



THE FUTURE OF WORK



BEN KIEFFER



DR. MICHELE WILLIAMS

Ben Kieffer: It's weird I keep waking up every day saying to myself, "It's weird." I guess that weirdness with- it's River to River from Iowa public radio news, I'm Ben Kieffer. Well, the coronavirus pandemic has reshaped our lives. It's weird I keep waking up every day saying to myself, "It's weird." I guess that weirdness will wear off and we'll have a new normal. Or we'll go back to the way it was. I don't think so. Social distancing has meant, of course, for all of us tremendous changes. It's meant shutting down all kinds of events and gatherings, sports theatres, cinemas, closing churches, inspired online churches, clothes stores, its limited restaurants to take-out only service here in Iowa. And many of us have been encouraged or required to work from home. Perhaps you are now a new at home worker. Making that transition just as I am. In fact you are listening to the very first edition of River to River that I am hosting entirely from my home. I have my tea, chamomile tea, next to me. I'm hoping my dog Lucy, upstairs, doesn't get too excited by something she sees outside the window and barks. We'll see that may happen. Up to now working from home, commonly called teleworking, has been a benefit available to just a handful of us. Only 7% of workers in private industry in the US. That's roughly 10 million of the nation's approximately 140 million workers in private industry have access to flexible workspace benefit or telework. That's according to a 2019 survey from the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. And before the COVID epidemic, those workers who have had access to telework and have been for the most part, managers, and other white collar professionals as well mostly affluent people. This hour I have two guests joining me remotely to discuss working from home. They each have a specific take on this area that springs from their research and both our assistant professors at the University of Iowa Tippie College of Business. Welcome to Michele Williams and Daniel Knuth Michele and Daniel Welcome to this program.

Michele Williams: Thank you, Ben.

Daniel Knuth: Thank you Ben. Happy to be here.

Ben Kieffer: And this is interesting, are you both in your homes as well?

Michele and Daniel: Yes. Yes, we are.

Ben Kieffer: Is this just a little freaky for you or are you used to this?

Michele Williams: I think we usually do a lot of our research from our home but we're not used to doing all of our teaching and media and interviews and things like that from home so that's a new phase for us.

Ben Kieffer: Okay, well in just a moment I wanted to get into more specifics with you, of the benefits and challenges of working from home, and share some of the social media responses we got from IPR listeners about- from people who are newly at home workers. But let's start off if I could ask each of you to tell us a little bit about the focus of your work. Michele let's start with you. You work on what- you work on trust between management and workers. Tell us a little bit more about what you do and your focus.

Michele Williams: Oh, certainly. So I am particularly interested in trust and collaboration that occurs across boundaries. So, usually I am looking at trust between workers from different organizations like consultants and clients, or buyers and suppliers. Also from different organizations in terms of healthcare, like you might have a hospital collaborating with a nursing home for care of patients. What's really interesting now is that the boundary is people's homes, right? So they're working across boundaries. I'm particularly interested in really skills. The skilled interpersonal behaviors that people use to build trust. A lot of times in the trust research we think of trust as, "Oh well, someone has high ability, they are benevolent, they have integrity." And we just watched them to see them reveal these qualities or characteristics. But in the real world, people are working together and they're negotiating, that they're figuring out together what would someone else feel is trustworthy. "How do I make this relationship work?" So I look at what people do to really build that relationship, things like perspective taking, looking at things from other people's point of view, things like emotion management, trying to reduce the threats that other people might see in this relationship. And I started with trust building and now I also look at trust repair. And particularly nowadays with people working from home that idea of these glitches, things people don't always meet our expectations and now there are millions of reasons why that might not happen. Technology might fail, there might be a knowledge gap in using the technology and really how do people work with it, with interpersonal problems, to really build and strengthen that relationship when they have to do it from a distance.

Ben Kieffer: Michele, I want to find out more about your research, and into trust and collaboration between teams, team members. How you see that having a bearing on what we can learn from it as new workers at home.

Michele Williams: Great. I'd love to share that. One of the things that- when I do workshops with teams across the country- one of the things that I find- I usually get them a scenario and there'll be three different co-workers that they could hire into their team. And one of three, one is kind of a little low in competence, one is low in integrity so they lie a little bit, and one is low in benevolence, so they're not the most friendly, don't go out to lunch. And inevitably, people will choose the person with low

