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Russian Corporates Plot Employees' Return to Office

A handful of Russian businesses are embracing the work-from-home revolution, others are rushing back to the office.

By Jake Cordell

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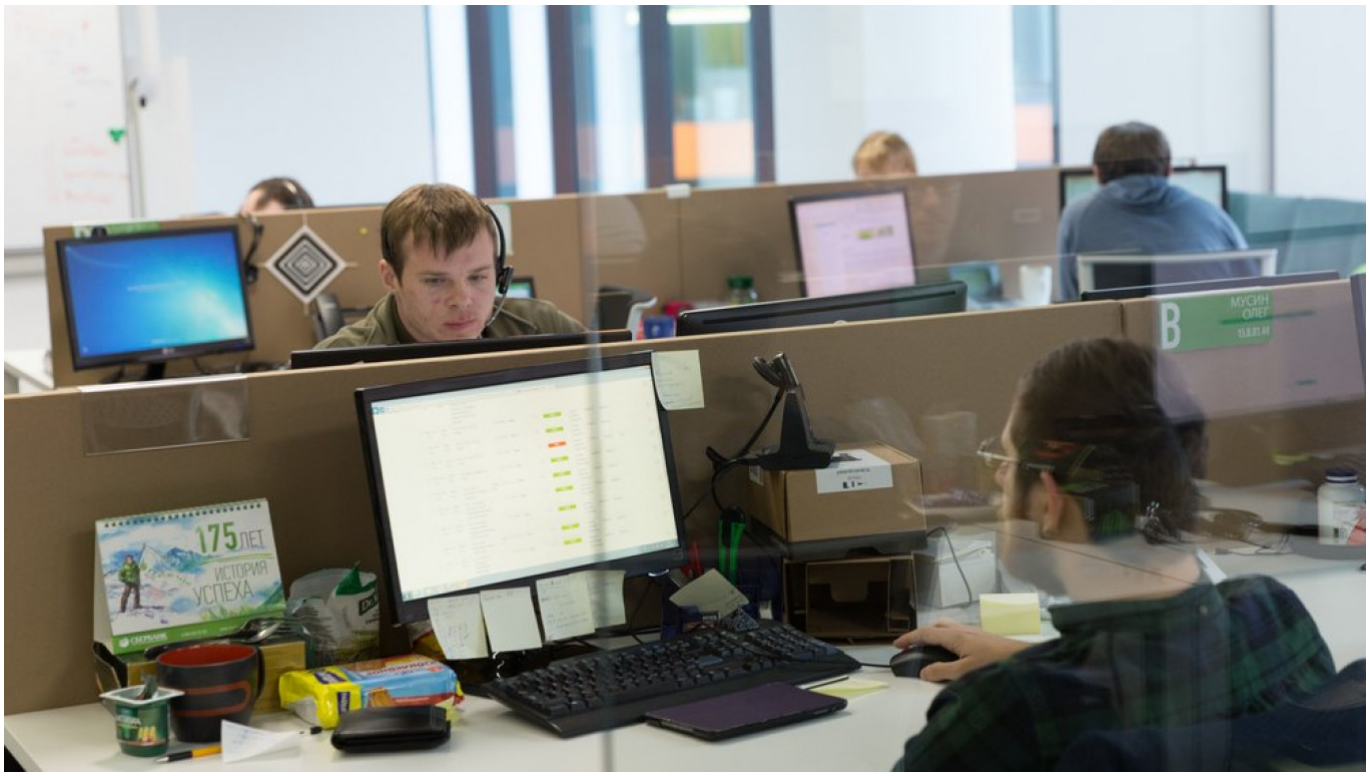

Only 5% of Russians are still working fully remotely. **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

One of the biggest dilemmas for corporate leaders around the world — how, when and whether to bring staff back to the office — has divided the Russian business world, as firms start to chart their course out of the coronavirus pandemic.

While some of Russia's largest companies have embraced the idea of a "new normal" — capturing and crystallizing the benefits of the work-from-home revolution and biggest shock to workplace culture in a generation — others are trying to get back to pre-crisis ways as soon as possible.

In the first camp are fast-growing younger firms like e-commerce leader Wildberries and challenger bank Tinkoff, as well as Russia's largest private lender Alfa Bank.

A new normal

"We are working on options to fundamentally transform our work," Marat Ismagulov, Alfa Bank's Personnel Director told the Moscow Times, adding that employee productivity actually increased during the remote working period at the height of the pandemic.

He envisages most of the bank's 11,000 staff that aren't based in a branch shifting to a mix of in-office and remote working. "For example, people will work three days a week from home, and two days in the office." In the meantime, the lender, Russia's largest private bank, will let staff carry on working from home until the end of the year.

Tinkoff also plans to keep a strong work-from-home ethos once the pandemic subsides. In an email to employees last month month, chief executive Oliver Hughes wrote: "What seemed to me to be completely unrealistic — effective working from home, a flexible schedule for the entire team, Zoom meetings — all this has become the new DNA of Tinkoff."

