

Why The Office Simply Cannot Go Away: The Compelling Case For The Workplace

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The office is critical to innovation, business success and our humanity.

Steelcase

We're in the midst of the most significant reinvention of work in our time. We've proven people can work anywhere and the greatest social experiment—sending everyone home to do their work—has decimated barriers to working away from the office.

Some contend people are working with a reasonable level of productivity from home. And this is during arguably the worst-case situation for remote work: Being forced to work from home without choice, experiencing stress about the pandemic, sharing space with spouses or partners who are furloughed or also trying to work from home and finding time to educate children who would normally be at school—all of these create challenging

conditions. Even so, people are getting work done—and could probably perform even better from home when the coronavirus abates, children go back to school and employees can return to a more typical way of life.

We can work from home with some level of effectiveness. We can meet using all kinds of technology platforms. We can stay connected to colleagues. We can perform our tasks. We can manage our work.

We can, but it's just not the best idea.

It's tempting for companies to conclude the office is irrelevant. Perhaps commutes, conference rooms and coffee bars aren't really that necessary after all. With billions invested in real estate and maintenance of the workplace, companies would be missing something if they weren't at least asking questions about its necessity.

But not so fast. The office simply cannot go away. It is necessary on multiple levels—for our effectiveness, for our sanity and for our humanity. It is unlikely work will ever go back to the way it was. In addition, many companies had productive approaches to remote work pre-pandemic, and global work has always required working together from a distance. Working from home offers some wonderful benefits—avoidance of a commute, positive impacts on the environment, more time with family and greater work-life fulfillment. Partly based on these benefits, it is likely companies will continue to encourage some level of work from home, but the best strategies combine working in an office and working from home. It is not an all-or-nothing. It is not an either-or. Deleting the office altogether is not the best option. The workplace offers all kinds of critical value—and it simply cannot—must not—go away. Here are five reasons why:

Humanity And Innovation

Humanity. The office is critical to our humanity. We are social creatures and we crave connections with other people—even at socially-distanced lengths. People may have different preferences for how much they work alone or with others based on their personality, but everyone needs some level of connection. Face-to-face communication contributes to all kinds of wellbeing including physical, cognitive, and emotional. On the flip side, a lack of human connection detracts from mental health and physical wellness. Some of this connection can be effectively facilitated by technology, but not all of it. According to a study by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 71% of people are struggling to adjust to remote work and according to additional research, people working from home are reporting mental health challenges. In addition, the longer people work from home, the more likely they are to report issues with sadness and fatigue. We need each other, and we understand ourselves based on our relationships with others. We are coworkers, colleagues and team members. Being together in the office feeds this need for togetherness whether we're working side-by-side creating a new idea at a white board,

solving a thorny problem around a conference table or acknowledging a friend across the cafeteria. Our proximity may need to be social distanced pre-vaccine, but hopefully post-vaccine, we can be closer. Either way, our humanity demands human connections and technology only meets part of our need. Being together in a work setting contributes much more significantly.

Innovation. The workplace is also critical to innovation. As humans we are fundamentally creative—and want to contribute what’s new and impactful. In addition, companies live and die on the ability to adapt and respond to customers and the market in new ways. Just three years ago, a who’s who list of companies significantly reduced their telework because the programs were impeding their ability to compete. We can be creative anywhere, but being together physically is so much more effective for stimulating thinking. We can build on each other’s ideas and not have the awkwardness that arises from delays when we’re interacting virtually. Successful ideation depends on rapid exchange of concepts and the flow of dialogue unhampered by fits and starts of never-fast-enough technology. Experimentation occurs based on the opportunity to roll up sleeves—literally—and work together on generating the novel and testing the unproven. Innovation is also facilitated by the unplanned encounters we have at the office. We have a new idea because we chatted with a colleague we don’t normally see, or we were inspired toward a new solution because of information we overheard standing in line to pick up lunch in the cafeteria. Perhaps those who do individual work can be successful working exclusively from home, but teams work better when they can come together in an office to blend their best thinking. Beyond co-creation that happens within teams, organizations require collaboration between and across teams—and nothing offers the same value as an office in achieving this goal.

Purpose And Energy

Purpose. The office also provides a critical sense of common ground. Any company knows that to deliver powerful results, they must ensure people have a sense of shared purpose and aligned objectives. Employees must be rowing in the same direction. The physical experience of place helps foster this sense of being in it together. But we’re currently without it, and the SHRM study demonstrates 65% of companies report they are struggling to maintain morale. From the earliest times, people gathered in places for common purposes—whether it was for celebration, mourning, childcare or learning. People have always come together to inspire a sense of community. In the modern world, the office offers this esprit de corps. We walk in the door with another employee, run into a coworker over (a socially-distanced) lunch or simply connect with someone while waiting for the elevator. We can get some of this through virtual connections, but not as effectively. Being together in a place reminds us we’re unified and are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Energy. The office provides for communication and it energizes. Disseminating and exchanging information can happen anywhere and everywhere and this has never been more true than in this age of social media and technology platforms. But there is something powerful about showing up together for a town hall meeting or an annual gathering—even when we are socially distanced. There is a rush in the feeling that so many people are in one place, sharing an experience. There is the power of laughter or applause or the focus that is demanded by presence. Being together virtually just doesn't have the same magic—some people are engaged, some are distracted, some are multi-tasking and some are having technical difficulties. This disparity in focus can occur in person as well, but the influence of the crowd makes this less likely and the sociological concept of the bandwagon effect—when we're swept up by the group—can be helpful to our enthusiasm and engagement in hearing a message.

