The Return to Office Era:

"Because I Said So"
Is Not Good Enough

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INTRODUCTION

The recent pandemic pushed the majority of the modern workforce into a new and unfamiliar paradigm. Almost overnight. Offices emptied, the morning commute was cancelled and companies struggled to understand how they were going to keep the lights on, stay productive and still keep employees safe.

As the pandemic dragged on, it became apparent that it was possible to "keep the trains running" so to speak and that employees, for the most part, stayed focused, productive and happy to work in their new wardrobes of sweatpants and slippers.

This new paradigm created a newfound and unexpected flexibility – commuting was no longer necessary, workers suddenly found more time with loved ones and favourite activities, and expectations shifted away from the traditional in-office model.

However, the "work from home" model has become a dichotomy that many senior leadership teams and organizations struggle with today.

As the pandemic is increasingly in our rearview, many businesses now want their employees back in the office. They want to restore the pre-pandemic days, where desks are occupied, employees are on-site and "face to face" is the norm.

But the workforce, now accustomed to having the flexibility of working from home, is not inclined to head back to the office, and for the most part, the reasons CEOs are citing are falling on deaf ears. "Quiet quitting" dominated the conversations earlier in 2023 and now, "quiet firings" are on the radar as companies grapple with this pressing issue.

The pivot from work from home (WFH) to return to office (RTO) is not going smoothly.

Let's first examine the myths and rationales being used for RTO, and take a closer look at why employees are not finding them compelling or even believable.

Following this, we will discuss what new skill sets are required to help guide leaders and organizations through this thorny issue, primarily the opportunity to build a stronger workplace community.

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MYTHS AND FACTS

Let's explore three common myths about working in the office, challenging each with facts.

MYTH #1: *Being in the Office Makes Employees More Productive*

The first myth dictates that physical presence in the office simply helps workers produce more. Managers can *keep an eye* on people. They are *nearby* to assist or answer any questions. *It's how work gets done.*

The facts: Studies have confirmed that productivity actually *increased* during the pandemic[1], and at the very least, the causal effect between WFH and productivity is ambiguous[2]. At the minimum, WFH allows flexibility for employees who may not be feeling 100% (and not wanting to risk others), yet who remain committed to and well enough to continue working.

In relation to productivity, WFH is in an organization's best interest. So if this is truly about trust, employees aren't being fooled by a productivity argument.

MYTH #2: *Collaboration and Socialization are Integral Aspects of Work*

This second myth assumes the importance of "being together" at the workplace; that because roles and tasks intersect, it's best that employees engage, cooperate and socialize in person.

The facts: While most roles and tasks overlap with others, every day, in-person collaboration and socialization is not required, nor is it realistic.

Removed from the unnecessary interruptions, implicit and/or outright discrimination and the enforcement of awkward and sometimes unwanted birthday celebrations, it's not only the introverts who were thankful to avoid the office. If this is about maintaining social status, employees aren't seeing the value.

MYTH #3: *Creativity and Innovation Only Happens in Person*

Creative work only occurs under the right conditions, which includes being around other creative thinkers, and together in the office. Innovations requires 'aha!' moments, which come from a flurry of ideas generated on a whiteboard in a meeting room.

The facts: Is in-person interaction a requirement of creativity and innovation? It's true that many of our best ideas come through planned and sporadic face-to-face exchanges like a brainstorming session or chance encounter that sparks a new idea or creative solution. But did creative work from Software Developers or Graphic Designers, for example, stop during the pandemic? No.

And innovation, while important, isn't required daily for most roles, again, assuming it only occurs in-person. *Which it does not.* If this is about imaginative thinking, employees can be creative from anywhere.

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WORKPLACE LONELINESS

Senior Leaders, Managers and HR Professionals alike have been desperate to return to pre-pandemic ways, but they cannot reasonably explain why the need to "return to the office."

