

Workplace Strategy for the Whole Human:

Bringing the Flexibility of Home Working into the Office

JULY 2022

Employers understand that the transition back to the office might be awkward for employees. Workers used to the comforts of home have new expectations, and many hope to avoid a return to the status quo. What can companies do to bring the convenience of working from home to the office? One approach: devise a workplace strategy that addresses the whole human.

Working from home during the pandemic has unquestionably blurred the boundaries between office and personal life. For some, this has been less than ideal, but for many, it has made the possibility of true work-life balance realistic and achievable. The home office allows people to work in a comfortable, personalized environment. Affordable coffee and food are right in your own kitchen. Dress code is “anything goes.” Train delays are moot; traffic jams, nonexistent. And without a commute, being with family is as easy as walking to the next room.

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Is it any wonder, then, that many people are not choosing to return to the office? A recent survey¹ by Kastle, a corporate security company, found a 43% average occupancy across 2,600 buildings and 138 cities as of early April 2022. Yet people are returning to normal life in droves – sporting events, restaurants, and airports are experiencing up to 95% capacity as compared with 2020ⁱⁱ. What will get employees as excited to return to the office as they are to a basketball game?

For companies that thrive on in-person interaction and teamwork, making in-office time more attractive at this juncture is crucial. Health, social, and economic shocks spurred employers to show an enormous amount of empathy and flexibility through the past two years. To continue the goodwill, and simultaneously strengthen employee retention and workplace culture, employers must acknowledge employees as whole humans in workplace design and policy.

How do we address the whole human in an appropriate context for the workplace? There are three areas we believe present opportunities for employers:

- **Offer Value:** Introduce incentives that promote money and time savings for employees
- **Be a Productivity Champion:** Create environments that foster productivity, community, and comfort for all work styles
- **Respect Autonomy:** Establish policies that encourage autonomy, and thus, trust and respect between colleagues and superiors

Let’s take a look at some strategies that can advance these concepts further.

**OFFER VALUE:****The Savings of Working from Home**

Many of the work-life balance gains of working from home are emotional, psychological, and difficult to quantify. But some hard numbers are telling. Even as the pandemic caused extreme economic stress across the labor force, knowledge workers lucky enough to avoid layoffs or furloughs most likely became wealthier -- richer in both time and money, thanks to working from home. With the

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loss of commute costs and far less spending on leisure, Americans put away excess savings to the tune of \$3.7 trillionⁱⁱⁱ. Even without the context of a global pandemic, a Flexjobs study^{iv} estimates that people stand to save an average of \$4,000 a year by working from home, recouping money otherwise spent on work clothes, gas and transportation, car insurance, and food.



Time savings are even more profound. Flexjobs^v estimates that just by forgoing the commute, the average worker would gain back another 235 hours, or 29 eight-hour days each year – nearly a month of additional waking hours to spend with family, find the time to make dinner, or just decompress from the workday. This extra time can also make childcare less hectic and costly^{vi}.

In light of these advantages, returning to the office could be perceived as a pay cut or a demotion – unless employers adopt incentives and benefits that help employees re-capture similar savings working from the office.

Practical Services and Amenities that Save Time

Both a recent study^{vii} and Savills newly published intergenerational office research^{viii} show that workplace perks such as massages, yoga studios, or game rooms – while no doubt appreciated – are not driving people to want to return to the office.

Companies looking to potentially shed or sublease excess space could be missing opportunities to invest in their employees and introduce functions in those spaces – at a company or building level – that save workers time and money.



Why not consider establishing daycare services for families or pet care facilities? Laundry and dry cleaning onsite can provide employees with another time-saving amenity. Pick-up areas for grocery and package delivery are also practical time savers. All would make worthwhile investments in the repurposing of unused space.

Subsidies for public transportation are not just budget-friendly for employees but also beneficial for the environment. Where public transportation is not an option, parking subsidies for drivers or extension of remote policies again create time and money savings for employees.