Health And Wellbeing

Variety. We crave variety and the workplace provides it. We've proven to ourselves we can do everything from home. We can shop, eat, exercise, socialize and yes, we can work. But we want the variety that comes from getting out—to browse, enjoy a restaurant, go to the fitness club, gather with friends and go to our workplace. From neuroscience research, we know our brains are easily bored. We want the stimulation that comes from a diversity of experiences and an assortment of atmospheres. The office is one of these.

Movement and thinking. The office also helps us feel better. It allows for movement—across the campus or between conference rooms, and shifting postures throughout the day—something the workplace offers better than home—is best for your physical health. Movement has also been correlated with enhanced memory and learning. The physical workplace itself is also better for your thinking process. Having a place to go gives you a greater sense of time demarcation, reducing the disorientation that so many are reporting based on being (almost) exclusively at home. In addition, you avoid the cognitive challenges that arise from video conferencing (struggles to get in sync and fully read non-verbals). You also remember things better when you have more landmarks around you. The conversation from the atrium or the discussion you had in the hallway on the 4th floor tend to cement in your mind because of the physical markers around you.

Boundaries. We also need some healthy boundaries. Traditionally, we have talked about how to ensure a separation between work and home—how to leave work at the office and ensure a focus on life at home. But through the pandemic, the opposite has become true. People benefit from leaving home at home and coming to the office to focus on work. Work is a part of life and a full life embraces the effort that comes from making a contribution through whatever kind of work we do. Going to an office provides the opportunity to immerse in work with less of the distractions of home.

Talent And Engagement

Talent. The office attracts talent. Much of company culture is intangible. It is norms and values and assumptions, and it is “the way things get done around here.” But the workplace is a powerful way to demonstrate culture in a more tangible way. Place is the most visible artifact of culture. The lobby communicates a sense of a company’s mission. Gathering areas demonstrate the value it places on collaboration and connection. The work café shows employees their experience matters. The windows, daylight and views are a subtle depiction of the company’s emphasis on wellbeing and its ties to the community. All of these are powerful signals about an organization’s values and priorities. These are the beacons that attract talent and the messages that influence people’s engagement over time.

Engagement. Being in a physical workplace also helps reduce brain drain. Research has demonstrated people are more likely to have side hustles when they’re working from home so the chance of losing talent to the gig is greater. In addition, when people are home, they are more distracted and may be more likely to do non-work tasks during the day—from online shopping to surfing social media accounts. People working from home also admit to reduced likelihood of following procedures to protect company data and 84% of IT professionals say data loss is a significant concern with people working from home. Finally, people may be less engaged from home simply because they’re more distracted. Rather than being together in the workplace pitching in on a key project, they may be folding laundry during your meeting or responding to email during a critical work team discussion. The SHRM study finds 35% of organizations are reporting reductions in productivity and a study from the *American Journal of Political Science* finds women are disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of the ability to devote time to their work—and to be optimally productive. All of these are risks which are mitigated by being together in the office.

Empathy And Culture

Empathy. Empathy and trust are enhanced with physical presence. Team members who are regularly together can more easily stay attuned to each other—to share in positive events, offer support during struggles or learn from each other. Trust is built through proximity, and according to MIT, “physical distance can turn into psychological distance.” One study of 1,153 people showed a deterioration of team dynamics when people worked remote. We don’t trust what we don’t understand. More regular interaction can help us make sense of people’s responses, and more greatly appreciate their point of view. When we see each other more frequently we tend to identify with others and give them the benefit of the doubt. Social capital is the goodwill, fellowship, links and shared understanding that allow us to work together most effectively—and this is built more effectively when people are together. The alternative is the depreciation of social capital that can result when people don’t have access to the power of place. Leaders too can more easily focus on employees and their needs. Rather than having to check in formally, they

can easily see non-verbal signals and understand when an employee has a question or needs guidance. All of this can happen virtually, but not as easily. When relationships require more effort, there is risk they will erode, a challenge avoided in the shared workplace.

Culture. Without the chance to be together at the office, the SHRM research demonstrates more than a third of companies are having difficulties with their organizational cultures, and a study by Prudential points to cultural decay which may result from an exclusively work-from-home approach. Culture is significantly determined by the worst behavior it will tolerate. Companies aren't managing culture, they are managing behaviors in terms of what they encourage, discourage or reward. While leaders can still reinforce actions and hold people accountable via technology platforms, it's more difficult and there is a higher likelihood they will miss opportunities to reinforce and recognize great contributions or to guide and manage actions which may not be aligned with cultural values.

The Bottom Line

Working from home will likely never go away and this is a good thing. It offers plenty of benefits, chief among them, work-life fulfillment. But the workplace must also not go away. It is critical for individuals, teams and organizations. In summary the office provides:

- Humanity and innovation
- Purpose and energy
- Health and wellbeing (including variety, movement and thinking, boundaries)
- Talent and empowerment
- Empathy and reinforcement of culture

These benefits hold even in a socially distanced near term office, and especially in post-vaccine workplace.

We can do so much from home—and do so relatively effectively and productively—but it's just not ideal. We're better when the office is part of our holistic work experience—in addition to working from home. The workplace had a place in our businesses, our society, our communities and our lives—a place we must maintain.

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