We all have an innate desire to be with and accepted by others. The belief is that deep down, person-to-person contact, coffee shop conversations, short stand-up meetings and the like often give workers a sense of community and belonging. But even so, workplace research on loneliness shows that **82%** of employees have felt lonely at work, and nearly half have experienced greater loneliness since the pandemic[3].

In short, many employees feel lonely at work and value and desire the flexibility to work from home. And we wonder why RTO has been a tough sell and hard to get right.

THE RESULT

Employees feel caught between personal flexibility wants and needs, and RTO demands. The result is three common responses:

Confusion and Disruption.
I'm showing up to the office, but spending the day on virtual calls. That's not worth my effort, let alone ironing my shirt.

Eroded Trust and Resentment.
You said I wasn't required in the office regularly, so I moved elsewhere. Now you've changed your mind and need me back two days per week? What's next – 5 days a week?? How's this fair?

Reduced Engagement and Exiting Talent.
Other workplaces are fully remote. If I can't get the flexibility I need, I'll simply go elsewhere to get it.

THE SOLUTION

New Leadership Skills to Build an Active Workplace Community

Hybrid work is not a fad. Leaders need to let go of traditional pre-pandemic models of work because hybrid models, including geographically dispersed teams are here to stay. Engaging today's workforce requires new insights and skills in building a workplace community that is supported by these three pillars: *Connection, Support and Belonging.*

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THE THREE PILLARS OF BUILDING COMMUNITY

1. Connection

Connection requires more than ongoing one-on-one meetings or an annual performance evaluation. By connection, we mean *fostering a deeper, active relationship with employees* focused on their well-being, common interests, and successes.

Make Well-Being a Priority

We can hide dishevelment on screen, but it's much more difficult in person. Create safe space for sharing of personal mental health experiences and individual wellness strategies. Leaders must be the example, demonstrating genuine care and making vulnerability normal, acceptable, and encouraged.

And don't wait for an HR program. You can institute wellness check-ups (i.e., open discussions) to uncover how individuals and the team are truly faring. Set up wellness activities, seeking help from professionals and your EAP.

21% of employees feel burnt out frequently at work, and only

47% report receiving support to cope with work stress.[4]

Foster Deeper Relationships

People want to spend time with those they like and have common interests with. Use less formal settings like the local coffee shop or a walking meeting to connect more intimately on topics such as personal struggles, learning interests and career aspirations. Create social opportunities and formal social programs, and encourage others to seek friendships within the organization by speaking of the value of your own friends at work.

For example, forget the meeting room. Try local parks and restaurants for a different vibe that encourages connection. Invest in employee resource groups (ERGs) to bring together people with similar interests and experiences such as Working Parents or Asian Canadians.

Did you know: Employees with a best friend at work are significantly more likely to produce more in less time, share new ideas and have fun at work.[5]

⚙️ *Celebrate Life Wins*

Just as organizations progress, so does everyone's life. Discover and celebrate what's happening for people at home – at least what's willing to be shared – like a new family addition (human or animal), a completed renovation, a bucket-list travel trip, or a new hobby discovered.

Try asking this: *What's something you wouldn't normally say virtually, but might want to share now we're together?*

2. Support

People won't use paddles if they know how to work the engine at the back the boat. Find ways to advance your employees through training, problem-solving skills, and plenty of help and resources.

📖 *Invest In Learning*

While the pandemic put a halt on many training initiatives, relevant and applicable learning is a great reason to bring people together. Training programs and courses are valuable, but also consider less formal opportunities such as job shadowing and project debrief discussions that explore 'lessons learned'.

For example, you might invite a team member to tag along with you to a meeting where they'll gain learning and exposure, or invite an in-house expert to join an in-person team meeting to share info on current projects and experiences.

