



FROM HYBRID TO 'MYBRID'

Your company wants you back in the office more? You may resent that, but it's got a point – it helps both them and you, and you can work it to your advantage, says **Jenny Segal**

We all know the score: employers want us back in the office for more days than we want to be in for.

To reach any kind of middle ground, we need to understand each side's motivation. For employers, the desire for staff to come into the office is driven by positive reasons, such as collegiality, culture, collaboration and mentoring the next generation. But sometimes it's not: it can stem from a lack of trust or a need to micromanage. Or ego and status – the desire to parade around the office and oversee the troops. Or a concern that expensive office space is under-used.

For employees, there are very good reasons to work from home: better work-life balance, less time and money wasted on commuting, and the ability to focus uninterrupted on a task that requires concentration and flow. But... some people are using it as an excuse to slack off. And some have become fearful: Covid has made them hermitic and they've forgotten that the key determinants of happiness are contact with fellow humans and, at work, feeling part of a team. But the most interesting reason is the assertion that they are more effective when they work from home. To which I declare: your job is not your 'to do' list! Your job is to enable your company to succeed.

If we have to work on something that requires deep concentration, perhaps writing a report or coding a spreadsheet, the best thing from a personal efficiency stance may well be to stay at home and dive in until the job is done. And our efficiency may drop to, say, 70% when we are in a noisy office with the threat of constant interruptions.

However, when we are in the office we raise other people's effectiveness – perhaps because we inspire them or set the benchmark for what deep work looks like. Or maybe we just have a laugh and make everyone feel happier so they work that bit harder. Overall, the office's effectiveness increases. We may lose out because it takes us 30% longer to get our work done but, from the perspective of the office as a whole, that lost 30% is easily made up for in terms of increasing the effectiveness of those around us. Net-net, the company wins.

The office as organism

More than this, the act of coming into the office breaks down silos by allowing us to interact with each other in an unplanned fashion: an overheard fragment here, a glance at someone's screen there, a random thought provoked by someone's trip away or their new shoes. Exponential neural pathways form from these serendipitous interactions. The

office ceases to be a collection of silos, with the interconnectedness of the whole being much more powerful than the sum of its parts, working together like the organs of a pulsing, living being.

These neural pathways are where the magic happens, where innovation and blue-sky thinking occur, where we make the paradigm business leap. And great business leaders know it, which is why they're trying to encourage us back to the office.

One theory as to why such random interactions increase creative output is based on the concept of entropy which, the A-Level physicists among us might recall, is loosely defined as a measure of the disorder in a system. High-entropy systems are chaotic, low-entropy systems are stable.

Dario Krpan, a behavioural scientist at the London School of Economics, has extended this idea to psychology: humans prefer low-entropy environments that are stable, safe and well understood. When we find ourselves in a chaotic situation, our brains don't like it and seek to remove the entropy from the situation as quickly as possible, sparking rapid creativity in a desperate attempt to seek safety and survive.

The Work Wheel

Given that spending time with each other in the office is a good thing for both our

personal happiness and for business innovation, how much time should we be there for? Some companies dictate numbers of days and which ones, some leave it up to individual teams to decide organically. One thing is clear, though: carrots and sticks don't work long term. Free pizza on a Thursday quickly gets old, and threats of docked bonuses and no pay rises for dissenters is a surefire way to end up with a workforce that lacks diversity, as those who value their work-life balance move elsewhere. Is there a better way?

Whether you're junior, senior or the HR director deciding the back-to-the-office policy, start by considering what will drive business success. Suppose that, to achieve its targets, a business needs to focus on customer growth and product development, and this will involve employees spending time reading reports, writing spreadsheets, brainstorming ideas, meeting clients and carrying out market research. And we want to allow time and space for some serendipitous magic. Some of these functions will be best performed in the office and some best done at home.

Now imagine a wheel, where each spoke represents one of these success-driving functions (Figure 1).

Consider how effectively you operate in each of these dimensions when you are working entirely from home. For example, you might rate the ability to focus uninterrupted on reading and detailed spreadsheets very highly, but the scope for serendipitous interactions less so. Mark a dot on each spoke at the appropriate point and join them up to get your Home Work Wheel (Figure 2).

Now repeat the process through the lens of 100% office-based working; it might look something like Figure 3.

If we plan our days so that we spend our time working from home on those tasks nearest the Home Work Wheel's 'rim', and ditto for our office life, we will be very effective indeed, as shown in

FIGURE 1 The Work Wheel



FIGURE 2 The Home Work Wheel



FIGURE 3 The Office Work Wheel



FIGURE 4 The Hybrid Work Wheel



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Figure 4. Staff and managers alike can take this on board because the beauty of it is two-fold. First, it forces a logical thought process based on the drivers of business success, rather than more emotive factors. Second, its clarity enables the rationale behind the policy to be easily communicated – so important in achieving employee buy-in and winning over dissenters' hearts and minds.

The Post-Covid manager

And we all need to execute the plan effectively by making sure that, when people come into the office, they are focused about how they spend their time – not coming in to sit in back-to-back Zoom meetings, or to interact with parts of the business with

which they have no possible synergies. Or to find that no one else from their team is around.

This takes careful management and will require a new set of management skills. Businesses need to recognise the importance of the management function, selecting the right people for the job and giving

them sufficient time to do it well.

Management has become multi-dimensionally more complex: ensuring that when people come in, they are clear about why they are there and what they will do. Creating an open, welcoming environment that encourages serendipity, where people can exchange ideas, forge workplace friendships and have a great time. This will allow us to rediscover the joys of office life so we actually want to come in more. Work should be fun.

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