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Deconstructing Blood Cell Research
Building the Hematology Community

A New Working Model: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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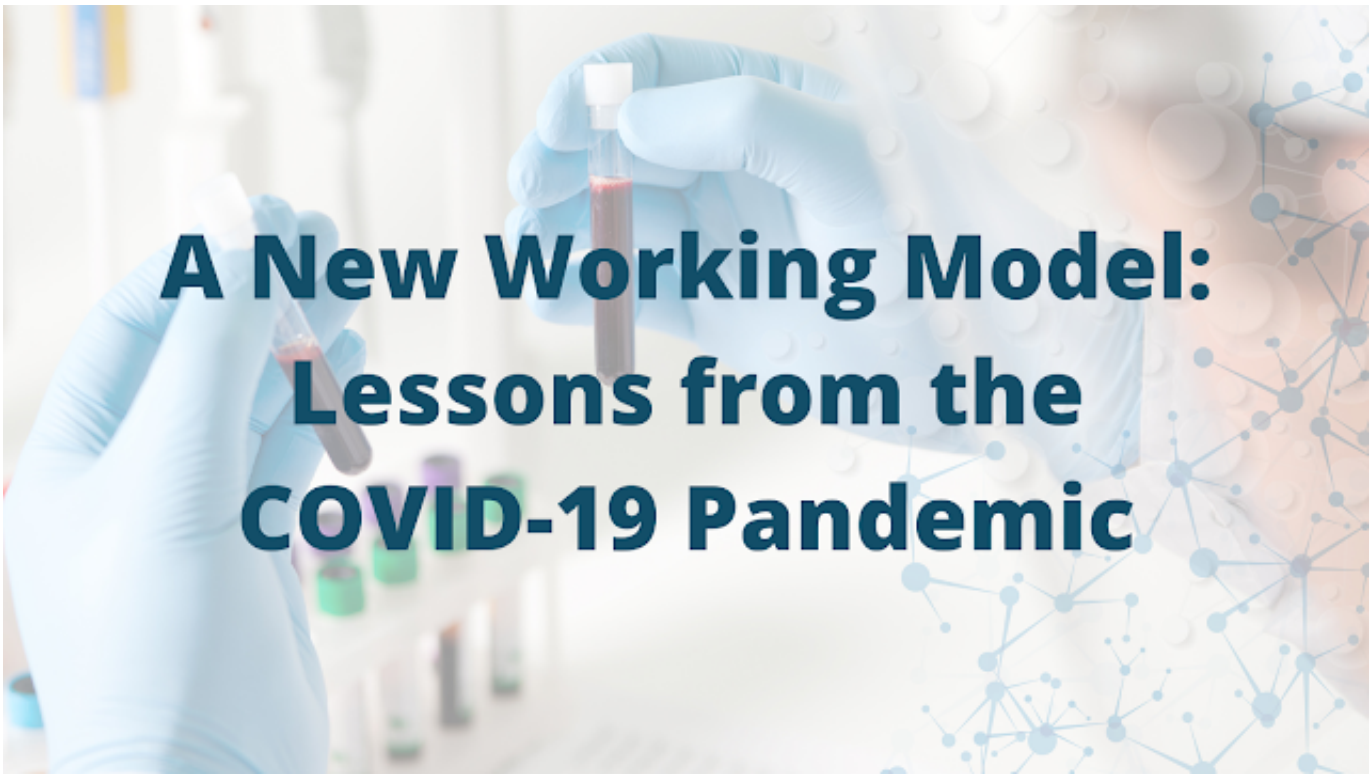

1. Introduction

Since the report of a serial of mysterious pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has already lasted for over 3 years. A lot of things have changed in our daily and professional life, most were unimaginable before this bizarre time. These include border closures, nation-wide lockdowns and people rushing to supermarkets for toilet papers. But not all changes are bad, and the future will likely embrace some of these positive changes such as flexible learning and working models and accelerated research on mRNA vaccine development and other scientific areas. In this blog post, the members of the ISEH New Investigator Committee will discuss our view on how the pandemic affect our working models as hematologists.

2. The old normal

The old norm refers to the way things were done before the COVID-19 Pandemic. This would typically involve work and socialize in-person, travel freely and attend large gatherings.