Troubling Training Trend

The number of training days per employee, the proportion of employers providing training, and the amount of money spent on training are all in decline.[6]

✊ *Resolve Challenges In Person*

Problem-solving big and small rarely requires cutting edge innovation or outside the box ideas. Often what's required is having the right people in the room, a clear purpose and everyone's focus. Commit as a team to challenges (anticipated or otherwise) being resolved in-person, such as planning, key decision-making, customer escalations, and of course, interpersonal conflict. For instance, everyone agrees to close the laptop and make the trek into the office to resolve the issue on an underperforming project. Furthermore, if your team is fully remote, make sure the occasions when everyone comes together is worthwhile with clear direction, expectations and collective work that drives value.
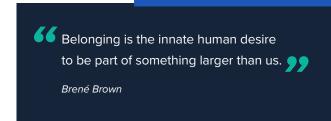
Share Resources & Information

Include 'ask anything' and 'ask for help' portions into team and individual conversations to acknowledge information gaps, workload ebbs and flows and to account for personal life circumstances.

For example, you might institute an ongoing 'what help do you need' in-person meeting to leverage complimentary skill sets and capacity from those in the room.

3. Belonging

Belonging doesn't mean fitting in or gaining approval. It's about being part of something bigger than ourselves, while still being ourselves. Develop a sense of belonging through trust, shared experiences, and accomplishments.

> " Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. "
>
> *Brené Brown*

Strengthen Safety & Trust

Feelings of belonging are predicated on trust and safety, where team members feel part of a group <u>and</u> confident to speak and behave openly as their authentic selves. Deepen trust by role-modeling genuine informal in-person interactions such as chitchat before or after a meeting, a quick question answered after overhearing a conversation, and the 'how are you' check-in when looking forlorn. Celebrate individuality, encouraging everyone's unique character, abilities, and perspectives.

Talk openly about the state of trust and safety within your team and what can be done to strengthen ties. Encourage more in-person time, formally (e.g., ongoing one-on-ones) and informally (e.g., sharing lunch or going for a walk).

Facilitate Formative Experiences

Like that all-nighter you pulled with your best friend as a teen, strong bonds are formed through unique shared experiences such as submitting a new client proposal, supporting one another through an unsuccessful product launch, and sharing laughs at the team lunch. Facilitate and highlight memorable experiences to increase camaraderie and draw your team closer together.

For example, increase the team's confidence by recalling memorable experiences of support and togetherness when the team is feeling unsure of what lies ahead.

⭐ ***Recognize Accomplishments***

Too often leaders overlook positive feedback, progress and milestones achieved, quickly moving on to what's next. Acknowledge headway collectively and for those truly responsible in a genuine, timely and personalized manner.

You can't give cars away like Oprah, but you can create the same kind of excitement and anticipation, enticing people to be part of the experience: *Who's next to be recognized, how and for what? I want to be there to find out!*

CONCLUSION

The blend of working from both the traditional office and from home is our new reality, with 60% of employees in remote-capable jobs seek a hybrid option[7]. However, even at the risk of employee resistance, we've seen some large, influential companies, mandate employees back to the office if they feel it's a requirement for business performance.

In spite of this, implementing a rigid, one-size-fits-all RTO strategy will be a lost cause for your organization if you can't meet the needs of your workforce and articulate why they should give up some flexibility to come back to the office.

To attract and retain top talent, avoid the desperate attempt to return to what used to be. Instead, be creative in considering what will be most effective in keeping your workforce committed and engaged. For instance, gathering the team for four consecutive days each month may prove more successful than one day per week.

Still feeling stuck? Ask your team about the advantages of and preferences for being together, and more simply, what would persuade them to leave the comfort of home, brave the commute and come to the office, or at least together, more often?

In summary, stop seeing RTO as the headache and distraction it has become. Drive engagement by exploring ideas with your team and build community using the strategies above. More importantly, you'll be leading a workforce that feels connected and supported, and that they belong. Whether they're working from the traditional or home office.

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Sources:

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4. *Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*, Mental Health Research Canada, June 2023

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6. *Train in vain? Skills, tasks and training in the UK labour market*, London School of Economics, March 2023

7. *Global Indicator: Hybrid Work*, Gallup, April 2022

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