

THE COVID FILES

A CEO CANCELS A CORPORATE LEASE. AN HR DIRECTOR MAKES HARD CALLS ON FAMILY AND WORK. AND A MID-LEVEL COUPLE FACE NEW REALITIES. WE DECLASSIFY THE RARELY TOLD STORIES OF LIVING AND WORKING THROUGH A PANDEMIC.

Emily and Matthew Fay with their children at home—which has alternately served as a coworking space and a daycare.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
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WE

know the stats on how the pandemic is ravaging businesses and the economy. We know companies are operating very differently today than a year ago, exposing frailties in a system that once seemed steadfast. But do you actually know what your colleagues, employees, and neighbors are experiencing behind the screen or the mask?

The headlines have overlooked the many subtleties that are shifting in our personal and professional lives. Each person is affected differently by the new realities, which requires leaders to dig deeper if they are to meet this moment. For introverts and those with the necessary support structures, many of the pandemic changes have been welcome and can be further capitalized upon. But others are barely surviving, whether because of the weight of domestic responsibility or crushing loneliness.

In an effort to go beyond the monitor, we interviewed a CEO who canceled the lease at corporate headquarters and then launched a second company to meet a demand born of remote work, an HR director forced to confront hard decisions about work and family, and a mid-level couple experiencing vastly different realities based on the elasticity of their respective employers. They shared with us what it means to be a worker, a boss, a creator, a parent, and a human during this exceptional time, when uncertainty is ample and compassion scarce.



SHARIFA GOMEZ

Location
Ashburn, Virginia

Occupation
Director of people and culture

Challenge
Full-time parenting and working

Sharifa Gomez is the director of people and culture at Epigen Technology, a Virginia-based firm that provides government organizations with strategic planning and technology infrastructure. She is 43 years old, educated, experienced, exquisitely competent, and drowning. “I’m beyond over it,” she says via Zoom, no makeup, wearing black-rimmed glasses and pajamas.

In addition to being a director at a growing company, Gomez is the mother of twin 5-year-olds, requiring her to transform continuously from kindergarten facilitator to mom to HR exec. The school day starts with class from 8–8:30 a.m. Then a half-hour break. Back online from 9–9:30. Half-hour break. Then an hour-long session from 10–11. Lunch/recess 11–12:30. Afternoon session 12:30–1. Special session 1:30–2. Guess whose

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job it is to transition the kids between each of those sessions? Mom's. And who has to fill their time during the breaks? Mom. Technical support when the audio isn't working or the laptop crashes? Mom. Meals. Snacks. Water. Hugs. Fights. Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom.

Gomez gets in work when she can. At 4:30, she clocks out and spends a few hours of quality time with the girls before putting them to bed at 7:30. She gets maybe an hour with her husband—who has gone back to work at the office—before logging back online to work uninterrupted until midnight.

"I know we have moms in their closets crying between meetings because that's happened to me," says Gomez, who is from Canada and doesn't have family nearby. "People are struggling and they're not talking about it."

Gomez isn't waiting a year to find out if the stress leads to an autoimmune disorder, like it did for one of her friends. She's pulled her kids out of public school and switched them to a private school. In the spring, when she was forced to home-school, the schedule was manageable. Gomez would finish lessons by 10:30 a.m., then send the kids to play and get in a solid six hours of work. "We had flexibility," she says.

Notice that Gomez isn't planning to quit her job. She can barely bring herself to take paid time off. She took a week off in November to go to the Outer Banks, but even then, she spent at least an hour a day staring at her computer instead of the Atlantic horizon. "It's the catch-up," she says. "I didn't want to deal with the aftermath." After more reflection: "I also wanted to send a message that even when I'm on break I'm doing my job."

During the first years of her daughters' lives, Gomez opted for consulting work rather than returning to the office full-time. While her husband is well-intentioned, she says, "I don't know if he could manage all of it. Since I was doing it before, it was assumed I would do it again. I am better at it, but I'm tired."

