



Living at work

When we went into lockdown in March 2020, white-collar workers around the world were sent home, instructed to log on remotely and begged not to drop any balls. On balance, this is exactly what happened: most businesses (specifically those in financial services) continued to operate relatively seamlessly, with back-to-back Zoom and Teams meetings becoming the norm practically overnight. What started as working from home soon turned into living at work.

Fast-forward to the present, and a significant number of companies want employees to return to the office and spend the proverbial nine to five there. But many employees are not so keen to re-enter that pre-Covid version of the rat race. They question the need to commute for an hour or more each

way daily, given that most of them have proved their ability to work effectively from home over such an extended period.

A number of businesses have responded favourably to this resistance, most notably in Silicon Valley: today it is possible to work from home permanently if you're employed by Twitter, Meta, Airbnb and Spotify, to mention a few.

But some bosses have not been quite as accommodating.

A couple of months ago, Elon Musk sent a company-wide e-mail under the heading "To Be Super Clear", with the first paragraph reading: "Everyone at Tesla is required to spend a minimum of 40 hours in the office per week. Moreover, the office must be where your actual colleagues are located, not some remote pseudo-office. If you don't show up, we will assume you have resigned."

A cynic might brush this off by saying it simply underlines how difficult it must be to build cars from home. But Musk's message was music to the ears of many CEOs trying to motivate staff to return to the office. Having said that, I'm not sure one should look to the Tesla founder for management lessons, given some of the other headlines he has been making.

More recently, a friend of mine who works in Amsterdam's thriving tech sector tweeted his conviction that most people under 30 actually wanted to be in an office with colleagues, the social bonding at work being critical to their happiness.

The observation sounds perfectly reasonable, but it did remind me of an earlier poll run by Charlie Bilello, the founder and CEO of Compound Capital Advisors in the

US. Bilello asked his 440,000 followers on Twitter about their views relating to working arrangements.

No less than 53% of the 6,600 respondents expressed a clear preference to working mainly from home, with only 17% wanting to work mostly in an office; the remaining 30% were happy to split their time equally between the two.

While it may be true that childless knowledge workers in their 20s generally prefer the buzz of an office, this is clearly not true for many others.

Remotely interested?

I am one of those who prefer my home study to the office desk. But I acknowledge many of the counter-arguments, specifically that it must be hard for a young professional to settle into a new working environment and learn on the job if there's little or no face-to-face contact with colleagues. To maintain and enhance corporate culture is clearly also a huge challenge in a remote environment. I suspect management teams will be grappling with this for years to come.

This whole issue was one of the topics of discussion when thought leader and best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell was recently interviewed by Steven Bartlett on "The Diary of a CEO" podcast. Both gents (who also happen to run their own companies) essentially agreed with the Musk approach and lamented about big businesses that have, to date, not been able to get employees to return to the office.

As I listened to their discussion, I was reminded of the famous line by Mahatma Gandhi, when interviewed at the site of a mass protest a century or so ago. He quoted one of the instigators of the French Revolution in saying: "There go my people, and I must follow them, for I am their leader."

Managers like Musk, Gladwell and Bartlett are all trying to follow the opposite approach and lead decisively from the front.

Will it really work, though, if much of the global workforce seems to have changed its collective mind? **x**

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