While gourmet food may be an unnecessary luxury, occasional free food never goes unappreciated. Providing healthy meals, especially breakfast and lunch, which many employees may have otherwise purchased due to lack of time, is a great incentive for people to come to the office. In-office healthy grab-and-go options are easily implemented and can help meet wellness program targets.

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When it comes to workplace benefits and amenities, think practically. Anything that will give people time back in their week, or money back in their weekly budget, is a convenience that mimics the advantages of working from home. Meanwhile, employers reinforce a positive working culture, potentially increase retention, and drive extra incentive to come to the office.



**BE A PRODUCTIVITY
CHAMPION:**

Space Choice for Diverse Work Styles and Needs

While many people assume introverts have had their heyday working from home over the past two years, in fact, privacy and quiet have broad appeal. Our recent generational survey^{ix} found that all age groups polled preferred various types of enclosed spaces for most work modes – not just quiet work but also internal and external collaboration. Privacy was also highly ranked as important in a workplace.

These results speak to the need for adopting a variety of space types in a floor plan. While open floor plans are attractive for their inherent flexibility and reduced real estate costs, too many employees have felt squeezed out by noise levels, distraction, and unwelcome interruption. For introverts, it's meant the pressure to “be social” at inconvenient times and higher anxiety levels^x. For extroverts, it's offered too few places to “switch off” when the day or task calls for it. Mono-space-type offices such as all-open plans are not beneficial for the many ways of working and the many personality types who work in them.

Offices that offer a variety of focus space types will aid productivity. But we should also remember that a unique advantage of the workplace is its role in bringing people together. After a period of relative isolation, many employees, especially younger generations^{xi}, are drawn back to the office seeking community – whether it's social time with friends and peers or mentorship from colleagues and supervisors. Co-working has grown in popularity^{xii} partly for this reason – and co-working spaces have done an excellent job of creatively incorporating space variety. Social and focus time can be accommodated equally in a floor plan that incorporates private

and communal space thoughtfully – with consideration for acoustics, circulation, and each company's unique cultural needs.

Finally, daylight is an underestimated motivator that deserves a place in any office plan. Access to daylight complements all work styles and brings a multitude of human-centered remedies to the workday – from reducing headaches and eyestrain^{xiii} to improving sleep at night, mental health, and creative capacity during the day^{xiv}.



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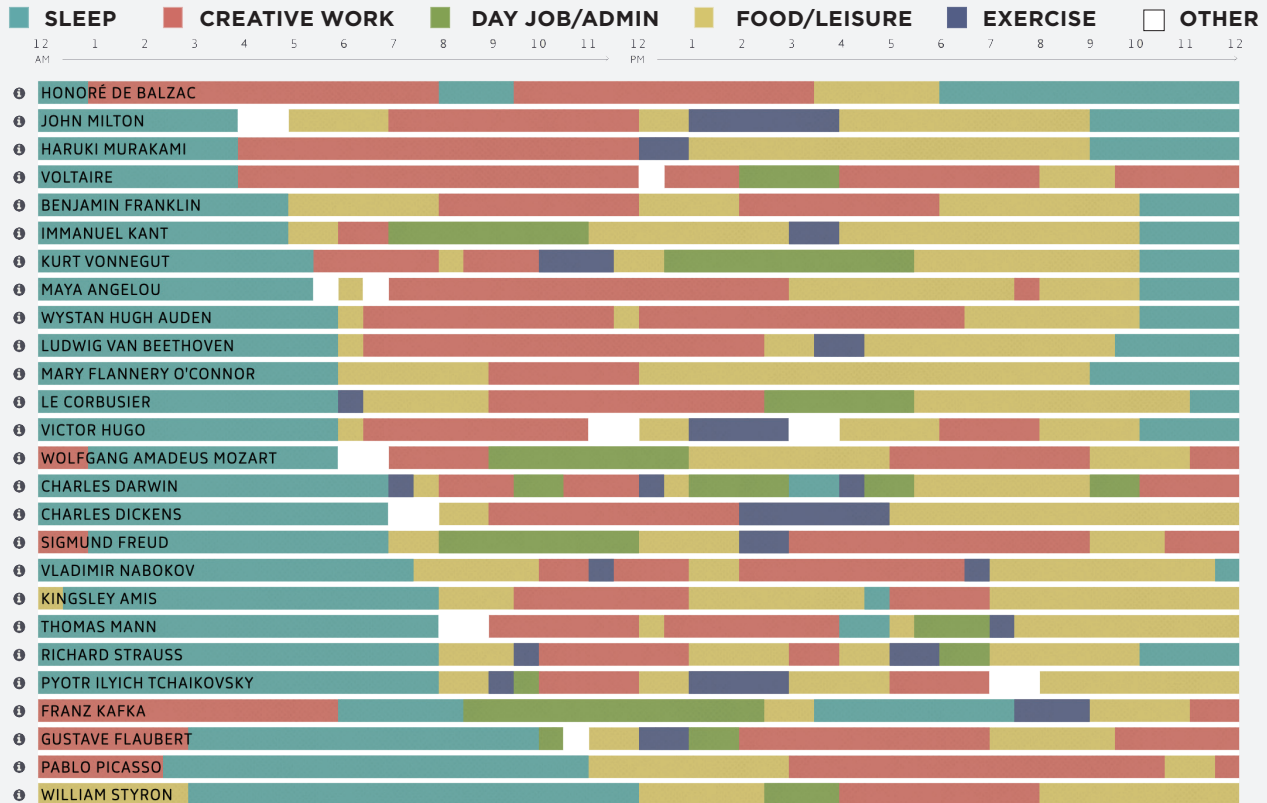
RESPECT AUTONOMY:
Trust Your Employees