Gomez's bosses are sympathetic. They have kids at home, too. They go into the office every day. They also have stay-at-home spouses. "They're not women. They are not doing both, and their wives are not doing both," Gomez says. "It is that double standard. I love our company and I love my job, but this is not sustainable. How do I do this?"

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PHIL LIBIN

Location
San Francisco, California

Occupation
CEO x 2

Challenge
Founding a new company
amid a pandemic

Phil Libin, CEO of the product-design studio All Turtles and former CEO and cofounder of Evernote, doesn't do mundane. Not even when it comes to basic survival necessities like feeding himself. "I didn't eat a boring meal in three years," Libin says, explaining his own Silicon Valley-magnate brand of intermittent fasting: he only ate food that was interesting. Considering his travel schedule and social circle, that wasn't the starvation sentence it'd be for most. "I sometimes went a week or two with no food. Then I'd be in Tokyo at the world's best ramen place."

The circumstances have changed—but not Libin's appetite for originality. It didn't take long for the novelty of conducting life via Zoom to turn stale. "The first month or two [of lockdown], everything was so different, it was almost interesting," the 48-year-old says from his home in San Francisco's Mission District. "You were nervous and afraid and figuring out logistics. What do I wear on video? By May, it was just boring and dreadful. That's when we started working on mmhmm."

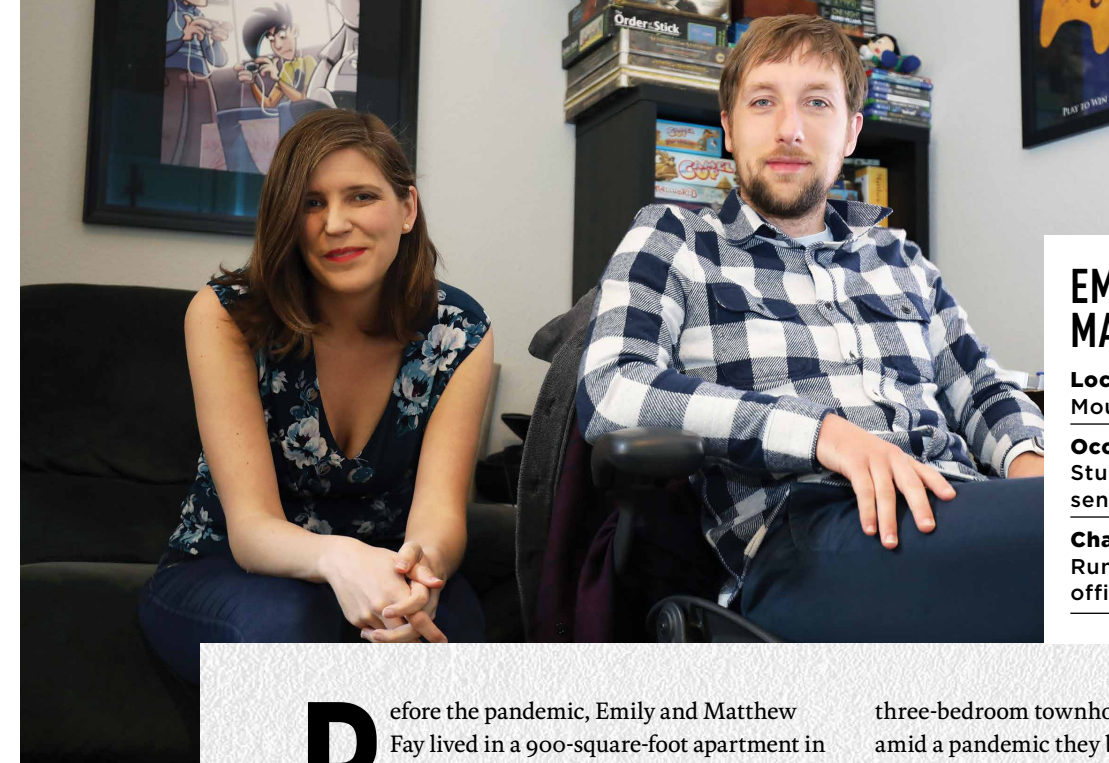
In November, Libin's 20th creation—a videoconferencing-editing platform—emerged from beta testing with close to \$36 million in funding and ravenous customer demand. "Everything we do is less effective on camera," Libin says. Mmhmm became a tool for adding

EMILY AND MATTHEW FAY

Location
Mountain View, California

Occupations
Student services manager;
senior staff engineer

Challenge
Running a daycare and an
office out of the living room



flavor and flair to the ubiquitous Zoom model. The start-up brings features like Jedi hologram filters, dynamic presentation gadgets, interactive capabilities, and, most essential, big hands.