in benevolence because they're high in competence, high intellect. And integrity I think, well that's not as important in a work environment, but when we move into an environment where people are working at home where you can't see them with all different kinds of things, health issues, and family issues can be going on in their lives. Benevolence starts to rise and the importance of a factor that your manager has, that your co-worker has. And so a lot of what I'm looking at is what are the kinds of threats that you can have to a trusting relationship. One of the ways that work is changing, is that managers have to trust their employees. They can't see them, they can't monitor them, they can't stop bidding on them as frequently. They have to trust that their employees will come to them when they run into a problem or a glitch, and they have to trust that they're doing whatever everything they need to do to make that organization go forward. And employees, interestingly, not only have to trust their managers to give them all the resources they need to work at home, but they also have to trust themselves, right? They have to trust that even if they have to take a break to help their child with math, or they're having lunch with their family instead of with co-workers, that they are still a valuable employee. So, Daniel mentioned the idea of- kind of giving people, you know, people giving themselves a little bit of a break in how they think of themselves as a worker, as a manager. One of the things we talked about and trust is really, we use a word in psychology called attribution, but it's really the assumptions you make about yourself, right? If you're at work and you're working in your office. If you went home for lunch you might have made an assumption that you're not as committed, right? But when you're working at home, that assumption should be that you're actually doing something that benefits your well being, your family's well being and makes you able to focus more work. They actually find that people who have other commitments are more engaged when they're doing their work and do a great job. But people learning to reframe what a trustworthy employee means? It's going to be critical during this time.

Ben Kieffer: We are on Facebook and also on Twitter over the weekend. We asked this question, "If you've been working from home, how would you rate your experience?" So you can give it a rating from 1 to 10. 1 being, "It's been miserable. I can't wait to go back to the office", and 10 is, "It's been great. I never want to go back to the office." And we asked our listeners to share their biggest challenges and their triumphs. So the very unscientific poll that we took over the weekend, we had 28 responses. We had- we didn't have any 1s but we had every other rating there. In fact, we had a couple over 10, we had a 15 rating. But here's about your reaction to some of the, the listener reaction we're getting Michele.

Michele Williams: Well, I'm seeing two different things. One thing that I'm feeling, I'm gonna go back to Dave, is something that's pervasive in our society right now. Loneliness, and it is something that not only impacts, you know, kind of our daily and emotional experience, but impacts our immune system. So, I can see how Dave is responding that way and like Daniel said one of the most important things is building some of that community into his day. Having a lunch break, that's on zoom or social media or text. I know that even in the school system throughout Iowa, they're having teachers have zoom calls with their different classes so that the students can start to feel connected. Even in my teaching with college students when they get on and they see each other and they can get back together and work with a group that

they've been working with, it makes a huge difference. So, work that may not normally be team based work so you don't have to meet with your team, but you have co-workers that you really care about and depend on. This is probably a job that could fall to managers. Managers are not having the same role anymore and part of their role may be to, kind of, develop these spaces of compassion and holding spaces for their employees to get together and have some of the things that make them feel productive. Not only having a schedule, but having these touch points with other people for the organization.

Ben Kieffer: So, we've got about a minute before we go away so I'm not sure if I'm hearing from you that- I love the perspective switching from manager to worker. Does the manager, perhaps in the future in this work at home environment, become less important?

Michele Williams: So, I'm thinking that in this role, they might become more important. They're a different type of touch point, right? So, managers are teaching their employees different skills. They're teaching their employees, how to negotiate an advocate for themselves, and make sure that that employee comes to them. They might have open office hours. The employee now has to come and ask if not that they stop by and say, "Hey it looks like you need this." or, you know, "What's going on here at the office cooler?" They actually are starting to train a whole new set of skills in their employees and then also facilitate those collaborative spaces for those employees for those social spaces like to have a virtual birthday party.

Ben Kieffer: Michele, back to your research into trust and collaboration between teams. You also study all this communication in business through the lens of gender. What might be the gender based work implications generally from this work revolution that is taking place because of COVID-19?

Michele Williams: That's a really interesting question. I think there are two different possibilities and one is that people tend to think of their work and their life, either as separate, and they're kind of cold segments. So, they want to go to work, keep it at work and then come home. And a lot of people are integrators, so they want to kind of integrate their work in the family. They'd like to have lunch with their family and then go back to work. And this is particularly beneficial for people who like to integrate. And so that's one aspect that might be particularly helpful to women who often have more of the family care responsibilities. Another aspect-

Ben Kieffer: Yep. Sorry, go ahead, I interrupted.

Michele Williams: - oh, no problem at all. Another aspect is really cutting down on that commute time. We talked, I think you mentioned Lindsey, who could go outside in her yard. All of these types of activities that reduce stress women are less likely to take advantage of; self care and self compassion. They're usually doing so many roles and having that commute time reduced may provide them with the opportunity to not only take care of others and do their work, but take care of themselves. And I actually thought of a third one, which is, there tends to be in society a big return for people for working longer and longer hours and sacrificing their time at home. And that's decreasing that which kind of can level the playing field. So, I'm really excited that some of these changes may actually make it easier for women to integrate

different parts of their lives and to be able to show organizations the value added to their organization by allowing workers who have worked in life issues to be able to integrate them through more flexible work arrangements. So, organizations themselves, the whole, they really change by seeing the quality of work people are able to do from home.

