

Matthew E. Kahn, **Going Remote: How the Flexible Work Economy Can Improve Our Lives and Our Cities**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2022, 238 pp., \$26.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

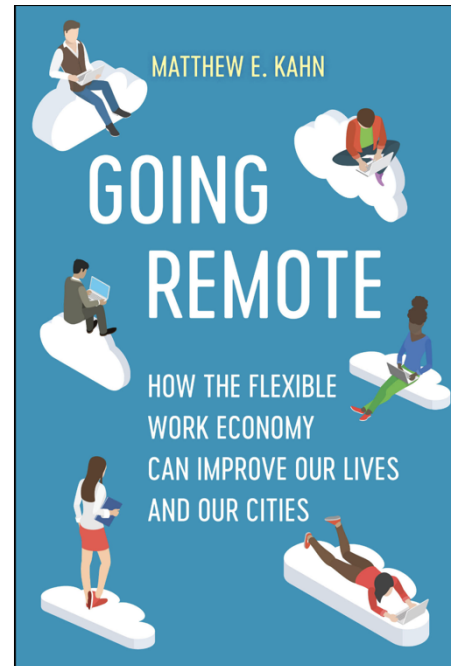
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Postpandemic questioning of the longevity of remote work has waned, but parsing through the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of remote work is much more difficult to assert. In **Going Remote: How the Flexible Work Economy Can Improve Our Lives and Our Cities**, author Matthew E. Kahn examines the opportunities and obstacles of working remotely. He offers useful perspectives on how remote work can affect various aspects of life such as communication, productivity, work-life balance, and the environment.

Kahn's training and experience as an economist bring a specific perspective to his discussion of remote work that at times is acutely aware of the socioeconomic ramifications but lacks the nuance of the sociocultural implications. Discussions of remote work are not new, in fact, Margrethe H. Olson's (1983) article on remote work addressed many of the same issues mentioned in Kahn's book, including the impact of remote work on various aspects of human life, such as geography, productivity, and the environment. The breadth of topics makes it readable to a broad audience and intersects with multiple areas such as policy, finance, tech, and urban planning.

Kahn makes it clear that remote work is not going anywhere; however, he does make a powerful point that "we differ with respect to what we gain from working from home" (p. 3), and spends the remainder of the text working through this thought. In the Introduction, "No Going Back," Kahn introduces the concept of remote work and provides context for the rising popularity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. He provides a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis framework for the benefits and challenges of remote work that positions the remaining chapters. In the second and third chapters, Kahn focuses on the short- and medium-term gain for workers who adjust to remote work. The second chapter opens with a quote from Warren Buffet about the relationship between external change agents and the need for adjustment. While both chapters summarize important themes around remote work, the characterizations sometimes fall into stereotypes, again hinting at Kahn's socioeconomic analysis strengths and weaknesses in sociocultural integration. For example, Kahn states, "Most young people don't want to work from home" (p. 25). While "young" is not explicitly defined in the book, there is often conflicting opinions on the appeal of remote work for younger workers. Without a clear articulation of who embodies a younger worker, the statement can feel stereotypical and out of context.



While Kahn should be applauded for addressing the gender-earnings gap and noting that remote work options offer a pathway to a solution, the oversimplification and sometimes essentialist reading of women, marginalized persons, and "environmentalists" (another term he neither denotes nor connotes) seems to be in tension with his larger thesis. For example, Kahn makes the statement that prioritizing working near an "environmental paradise" over a "lucrative job" was associated with being a "surfer, hippie, or ski bum" (p. 59). He then follows this up with the idea that remote work allows people to consider lifestyle and career but does not detail how making that decision helps remote workers escape the stereotype. In terms of gender pay earnings, much of the conversation is placed in the context of couples, specifically married couples, and does not fully consider other household configurations. While some of Kahn's descriptions and suppositions lack awareness of cultural politics, he does make an astute observation about American universities and the ongoing challenge of hiring diverse faculty. Kahn mentions that some universities have found success in hiring diverse faculty who work remotely, so that they are able to maintain their existing support systems while not being limited geographically to professional opportunities that are within reasonable proximity.

The title of the third chapter, "How Will Firms Adapt?" seeks to answer that very question by building on Kahn's expansive economics background to discuss key political implications, distributional effects, adaptation challenges, and labor market competitiveness (p. 115). In chapter 4, "The Rise of Remote Work and Superstar Cities," Kahn goes into detail about the relationship between the exodus of workers and companies that are no longer dependent on being in "the dense center city" (p. 141) and the influx of workers and companies to more aesthetic areas independent of the professional opportunities. This provides a nice transition to chapter 5, "New Opportunities for Other Areas," where Kahn discusses how remote work allows for the "dispersal of purchasing power" and "increases real incomes and allows people to be better matched to spend their time in a place where they want to live" (p. 181). These three chapters create an overwhelmingly positive outlook on the effects of remote work on firms and workers. Essentially, Kahn suggests that remote work provides access to work that affords more opportunities; however, what is missing is a nod toward the psychological processes associated with the remote work experience. Barsness, Diekmann, and Seidel (2005) found almost two decades ago that a "higher proportion of time spent working remotely from supervisors increased the frequency of supervisor- and job-focused impression management" (p. 401). What we know from more current research on remote work is that challenges related to "communication, collaboration, and time management with colleagues via technology" contributed to "higher levels of perceived stress and work-related burnout" (Hayes, Priestley, Moore, & Ray, 2021, p. 1). This highlights the importance of considering the psychological impacts of remote work when weighing its geographical and professional opportunities.

The conclusion offers the best summary of key points from the book, first with a brief discussion of the "The New Geography of Jobs" (p. 183). According to Kahn, "The ability to unbundle where we live from where we work creates new opportunities for many of us" (p. 184). Kahn makes the bold claim that "remote work accommodates our diversity" (p. 184). Next, he describes the possibilities of remote work, "the rise of WFH [work from home] helps to address a fundamental "mismatch" challenge" (p. 185); "creates new opportunities for such postindustrial cities," and "reduc[es] local poverty by stimulating local service-sector job demand and raising local tax revenues" (p. 186). Finally, he discusses the challenges of remote work, including competition from immigrants and international workers, the expansion of the gig economy,

access to health insurance, an aging population, and climate issues. These challenges are not insignificant, and, perhaps revisiting Marshall McLuhan and Bruce Powers' (1989) concept of the global village and the intersections of global remote work might prove useful.

Current research (Smite, Moe, Hildrum, Huerta, & Mendez, 2023) suggests that remote work is here to stay, and *Going Remote* makes a persuasive case for the socioeconomic benefits of remote work, providing a clear picture of how these benefits have a socioeconomic impact. Kahn writes in a style that appeals to both scholars and practitioners in multiple fields. This interdisciplinary approach, coupled with practical application, makes it an important resource to those interested in shaping the current and future remote work landscape.

References

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