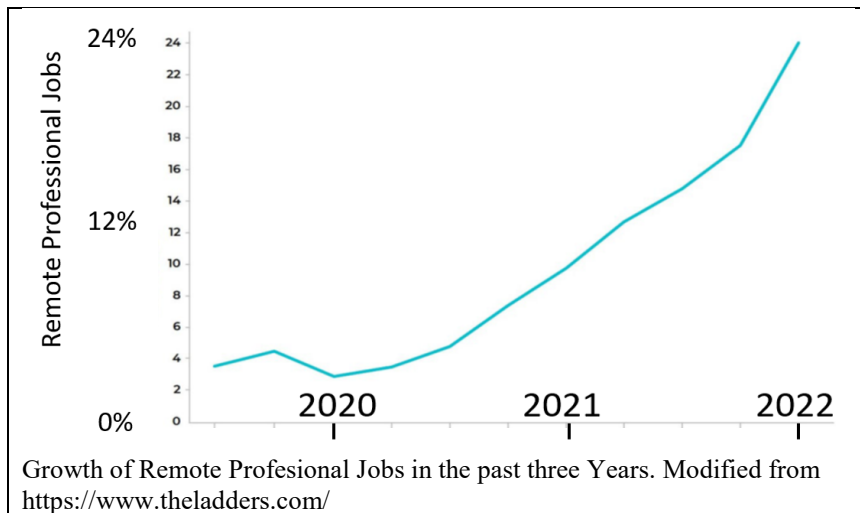


**On Empty Halls**  
Comments for the Lamont Town Hall  
Bill Menke, Nov 4, 2022



Times have changed.

The graph displayed at the left shows the steep growth of remote professional jobs in the US in the last few years. The high end is above 20%, which I find astonishing.

I have spent a bit of time trying to understand what scholars think about this change.

Many think that while COVID drove the rapidity of change, that the social and economic fuel for the change had developed before COVID. Consequently, remote jobs are not going to fade, even though the COVID epidemic may be fading.

We all have experienced this.

My own anecdotal experience is that attendance on the LDEO Campus began to fall off noticeably starting in the early 2000's. By 2019, the campus was about as empty as it has been in the past two sort-of-post-COVID weeks. This is not a criticism. My personal attendance is way down, too. I worked from home yesterday, for example.

So let me revise my declaration,

Time Have Changed and THERE IS NO GOING BACK.

I believe that our long term planning ought to presume that on a typical work day, attendance will be, say, 10%.

So the question that I pose is,

*Given our very limited resources, what investments should we be making?*

I believe that the answer should reflect our goals.

Everyone is going to have their own version of Lamont's goals. I encourage you to think about your personal version. Here's mine.

**EMPOWER, ENABLE and ENGAGE our people - including the younger & more diverse people who we have just brought on board or will hire in the coming years –so that we as an institution continue to do exciting, high impact and innovative SCHOLARSHIP;**

and

**Provide a setting in which MENTORSHIP, TRAINING, EDUCATION and ENCOURAGEMENT leads to our people reaching their FULL POTENTIAL.**

I acknowledge that translating these goals into concrete INVESTMENTS – and especially campus investments - is tricky, given our poor state of knowledge about what works and what doesn't work in the highly-remote new world.

However, more and more scholarship is developing on issues relating to remote working, both within academia and in society in general. I believe that its important. We should make an effort to become familiar with it.

As an example, here's something<sup>1</sup> I came across that I thought important;

People's professional networks have both strong and weak links. A strong link connects two people who are in everyday contact because their joint effort is needed to realize a mutually important goal. A weak link is one that connects people in just occasional contact, perhaps because they have a common interest that is ancillary to their immediate goal. Remote work has tended to strengthen strong links but weaken weak links. The strengthening of strong links is partly behind the observation that remote work has not led to a fall in productivity.

Unfortunately, it is the weak links that are mainly responsible for getting people excited about new ideas and in trying new ways of doing things. That's bad for us in academia, where innovation is such an important aspect of our lives, and where learning new ways of doing things is such an important part of professional growth. But it also points to an area where investment might bring special reward.

So as we move into the post-COVID era, we should not nostalgically yearn for a return to the physically bustling place that it was in the 1970's (when I arrived), but rather ask what investments are needed to maintain it as an intellectually bustling place in the 2020's.

<sup>1</sup>Yang et al., (2022), The effects of remote work on collaboration among information workers, Nature Human Behaviour 6, 43–54 .