The challenger bank is currently planning to bring staff back to the office from Sept. 1, but over the long term wants to shift so that the office becomes a place for large team meetings, strategy sessions, networking, and getting to know colleagues, while day-to-day work and projects are completed "in the quiet environment of home," Hughes said.

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Meanwhile Russia's largest e-commerce site Wildberries also reported a jump in productivity over recent months, and plans to go fully flexible, giving its 1,000-plus head office employees "the opportunity to choose the most comfortable working conditions for them: to work in the office, or from home."

For companies that can increase the time employees are working from home, it could be a win-win for both businesses and staff, said Dmitry Sauers, deputy chairman of Gazprombank.

"It reduces the cost of renting offices and organizing work spaces. Hundreds or even thousands of people can work remotely. And then the savings on office rent can be shared with employees, for example, by increasing their salaries," he told The Moscow Times.

More than just cutting costs however, he added that home working will enable Gazprombank, Russia's third largest lender behind Sberbank and VTB, to tap into pools of talent outside Moscow.

"Employees can work in different parts of the country, so you can search for people in regions where there are specific technical specialists. This completely changes the model of HR management and organization of the business."

Rival Sberbank also announced recently that it will permanently keep up to 30% of its staff working remotely, although Bloomberg reported that chief executive German Gref has

complained about a fall in productivity and urged department heads to accelerate employees' return to the office.

Technology giants Mail.Ru and Yandex have also kept their staff working from home, with tentative back-to-office dates set for the fall.

Business as usual

Despite a clear rise in remote working, early signs are that the corporates planning a fundamental overhaul are in the minority. Even as Russia reports more than 5,000 new Covid-19 cases each day, politicians have been quick to try to restore a sense of normality and return to pre-crisis life in a bid to stem the deep economic damage from the virus. It seems the majority of businesses and employees have put that message into action.

By late July, the proportion of Russians working completely from home had fallen from 13% to 5%, the independent polling agency Levada Center found. Meanwhile, 70% reported no change in their working conditions — a reminder that in an economy dominated by sectors such as energy, manufacturing, mining, agriculture, transport and construction, only a minority of businesses and employees actually have the option to work remotely.

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Levada found almost twice as many employees were put on forced vacation at the height of the pandemic than switched to remote working.

In another sign of Russia's return to pre-crisis life, mobility trackers and traffic data show that Moscow and St. Petersburg have been two of the most active cities in the world over recent weeks.

In line with this atmosphere, many big corporations are planning to get back to the office as soon as they can, with some already having fully cancelled remote work. Energy giant Gazprom started testing its office-based staff and bringing back those confirmed negative for the virus as early as May 12 — at the very peak of the pandemic, one day after Russia reported its highest number of new daily cases at 11,656 and the first day after the cancellation of Russia's six-week 'non-working' period.

State corporation Rostec told the Moscow Times, "now the situation has normalized, employees have returned to their working places," with various social distancing, employee-testing and other sanitary requirements in place.

Others are taking a more gradual approach but remain committed to keeping the work-from-home regime as a quirk of the coronavirus pandemic, rather than the start of a workplace transformation. Around three quarters of VTB's head office staff are still working remotely, for instance, but the bank plans to bring that number down to zero as the virus "stabilizes," a VTB representative said.

Staff wellbeing

Businesses bringing thousands of staff back to the office after what could be almost half a year of remote working say they are keeping a close eye on employees' mental health, due to ongoing fears of potentially contracting the virus as well as culture shock coming out of quarantine.

Almost half of Russians say they are scared of getting infected, while two-thirds do not believe official information about the situation with the virus. Meanwhile, a daily slew of news articles highlights the potential stress and anxiety for staff returning to the office.

Mobile service providers Beeline and Megafon are among the firms offering employees psychological support and access to professional helplines, psychologists and mentors, both throughout the pandemic and as they prepare to return to the office.

For employees heading back to the office, the space is unlikely to be a familiar one.

Businesses say they will be dishing out personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves and face masks for office workers. Hand sanitizing stations have been installed, desks rearranged to comply with mandatory 1.5 meter social distancing requirements and special meeting rooms set up with place markers to ensure employees do not get too close to each other.

Gazprombank will introduce new start times for office staff, ranging from 7:00 to 12:00 to minimize crowds in lobbies and spread out the use of office facilities throughout the day.

State-backed oil major Rosneft said its 3,300 head office staff will work a reduced 30-hour week once they return.

Ultimately, whether they are rushing back to the office or keeping the rank-and-file at home, Russia's corporate leaders say the question of when or how to return to the office is still being driven by health concerns. For some, dealing with the virus is even a point of competitive pride.

We "should take every precaution to ensure that this shit does not get into our ranks," Tinkoff's Hughes wrote in an email update to the bank's staff in mid-July. "Today, thanks to our coordinated actions, the percentage of cases in our team is several times lower than in other corporations in the country."

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