Libin previously had not been a believer in remote work. He preferred to make decisions over cups of coffee. He favored brainstorming with whiteboards and sticky notes. It was a complete 180 when, a month into sheltering in place, he canceled the lease for the company's headquarters. All current job listings are now advertised as fully remote and marketed to a truly global talent pool. "There have been some very significant silver linings," he says.

While many leaders have frantically struggled to lubricate arthritic institutions to keep up with rapidly evolving conditions, Libin and his product studio were primed to pivot. The All Turtles charge is to create real-time solutions to problems marring the future of work and health, and particularly the integration of the two. They launch only products that are specific to the current moment and mission-driven, can go to market within a year, and rely on direct revenue.

As CEO of two companies now, Libin is considering three big questions, which he used to lump together simply as office dynamics: 1) How to facilitate creativity? 2) How to maintain staff cohesion? And 3) How to ensure that all employees have access to healthy and productive work environments?

He doesn't have all the answers. But regardless of the specifics, he knows that radical, intentional inclusivity will guide the path forward. "Ultimately, for-profit companies have

one primary set of tools," says Libin. "What do we spend money on? Show me your budget and I'll tell you your priorities." Libin's line items include investing in a new podcast his company recently launched that explores racial (in)equity in the tech industry—and, of course, the best takeout in his delivery radius.

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Before the pandemic, Emily and Matthew Fay lived in a 900-square-foot apartment in Mountain View. After giving birth to their second child in September, Emily, 33, was back to buzzing around Stanford University's Palo Alto campus as a student services manager in the psychology department. Meanwhile, Matt, 34, was in his sixth year at the data management firm Pure Storage, living just minutes from its headquarters. "We were a young, busy family," Emily says. There were swim classes and playdates. Weekly visits to the farmer's market. A standing Dungeons & Dragons soiree with friends.

Then the emails came the second week of March telling employees to take their laptops home. Overnight, the tiny space where they once

three-bedroom townhouse. It's notable that even amid a pandemic they bought close to work. "I'm less productive not in the office," says Matt, who now has the option to return to work but doesn't bother, because no one he wants to see is going in. "Ideas don't come as quickly. Collaboration is shot."

Emily has something to say about that: "There's a lot of talk about how do you create community on Zoom? You don't. Can we just be OK with that? It's already grinding on me that I don't have that community. Then there's the pressure that I'm failing to provide it too."

Fortunately, around the same time that Emily's sister went back to work, both kids were able to return to daycare. But there were a few weeks in between when childcare fell to the parents, which coincided with the first weeks of the new school year. "The only reason I was able to deal was I knew my boss trusted me to get the job done, and when it got really bad I could be honest with her," Emily says. "I can't do all these things in a couple hours of conscious time. She said, if it burns, it burns. If I didn't have her, I probably would have quit."

It's easier for Matt to take parental leave, because he can offload to other engineers. Emily, on the other hand, is the only one with the know-how and systems access to do her job. Yet Matt makes the money. If someone has a bad performance review, it has to be Emily—especially now that they have a mortgage.

"Matt's company is structured in a way it can stretch," Emily says. "Mine is much more brittle. There is no redundancy built in. Our systems are held together by institutional knowledge, duct tape, and hope." ▮

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role-played was converted into a coworking space and daycare center. Matt installed a "ginormous" monitor in the living room, while Emily set up shop at the dining table. Emily hired her sister—a suddenly out-of-work hairstylist—to take care of the kids during the days. "All five of us were in one room without AC," Emily says.

The couple was uncomfortable enough to pull the trigger on buying their first home, a