Ben Kieffer: All right, but that's very individual to push back a little bit, Michele. I mean, the integrators, if you're an integrator, and you're happy to integrate your life with your work at home, back and forth and have that mix. But isn't there a danger, perhaps this is only for a certain type of person, be unguarded, you might have the feeling that you're at work all the time because you associate your- the walls that you used to have a refuge and just for family and doing, you know, getting away from work is now associated with work. Is there a caution there for a certain type of person?

Michele Williams: There really is and what I've been- I teach negotiation. I've been teaching it for over 15 years and that's one of the things that I think negotiation not just as these big deals but kind of what you do at home and at work, is that people not only need to create structure for their work day, you know to get up and get dressed, even though they're at home, but they need to use those skills to say no. They need to be able to figure out where their boundaries are. Instead of saying yes to every request and keeping their email and phone on 24/7, they're going to have set boundaries and say, "You know, from four to seven, I'm turning off my phone. This is my family time." And actually, for people who are total integrators, they might have to figure out what those boundaries are. It's very easy for people to make requests. At midnight, I get emails from students at midnight. "Can you tell me a little more about this assignment?" And you have to figure out, Do I wait till the morning to answer it or do it until I answer it at midnight? And this to me goes back to kind of the manager role of kind of really talking with employees seeing what their schedule is, are having an open honest communication of when are we at work? And this depends on industry and when we are at home. Some industries you have to be available. You might be a doctor on call, but there are a lot of industries where with your work team and with your manager, you can figure out how are we going to make sure that all the hours that need to get covered are covered and everybody has downtime.

Ben Kieffer: Think about the typical office manager, let's say they're, you know, a bunch of cubicles, the manager goes around, and does one of those typical tours during the day to check in with this or that other boy. So when your research on trust is there, so this just completely changes that the manager doesn't do that anymore if the manager ever did it and and we really have the manager judging this worker by the output, right? Because they can check anything else other than output.

Michele Williams: And what's kind of interesting is that monitoring actually shows the employee that you don't quite trust them. So, right now managers are being forced to take a leap of faith, right? "You're at home, you have to be at home. I've got to trust that you're going to do what you need to do for this organization." And that big leap of faith and risk, when the employee brings it back, that's how high quality work that they're capable of doing actually makes a big leap in their actual trust

because they said, “Okay, I had to take this leap but you've met what I expected.” And so that's really one of those powerful ways that trust between employees and managers can spiral upward. The thing we want to prevent is when these, what I call trust glitches happen, things where expectations aren't met for a variety of reasons that people are able to use what I call more cognitive flexibility to be able to think there are a lot of reasons out there why this might have not gone well. “Let me talk to this employee.”, “ Let's have a conversation.”, “Let's figure out what are the odds and what can we work through together.” So, the manager's really becoming, kind of coaches, kind of let's figure out what you know how we can make this work as, as opposed to people who are there only to hand out rewards and punishments for a task done for people to really just support that employee.

Ben Kieffer: Michele, and I'm trying to imagine us, perhaps in five years listening back to this conversation and going, “Wow, we didn't get it.” In some ways. I don't know if you have that feeling. But I always try to put myself in the future and then listen to myself now. And imagine, what do you think we'll think of this conversation? As an indication of the change our culture is just now starting?

Michele Williams: I think that we're going to have two aspects. I think we're going to have the part that Daniel said about a lot of work is going to be done differently and more creatively and that we're going to learn a lot from organizations like Zirtual, that have a whole workforce that is working at home and helping other individuals. But I think we're also maybe at this point still underestimating the power of that personal touch- of being- and by that I mean just face to face contact, and how the virtual will never catch up with the same ability to read non-verbals. And so there's always going to be a place for work relationships that are conducted in person and being able, I think we what we can predict is what form that's going to take and how that's going to be narrowed in different.

Ben Kieffer: Okay, well, we've run out of time here and I want to thank you both very much for joining us. Michele Williams, Assistant Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship at the University of Iowa Tippie College of Business. Also the John L. McLeod, fellow. Is that right? McLeod fellow in entrepreneurship. Daniel Knuth, Assistant Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship, a colleague there of Michele at the University of Iowa. Daniel and Michele, thank you so much for joining us. It's been insightful and historic. I have to say.

Michele and Daniel: Thank you so much, Ben.