

Back to the office? An exploration of post-pandemic work life

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on the way and the space in which work practices are performed. The pandemic has created a huge shift in the way people make sense of what is office space and what it is not. After being forced to work remotely for almost two years, this has become the “new normal”, and many workers are trying to find their way back to a balance in which working remotely and working in the office are “in sync”. In this essay, the different consequences of this shift will be explored, and the various ways workers make sense of work practices and work space. Moreover, future consequences for both work practices, organizations, and office space will be explored.

Keywords: post-pandemic work life; space; office; work practices

Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, workers -mainly freelancers and digital nomads- had discovered how they could create an office just anywhere, as long as they had the right devices and digital technology. As Hatuka & Toch propose (2016) any place could be formed into a “portable private-personal territory” (PPPT), and just by performing work practices, a space not designed as a coworking place, could be transformed into an “unintended” coworking space. Where the “working anywhere”-movement started at coffeeshops like Starbucks (Simon, 2009), soon mobile workers, or so-called “urban digital nomads” started to create work spaces in places such as museum café’s and hotel lobbies. (Brakel-Ahmed, 2021)

At the same time, employees of firms, slowly got more possibilities to work remotely since the late 90s, even though most managers would ask employees to be in the office on most working days. Offices are being built with flexible spaces in large open floor plans. The idea is to stimulate creative discussions, having access to a colleague for face-to-face contact more easily, and consolidating colleague-to-colleague work relationships (Suckley & Nicholson, 2018). Moreover, this is an efficient way of designing office space, and saving money as space is being utilized up to the last square meter. In some firms, the trend is to have different kinds of spaces in order to create ideal work spaces for different tasks, coined by Veldhoen (2008) as Activity Based Working (ABW). Tasks where workers need to concentrate are closed off cubicles

without stimuli, yet for creative thinking the space is more “playful” (Suckley & Nicholson, 2018).

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, there was a radical change. The concept of working remotely was fast-forwarded and legitimated. The world changed into a large field lab experiment. All (knowledge) workers, both self-employed as employees, were bound to their home office, and online meetings took a giant leap. As the pandemic was ongoing for two years, workers got used to working remotely. It became the “new normal”, and starters in the job market do not even know better than working remotely being the norm.

At present, just before 2023, as the pandemic seems to be nearing an end, workers are returning to the office, and every firm is trying to grapple with returning back to “a post-pandemic normal” (Howell, 2022; Garzillo, 2022; Crawford, 2022). Some firms want employees to be back in the office fully, others are more flexible and some firms even encourage working remotely 100% and employ new people no matter where they live.

There are consequences for both organizations and workers in the post-pandemic era. In the next section, these will be explored.

1. Consequences for workers and organizations

There has been a major mind shift, due to the “intervention” the pandemic caused. Whether organizations and workers liked it or not: work was performed remotely. After having lived through this situation for more than two years, what consequences does this have on the way employees think about and make sense of (the possibility of) working remotely? And what does it mean for organizations?

There is a big diversity in how workers perceive and make sense of remote working. Some workers thrive on remote working and “never” want to go back to the office again (Kelly, 2022; Malinsky, 2022). The fact that they can plan their days as they wish, and do household tasks, care tasks for children, family and/or pets during working hours can be very attractive to some workers. Moreover, all the time commuting to and from the office has disappeared.

Even though this seems positive and partly is, working remotely does have organizational and societal consequences. As there is no boundary between work and private space, it is harder than ever to separate private life

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from work life, and private self from work self. The time commuting to and from the office could be seen as a liminal space and time in which workers “transition” from work self to private self, work space to private space and vice versa. The spatial and temporal “unwinding” has disappeared, which could cause stress (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Palumbo, 2020; Peters, et al., 2009).

For some workers, working in the same context and space is too stressful and confusing, in particular the recurrent move from bed to computer screen every morning and the intensity of new immobilities at home (de Vaujany, 2022). They prefer going to the office to be able to be productive, meet colleagues and go through the performance rituals of work.

Most employers want their employees back at the office. Around 66 % (Malinsky, 2022) of European employers want their employees back at the office. This sometimes even leads to a “battle” between employers and employees (Kelly, 2022) Who “wins” the battle or what future scenarios will bring, are very much dependent on the state of the economy, and the job market.

