



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

CAREER

WORKING WITHOUT BORDERS

The rise and risks of working for foreign companies remotely

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TAZRIN RASHID PRITHA

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about dramatic changes in work environments across the globe. According to the American Community Survey (ACS), remote work increased significantly across all major industries between 2019 and 2021. In response to these global shifts, Bangladesh has also kept pace with the rapid adoption of remote work practices.

However, work-from-home opportunities at companies operating in Bangladesh remain limited. As a result, a large proportion of remote workers in Bangladesh today are choosing to work at foreign companies over domestic organisations.

Some, like Mohsena Akter Drishty, an independent legal researcher, had embraced remote work even before it became widespread during the pandemic. "I got my first remote job back in 2018, when I was just a third-year university student," Mohsena shares. "I needed a side hustle to support myself, and the only employment opportunities typically available to students were tutoring, which felt very monotonous and exhausting. I was fortunate enough to secure a UK-based remote position with a professor, where I was able to make use of my passion for research and writing."

Having a similar experience, Rakib*, a marketer, says, "I got my first remote job as a student. I had the opportunity to work

full-time during the gap between my HSC exams and starting university. In Bangladesh, there are very few opportunities for students to secure such roles, ones that allow them to sharpen their technical skill sets and gain relevant work experience to strengthen their CVs. Remote work helps to fill that dire gap."

For others, such as Subash Richard Soren, remote work has created opportunities to apply their academic knowledge within multinational organisations while working from the comfort of their homes. Subash holds a master's degree in accounting, so he found it quite easy to become certified as a virtual bookkeeper by both Xero and QuickBooks, leading cloud-based accounting platforms. "The study materials are readily available online, and one simply must sit for an online exam to obtain certification," he says.

Obtaining such certifications can open lucrative career pathways with competitive compensation across the globe, made possible by the flexibility and accessibility of remote work. However, the most prominent

reason many choose to work remotely for foreign organisations is the opportunity to earn at an international pay scale while working from the comfort of their homes. Higher compensation, when adjusted to the local cost of living, can significantly improve financial stability and quality of life.

Md Mahabub Alam, a senior operational analyst at Dependable Solutions, Inc., based in California, explains: "I now earn three times more than I would have if I were employed at a local company. This is partly because I am paid in US dollars, which translates into a substantial amount in Bangladeshi taka. More importantly, US companies tend to value their employees and make an effort to retain talent by offering attractive compensation packages."

Hiring processes at foreign organisations often differ significantly from those of domestic companies. These employers tend to focus less on formal credentials and more on practical competence and cultural fitness.

Mahabub shares: "Foreign companies assess whether a candidate possesses the specific skill sets required for the job and whether they align with the organisation's overall culture. In fact, I had to go through several rounds of interviews, including a technical viva. The aptitude test was based on a real-life case study where I had to analyse the situation and synthesise appropriate solutions to the problems presented. They also asked broader questions, such as how I view a case, how I view my life, and how I have risen above past failures. Not a single question was raised about my certifications or alma mater, which significantly reduces potential biases in the hiring process."

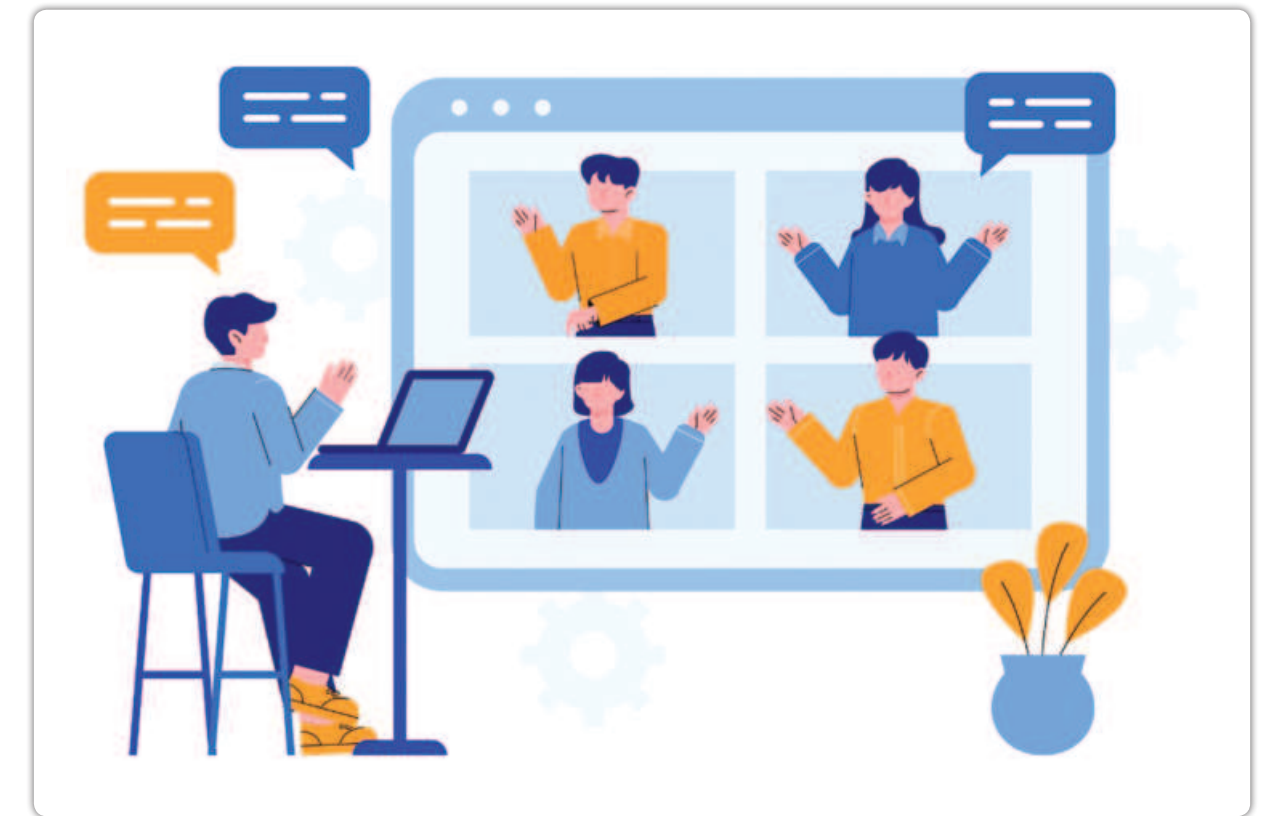
He further adds, "In Bangladesh, it is rarely possible to switch domains. Job circulars often require academic degrees that are directly relevant to the role. Even when companies do allow some flexibility, career progression is typically limited to junior positions, making it difficult to advance to senior roles. Thus, if I were restricted to local companies, I would neither have