In academia, the old norm would be in-person classes, face-to-face meetings with students and colleagues, and on-campus events and activities. Researchers would typically conduct experiments and studies in laboratories or other specialized research facilities, and would often collaborate with other researchers in person, attending conferences and workshops to share their findings and discuss their work with others in their field. There was also a strong emphasis on publishing research findings in academic journals and presenting at conferences in order to share knowledge and advance the field.

3. The new normal

Fully remote positions; Internationally relocated labs

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, there have been many changes to the way people live and work. The "new norm" for many people has involved staying at home, practicing social distancing, wearing masks in public, and working remotely. These changes have had a major impact on people's daily lives and routines, and it's likely that some of these changes will continue even after the pandemic is over.

Many businesses have had to adapt to these changes by implementing new policies and technologies to support remote work and online communication. Some have established a hybrid working mode that employees have more flexibility to get work done when, how, and where they're most productive. The others may had made positions to be fully remote or international relocated.

In academia, the shift to remote learning and the cancellation of in-person events have certainly been necessary in order to keep students, faculty, and staff safe. But they have also had a significant impact on the way that education is delivered, and research is conducted. Many researchers have had to adapt to a more digital way of working, using online tools and platforms to collaborate with colleagues, conduct experiments and surveys. This had also led to a shift towards open access publishing and the use of digital platforms to share their work with a wider audience.

One of the biggest challenges that researchers have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic is the impact on their work-life balance. Many have reported increased stress and digital fatigue as a result of the need to work remotely and adapt to new technologies and methods. This has had a negative impact on their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and has raised concerns about the long-term effects of the pandemic on academic work and the research sector as a whole.

Despite these challenges, the shift to remote learning and the cancellation of in-person events has also offered some advantages. Many researchers have found that the emergency remote working has offered them greater flexibility, allowing them to work from anywhere and at any time. This has also helped to develop their digital skills, enabling them to use new tools and platforms to conduct research and share their findings. The precedent set by the COVID-19 pandemic could also be advantageous in the long term, if it leads to a more flexible and adaptable academic workforce.

4. Tips to improve productivity when WFH

How to handle 8 hours of Zoom meetings
How to remain connected with your colleagues (Slack, virtual happy hours)

Some of the challenges of this "new normal" have had a major impact in researcher's productivity. To try to adapt to this new way of doing research, we summarize below some tips to try to stay productive whilst working from home.

- Arrange a **designated working space**. This is crucial to switch your mindset to "working mode", especially in the morning or after lunch. Keep it tied and organized in the same way you would have in the office, and try to (space allowing) make this space physically separated from your bedroom.
- **Take breaks**, especially in between Zoom meetings. Zoom is exhausting and looking at a screen for many hours on a row gets almost unbearable after a few days. Plan your meetings to be 50 minutes instead of 1 hour, so that you get 10 minutes of fresh air before continuing with more Zoom calls.
- **Remain connected**. There's many tools to stay in touch with colleagues in a remote workplace. Slack is a great platform to interact with colleagues in a more dynamic and less formal way than sending emails. Also, some labs or even departments organize virtual happy hours. Most of the main hematology conferences, including ISEH Annual Meeting and ASH also include "virtual" interaction platforms and networking opportunities, so make the most out of those!

5. The future model

Hybrid working style
Personal preferences

In the present and near future, many researchers are switching to a "hybrid" working style in which they spend some days at the office and work from home the rest of the week. The percentage of time varies from researcher to researcher and the experimental requirements of every project, and of course, personal preferences.

Fully remote and internationally-relocated positions also exist for computational biologists and senior scientists or management staff (there's even remote lab managers!). This is a great way to find a better work-life balance when growing a family, for caregivers or people that wouldn't otherwise join a lab in a different country. Despite the challenges associated with this model, especially from a human resources perspective, fully remote positions are starting to become more common in research institutes and are actively being embraced by many of our colleagues.

Indeed, the future model is definitely more flexible than our typical 8-hour working day in the office, and will hopefully offer better opportunities of professional growth for all stages of a hematology research career.

6. Concluding remarks

The beginning of 2023 marks a new phase of this unprecedented crisis. The majority of countries have learnt to live with COVID-19 and complete lockdown and travel ban are no longer the way to go. Instead, flexible policies have been integrated into many aspects of our personal and professional life. With the Chinese government finally abandons its COVID-zero policy and allows international travel, ISEH is looking forward to a new year of events such as our annual meeting in New York to engage with members of the hematology research from the globe.

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