Moreover, it will take some time for the “new post-Covid-situation” to find a balance, and get more reliable statistics on remote working.

Regardless of the worker’s or employer’s preferences to be physically present in an office space and place, the notion of (lack of) togetherness is an important factor. As previous studies have shown, the fact of being together in an office space enhances informal interaction. Important physical spaces for informal interaction are e.g. the lunch room, the water-cooler/coffee machine, photocopier. Fayard and Weeks (2007) found that objects such as photocopiers and water-coolers *afford* informal interaction. As the workers get something to drink, or make photocopies, they are in a tiny timespan of liminality in which they interact with co-workers. They tend to strike up an informal conversation, which could involve both private life as work-related themes. Informal talks and seemingly unimportant conversations about work do not only have a function of bonding with one another, but also create more organizational commitment towards the organization. Fayard and Weeks (2007) mention workers going to the photocopier on purpose just for the sake of some social interaction. The importance of these small physical encounters are often overlooked and underestimated in relation to remote or hybrid working. Before the pandemic, remote working was usually limited to a maximum of a day or two per week. However, in the post-pandemic era, it is not uncommon to work remotely fully, or at least the majority of the week. This has many consequences for

workers and their relationship with the organization and each other.

It should not be underestimated how important physical closeness in the same space is to keep the organization and its culture strong. When work is just reduced to performing a profession from a home office or any other remote space, the worker is just a professional, performing tasks that could also be performed for any other company with other colleagues. When work is just reduced to performing tasks, regardless of the organization and co-workers, the way the organizational culture weaves the workers, goals and firm into one “family of workers” becomes highly problematic.

A lack of physical proximity and hence (often) a weak organizational culture have an effect on how workers feel committed to the organization and toward each other. When people do not know each other and perhaps even have never met face-to-face, there is no basis to trust the other person (Fayard & Weeks, 2007). This has consequences for knowledge sharing, as workers are just “performing their professional tasks” remotely. Knowledge, then, will not be used constructively to -as a team- make the organization a huge success. The post-pandemic organization, metaphorically speaking, would just be a large machine where workers are just “cogs in a machine” that do not care about the end result, just that their own tasks are performed well.

Besides feeling less committed and inducing a weaker organizational culture, the lack of physical proximity has some negative consequences that should be taken into consideration, especially when work is performed by knowledge workers and requires teamwork and innovation to achieve success. The lack of physical proximity makes it difficult to build trust through personal connection. This has a negative impact on teamwork and innovations. Moreover, the chance encounters in the office space are a rich source of innovation (Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Fayard & Weeks, 2014).

For the organization, the consequences of workers feeling less connected leads to a diminished organizational commitment and identification. The turnover will be higher which makes the organization will lose money, valuable knowledge and networks. An organization can grow and thrive when workers trust one another and want to create the best for the organization. Yet as stated earlier, in a situation where physical proximity is lacking, trust, commitment, informal conversation, creativity and innovation diminish.

Concludingly, it seems that (almost) fully remote working has consequences for both workers and organizations. The lack of physical proximity makes the worker feel like a professional just performing tasks for a “random” organization without feeling part of a “family”. Moreover, the blurred boundaries between work space and private space can create feelings of loneliness, stress and alienation. Contact with co-workers is more impersonal with physical distance, which is not conducive to building trust, personal work relationships and facilitating chance encounters that lead to bonding and are a source of innovation. For organizations this means that the organizational culture and commitment are weaker, and ultimately this leads to less innovation and a higher turnover.

2. Consequences for society

Digital technology and the imposed remote working during the pandemic have opened up many possibilities for workers (Aroles, de Vaujany, & Dale, 2021). It is however important to consider the consequences for workers and organizations in the mid- and long term. Ultimately, these consequences will have an impact on society as a whole.