secured my current role nor been able to climb the promotional ladder in a tech company because I am a finance major. Local employers would rarely consider the additional training and education I pursued later. This creates a system where individuals are expected to remain within the same field for the rest of their careers, with limited opportunities to switch paths or redefine their professional trajectories."



Beyond flexibility, many remote employees report enjoying a healthy and empowering work culture at their respective workplaces. "From my experience, workplace culture is better, as foreign companies tend to treat employees with respect regardless of their designation," says Mohsena. "It helps with one's self-esteem and empowers them to speak their mind."

Mahabub echoes the same sentiment: "This is definitely one of the biggest perks that remote work has offered me. I have had the opportunity to work with both internal and external stakeholders. I can enjoy this responsibility because of the decision-making power and autonomy that my company entrusts me with."



Remote work opportunities have also brought significant relief to working parents. It reinforces that giving access to remote work opportunities can potentially support work-life balance for parents. Stakeholders in Bangladesh are also likely to benefit by adopting the same route.

Moreover, many women employees prefer remote work due to the inaccessibility and safety concerns associated with transportation. Commuting often requires constant vigilance, which can take a significant mental and emotional toll.

Despite its many advantages, remote work also comes with notable downsides, possibly instigating different physical and mental health challenges.

"Initially, it was fun," says Mohsena. "You get to be in your pyjamas and work from the comfort of your bed. However, I wasn't prepared for how strongly the wave of isolation would hit me."

After graduation, opportunities to meet university friends became limited, and meaningful social interaction became harder to come by. With family members often belonging to different age groups, the chance to engage in heart-to-heart, relatable conversations diminishes. In work-from-home arrangements, the absence of in-person workplace interactions can intensify feelings of loneliness and social disconnection.

To address this gap, Mohsena shared that her company makes conscious efforts to foster a sense of belonging. "They send us office merchandise like cups, pen drives, notebooks, and so on, so that we feel that we are part of the organisation," she says. "It is a small gesture, but it means a lot to me."

Mental health experts suggest that taking time out each week to socialise

with friends and family members should be made a priority if one wants to survive in this domain with good mental health. However, this poses a challenge, as remote workers must adjust to different time zones and often have routines that run in opposite directions to those of their loved ones.

Mohsena shares that she sadly missed out on recent social events with her loved ones. Working overnight left her utterly exhausted, forcing her to spend the daytime hours catching up on sleep just to function. She informed that this is a regular occurrence for her.

The cost of functioning against the body's natural circadian rhythm is rarely acknowledged. Consistently working during the night and sleeping during the day

can cause long-term irreparable impacts on the body's functionality.

Lastly, remote workers are left in a vulnerable state as labour laws of both Bangladesh and the respective foreign countries can be bypassed via this arrangement. Rakib shares: "My payment terms were not communicated clearly to me. I was given the idea that I would be salaried monthly, but 20 days into my work, I learned from my colleagues that this is a commission-based job."

Apart from a lack of clarity observed in some instances, many foreign companies prefer to hire remote employees on renewable contracts rather than offering permanent positions. Mahabub shares that he has been working under such an arrangement for the past four years. While this provides continuity, it also means that employees like him often miss out on benefits typically available to full-time staff, such as paid leave, health insurance, retirement contributions, structured career progression, and bonuses. Over time, this contractual model can create a sense of uncertainty despite long-term service.

However, the most concerning issue is the absence of an entity for remote employees to report grievances in case a mishap occurs. This is alarming given the fact that remote workers across the globe have seen a 30 percent increase in digital harassment as this job modality grows more popular.

Rapid expansion of remote work in Bangladesh, while being beneficial mostly, has also exposed significant regulatory and structural gaps present today. Meaningful reforms are necessary to ensure that the future of work is not only flexible and profitable, but also fair, secure, and sustainable for those who power it.

*Name has been changed to protect privacy

Tazrin would probably not say no to a remote work side-quest. Reach out to her at rashid tazrin1@gmail.com