

Remote Work Forever? Not So Fast, Jobs Guru Says

The CEO of Adecco, one of the world's largest employment agencies, discusses the pros and cons of working from home



Adecco's Alain Dehaze thinks 'social proximity' is critical to personal development and fostering a corporate culture.

PHOTO: ARND WIEGMANN/REUTERS

By [Daniel Michaels](#)

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Alain Dehaze knows a lot about jobs, and he's not sold on remote work.

The 57-year-old Belgian has insights into the world of work as head of [Adecco Group](#), [ADEN -0.85%](#) ▼ one of the world's largest providers of temporary employment,

outplacement services, headhunting and retraining services.

Many companies have recently trumpeted the promise of working from home as demonstrated during the coronavirus pandemic. Mr. Dehaze sees the benefits but also risks.

“Remote work is unfortunately creating a social distance that we should not have,” said Mr. Dehaze, though he sees no return to workplace normalcy until a vaccine is widely available.

Adecco has studied a dozen leading economies’ responses to the health crisis, aiming to identify policies that yield superior results. To jolt economies back to life, governments must invest about 10% of gross domestic product—and do it quickly, Adecco concluded.

“It’s a question of money, but it is also a question of how fast you put the money in the economy,” said Mr. Dehaze, who sees Germany and Switzerland forging a relatively fast recovery from the pandemic.

He recently spoke with The Wall Street Journal by video from Adecco’s mostly empty headquarters in Zurich. Here are edited excerpts.

WSJ: Do you see any green shoots or bright spots emerging yet in labor markets?

Alain Dehaze: It is clear this Covid situation has and will accelerate digitalization. We see, for example, that all e-commerce and related services have accelerated tremendously. We had Christmastime at Easter in e-commerce because traditionally Christmastime is the peak. For one of our largest customers in the world, we recruited 16,000 people in Europe. And we did this without any physical touch. Everything digital.

WSJ: How do you think employers and workers will look at remote work once people can go back to offices?

Mr. Dehaze: There are very positive aspects regarding remote work. You don’t have to commute, so you save time and money. For some, it is very convenient to work from home. But for many others, it’s a nightmare. There is the question of the quality of broadband infrastructure, computer screens and separation between private life and work.

Then there is the question, Who will pay for all the digital infrastructure work needed? Who will take the benefit of time and money saved not commuting—the employee or

employer? And there is the third part, which, for me, is very important: What about the culture—the social proximity—you have in a company?

WSJ: Social distancing and company culture don't mix?

Mr. Dehaze: I don't like this term social distance. I prefer physical distance, because that's what we need. The question is physical distance versus social proximity. By being with colleagues, you align, you share a lot of things. You cultivate your values, you cultivate your purpose. If you are permanently alone, I don't know how you can cultivate this.

It's like friendship and love. You cannot cultivate friendship and love only from souvenirs, from memory. You need presence, you need to nurture. And with culture, it's also about nurturing through experience. This social proximity will remain important.

WSJ: Training and retraining—are there any patterns emerging during the pandemic in terms of areas or skills that are most in demand?

Mr. Dehaze: We decided to organize free online courses every Friday at General Assembly [an Adecco subsidiary specializing in jobs-skills training], and it was incredible. In a couple of weeks we had 230,000 subscriptions. What was high in demand? It was what we call digital-marketing capabilities, like search-engine optimization, Google analytics, everything around social media, everything around data science, but also business intelligence and so on.

We have committed to reskill five million people by 2030, and we hope this Covid situation will be an accelerator.

WSJ: Is demand mainly for digital skills? Are there other areas?

Mr. Dehaze: It's a hybrid. On one end, yes, digital skills are extremely important—everything around data science, especially—but also soft skills: empathy, emotional intelligence, collaborations, creativity.

WSJ: And people need to have the mind-set that they're in a constant state of reskilling.

Mr. Dehaze: Yes. And I think this will be constant. Upskilling and reskilling will be absolutely necessary to remain employable and attractive in the labor market because, due to the acceleration of technology, people are losing around 40% of their skills every three years. It means after less than 10 years, you are obsolete on the skills side.

WSJ: Can or should governments play a role in this?

Mr. Dehaze: One key tool is what we call the individual personal account. It was created in Singapore. You have the same concept in France and almost the same in Brazil. It is the opportunity for every worker to have his or her personal training account. You receive money from the state, from companies—depends how you want to structure it. You can also put money in this account yourself, so that when you need upskilling and reskilling, you have a budget at your disposal.

Hopefully, this crisis will encourage governments to move on that type of scheme because we see upskilling and reskilling as a kind of protection for every worker. Today, many countries have a protection system regarding illness, retirement and unemployment. Countries should treat reskilling and upskilling the same way.

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