Not meeting colleagues face-to-face, going through the rituals of being in the office, having lunch, coffee and drinks with colleagues has an impact on the organizational commitment and organizational identification. As mentioned earlier, workers almost feel like self-employed actors that perform work activities for a certain firm, but it could be any other firm with the same job description. This has severe consequences for loyalty towards the organization, as workers may hop from one job to another if work conditions and pay are better. Another consequence is that the organizational identity becomes weak, and workers do not feel part of the organization, but rather an “intrapreneur” within the organization.

For organizations the post-pandemic has taken New Ways of Working to a different level. Workers feel less committed and more empowered. Possibilities have opened up to work from anywhere and for any organization. Whatever glue has been keeping workers from being “stuck” in an organization, such as the office, the affectional organizational commitment, not realizing a much broader scope of possibilities of when and where to work, it is now being questioned critically. Where even before the pandemic workers would not always feel appreciated and acknowledged by their managers, the pandemic seems to have exacerbated this feeling of not being valued (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Hartner, 2022). The way workers connect to their colleagues, their

employers and their jobs, is one of the important pillars in how they place themselves in society.

The post-pandemic New Ways of Working have consequences for society. The concept of Working Alone Together (Spinuzzi, 2012) now does not only concern mainly self-employed people, but also employees of organizations. The speed of digital technology offering possibilities to work from anywhere and use videoconferencing software to connect with co-workers has surpassed the time, space and need to investigate and reflect upon the consequences for society. Paradoxically, the world has become bigger as we can communicate online either in real time or in an asynchronous manner. Hatuka and Toch (2016) state that we are in our “portable private personal territories (PPPT’s)”. The authors see the PPPT as a social and not a physical territory, but as “a social condition that comes into being by the individual in a space” (Hatuka & Toch, 2016:2203). This implies that the physical space is inhabited by people in their own individual virtual, social bubbles.

Quite paradoxically, digital technologies and the possibilities they have created to work remotely, has in fact made our worlds and sense of community smaller. The importance of physical proximity and the affect it has on bonds of trust and connection is overlooked and underestimated (Fayard & Weeks, 2007). The increased use of online communication has created individuals in a liquid society (Bauman, 2013), engaging in online communication whenever they please and with whomever they choose to virtually interact with. The connection is there, but the depth and intensity of Face-to-Face conversation with its nuances in tone, body language and facial expressions are missing. The result is a loss of sense of community, solidarity, trust and belonging. It is crucial to investigate these consequences as, despite the fast developments in digital technology and all the opportunities it creates, we, as humans, are biologically made to connect and feel that we belong to a community (Mellor, et al., 2008; Baumeister & Leary, 2017).

Conclusion

The fast development of (digital) technology has increased mobility and possibilities to work from anywhere. Remote working took a giant step during the pandemic. Work time, place and space has become liquid. Even though it offers many possibilities, it is important not to lose sight of the consequences it has on organizations, workers and ultimately society.

As stated earlier in this essay, when workers do not feel any specific organizational commitment, and work as if they are cogs in a machine, they tend to only perform their own tasks without looking at (or caring for) the whole picture. As managers do not see or know their

employees that well, it is easier to overlook or not acknowledge hard work. There is a tendency toward “quiet quitting”, where workers consciously just perform the tasks they have to do, but not go the extra mile (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). This has partly to do with creating more private time and avoiding overwork and stress, but at the root of this limited commitment lies the post-pandemic loosely woven organization: The workers feel like cogs in a machine, performing just their own tasks, whilst being overlooked by managers that are less likely to acknowledge their efforts (Harter, 2022). The perception of alienation at work can result in a feeling of not belonging to a community, and part of society (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021). It makes people behave like individual rather than citizens of a society.

This essay is by no means a manifesto stating that work should only be performed in a physical office with all employees being present at all (working) hours. It is, however, an attempt to point out the consequences of a very loosely woven organization. Ultimately the concerns raised affect our whole society, as people are searching for a sense of purpose and belonging. (Work)relationships, the purpose of work, work-life balance and finding a sense of meaning at work and as a result thereof, in society.

The lack of a sense of belonging, trust, connection and being part of a community can have consequences in how our society is woven together. Being aware of both the possibilities and opportunities that digital technologies bring, and of our biological needs to be part of society could be helpful in making sense of our post-modern liquid society. After all, we are herd animals that have an inherent need to belong to a community.

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