In addition to solid IT infrastructure, enabling home working during the pandemic required one other key attribute of employers: trust. In-person oversight, and at its extreme, micromanagement, were far harder to accomplish via Slack and Zoom. Despite this, many surveys have shown that people reported feeling and being more productive working from home^{xv xvi}. When afforded both trust and space to work as needed, the majority of employees passed the test.

For many, trust from their employer had been a long time coming. Recent research^{xvii xviii} has consistently shown that what workers value most in an employer is respect. In addition to creating flexible floor plans, employers can extend respect for employees as individuals by adopting more

flexible policies. Measuring performance by results instead of the timesheet and allowing workers to have input on their schedule or choose their ideal work setting imparts respect and trust in employees as responsible professionals.

Not only is this another strategy to give people time back in their week - by granting flexibility for appointments and family care - but it also accommodates individual productivity needs. Author Mason Currey has published books about the habits of the world's most creative thinkers. Through studying the diaries of preeminent figures such as Mozart and Maya Angelou, he has documented how creative work happens at vastly different times for each person, inside and outside 9 to 5^{xix}. While not everyone can claim to be the Mozart or Maya Angelou of the office, this is a good reminder that great work happens at different times for different people. Companies can establish flexible scheduling and optional remote policies as a tool to unlock employee potential.



Credit: Mason Currey, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*. Knopf, 2013. Reprinted in Podio. Author Mason Currey studied the diaries and letters of the world's great thinkers to document their daily routines. This graphic shows how productivity is not limited to "business hours" and is unique to each individual.



Realigning Corporate Culture with Human Attributes

The origin of the contemporary office is rooted in early 20th century Taylorism, an ethos and a style that positioned managers as supreme overseers of vast open floors of employees in rows of identical desks. We've come a long way since then. Society, technology, and the nature of office work have changed several times over. Workplace strategy should continue to evolve with those changes. By pursuing more enlightened workplaces, we come closer to achieving a healthy balance between business objectives and individual requirements – with better recruitment and retention potential for companies.

Employers have a unique challenge in bringing employees back to the office after a long hiatus. To abandon the progress realized in working from home – from gains in time and money to greater autonomy and productivity -- would be leaving smart and effective workplace strategies on the table. Companies will “choose their own adventure” in adopting return-to-office incentives, but if they choose practical, meaningful, and lasting plans that treat people as three-dimensional and offer real value, they will create a powerful new impetus to come back to the office.

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