

Why You May Actually Want to Go Back to the Office

by Art Markman

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With vaccines becoming more widespread in some regions, many offices are opening their doors to allow (or require) workers to return. But plenty of employees aren't eager to go back. At the University of Texas, where I've been the head of the academic

working group for pandemic planning, many of our faculty and staff have expressed that they've been productive working from home, have enjoyed it, and hope to continue doing much (if not all) of their work remotely.

It's easy to see why many people prefer working from home. Commuting — which has long been known as one of the biggest joy-killers for workers — has been eliminated. It makes it easier for people to choose the hours they want to work and to schedule their work time around other responsibilities like child care. For many, the personal drawbacks, such as difficulties in maintaining work-life balance, pale in comparison to these benefits.

So, when leaders start talking about getting people to return to the office, it's natural for many employees to resist. The central problem is that many of the benefits of working from home are good for the individual, whereas many of the benefits of working from the office are good for the organization and affect the individual more indirectly.

If you're dreading going back to the office, it might help to have a reminder of how in-person work can actually benefit you — not just your company. Here are three ways the office can make your working life easier.

Culture. It's hard to start a brand-new job remotely. We learn how to navigate a workplace's culture by watching other people and how they interact. Remote onboarding can be particularly difficult for people who are fairly new to the working world and transitioning from school to a job; they don't get the opportunity to just see how work *works*.

In general, new employees who work remotely are likely to find it harder to get things done — if you can't watch what people are doing and if others can't notice when you're struggling, then everything about the job has to be taught more explicitly. Most organizations aren't great at this and still rely on new hires

gleaning a lot of what they need to know from their interactions with colleagues, and even longtime employees may not be aware of what needs to be taught.

If you're an existing employee in an organization, there are also benefits to spending time with your colleagues. The longer you're separated from them, the more your overall sense of mission tends to drift. In order to ensure that your organization retains elements of its culture that you value, it's important to engage frequently with your coworkers to stay aligned about your core values. Your interactions with the newest hires are particularly important. They'll learn a lot both from their conversations with you as well their observations.

Collaboration. It's harder for institutional knowledge to make its way around in a remote environment. A lot of information sharing happens through short, informal conversations between people over the course of a normal workday. Working from home requires that every interaction be scheduled or take place over text. That extra effort can make people less likely to ask quick questions or share something they just learned informally than if everyone was working together (especially considering the phenomenon of zoom fatigue).

The physical workplace enables moments of serendipity that can move projects along. You might bump into a colleague while thinking about a problem and ask a question that leads to a new and surprising solution. Maybe you grab a cup of coffee with a few coworkers and that leads to a new product or service. Or you notice a colleague struggling with a task and give them some tips that save a lot of time. We may not miss those moments when they're not happening, but they can have a significant positive impact on our individual success, not just the success of the company.

Clearly, working more effectively is better for the organization because it makes employees more productive. But the ability to collaborate freely benefits individuals as well. Having colleagues and friends at work increases job satisfaction. Good collaborative relationships also decrease frustration with work by making it easier for people to get help when they need it and learn new tasks that are just beyond their reach.

Purpose. Another benefit of spending time with colleagues in the office is that it reinforces the sense that you share a common mission. The phenomenon of goal contagion is a reflection that when you observe the actions of other people, you often adopt their same goals. Being around a group of people who are working toward a common mission reinforces that goal in everyone in the workplace. When people feel connected to the mission of the organization, it improves their overall satisfaction with their work. Believing in what the organization wants to accomplish reinforces that sense that a job is a vocation or calling and not just a way to earn a paycheck.

These influences of spending time with colleagues in the workplace benefit both the organization and the individual, but their effects (particularly on the individual) occur over the long-term. In contrast, the benefits of working from home over returning to the office are more obvious to people in the short-term. There is a strong bias for people to prefer options with short-term benefits, but don't forget the reasons why in-person work may actually improve your working life.

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