



The New Office Experience Is All About Relationships

By Fletcher McCombie and Tracy Reznik

It's more about relationships than productivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how and where we work.

No longer do employees need to be located in a physical office to do their jobs — in fact, many don't want to be. According to recent surveys,¹ over 80 percent of employees prefer a hybrid work environment,² and more than 50 percent of employees would quit their current jobs if one wasn't offered or they were forced back into the office full time.³ Those same studies also paint a clear picture of how employees view the future of work, and it includes at least one to two days per week working from home. If employees have their say, the pre-COVID office is gone — hybrid jobs are here to stay.

But why do we need to come into an office at all? Over the last three years, employees in many industries have proven they can be productive working elsewhere, and they've proven that the old adage “The office is where work gets done” isn't necessarily true. Before COVID-19, we didn't know any better. Now we do.

Today, productivity in the office means something new. We come into the office for reasons other than a desk. We come to get direction from leaders, form new relationships and strengthen existing ones, and connect directly with the organization's culture through interacting with others. Notice that none of those reasons include “to do work.” Also, notice that each of those reasons relates to people and the relationships we have with them.

The number one reason to come into the office today — to battle the traffic, to sit on the subway, to return to our pre-COVID commutes — is to build relationships with our colleagues.

**More than 50 percent
of employees would
quit their current jobs if
their employers didn't
offer hybrid work.**

ONLINE COLLABORATION ONLY GOES SO FAR

Hybrid and online collaboration is the new normal. But our at-home digital tools are not enough to get the job done. Slack didn't solve our communication issues any more than PowerPoint made our presentations perfect. It's the relationships we have with our co-workers that are most important.

Collaboration is more than just tools. Collaboration in the office leads to better relationships and better content because we're able to better understand each other — our perspectives, intentions, and thought processes. The tools don't make relationships better, the relationships make the tools better.

Collaboration and the office go hand in hand. But collaboration is not simple, even when everyone is sitting around the same table. Telling others to collaborate is much different than developing genuine relationships that innately result in effective collaboration. When we build authentic relationships, the benefits are clear. Relationships with trust work better. And that alone is reason enough for leaders to rethink not only what it means to be productive in the office, but also why building relationships in that space is so critical to success. At home, we have convenience and flexibility. But at the office, we benefit from vibrancy with community and collaboration.



REDEFINING PRODUCTIVITY AS RELATIONSHIPS

The old measure of productivity is tasks completed per hour. But that was based on operational science from the factory floor. Modern knowledge-based work has high levels of interdependencies. What matters when thinking about knowledge-based productivity is the quality of work. It may feel less tangible than measuring widgets, but it is no less productive.

Moving forward, we must define productivity in a new way: by the quality of our conversations and the breadth and depth of our relationships. Getting zero work done at home is not okay, but getting zero work done in the office should be encouraged in the new normal.

The modern knowledge-based worker is productive based on interpersonal dynamics and deeper

and broader relationships, which are not easily measured. However, if we change our paradigm from widgets to relationships, we can begin to think about the office not as a space to accomplish work but rather as one to focus on the people with whom we work.

Sometimes building relationships actually is about conversations at the water cooler. It's talking about the latest TV show, our favorite new restaurant, or the special family event we attended over the weekend. Unplanned discussions and side conversations, regardless of the topic, can be powerful. And if we increase our focus on having those conversations in person, in building those relationships, we can be more productive in the long run.

ROCK, PAPER, RELATIONSHIPS

Our new hybrid productivity formula for knowledge-based work looks like this:



And “Relationships” are the most critical part of the formula above. You bring your knowledge with you to a job, and you expand it with your experience. But your focus and relationships are dependent on your setting — whether working from home or in the office — and the trust built through interpersonal interactions. When relationships are the multiplier, productivity can skyrocket.

“Focus” is the ability to build relationships and put purpose back into meetings. If we return to the office simply to conduct the same tired meetings — but now half of the attendees are in person and half are remote — then nothing has been gained. In fact, with half of the attendees attending by video, you might have even lost something.

However, if we are targeted in our office experiences and promote special bonding events, we can build better outcomes. For example, there are two occasions when targeted, in-office collaboration is highly beneficial: (1) when solutions need rock-solid buy-in, and (2) when you are designing a solution that requires too many players for a single call. The key, though, is being intentional about that bonding.

Relationships require investment. You can’t build trusting relationships with peers and executives overnight, but when you do invest, you are

investing in the long term. This investment can be easily overlooked if you’re focused on tasks and what needs to be accomplished this week rather than what needs to be built over months or years. This strength (or amount of trust) is a combination of breadth (nodes in your network) and alignment (intensity of each connection).

THREE QUICK TIPS FOR BRINGING YOUR TEAM BACK TO THE OFFICE

We do laundry at home; we build friendships at the office. It’s long been proven that having a friend at work reduces attrition and increases engagement.⁴ While everyone may use the office differently — and have different definitions of productivity — an engaged group of colleagues is what we all are looking for, no matter where we are doing the work.

So, how do you bring teams back into the office? Simple. You design an office experience that your employees want to be a part of it. Here are three tips for doing that effectively:

1. Enable a remote-first policy that encourages office time only when there is a reason to physically come into the building.
2. Entice your employees to come in to build relationships in person, not just online. Articulate how relationships are personally and

professionally beneficial. Check out the Spring 2018 *Jabian Journal* article, “Increasing Employee Engagement Through Relationships,” for further reading.

3. Redefine what “productivity” means. Throw away your old measures of it, especially if you’re achieving your desired results. Teach your teams that productivity and relationships are synonymous, and start speaking in town halls and 1x1s about relationships that have made a meaningful difference in the last year to your team’s success. ☺

Fletcher McCombie

fletcher.mccombie@jabian.com

Tracy Reznik

tracy.reznik@jabian.com

Sources:

- 1 Barrero, Jose Maria, Nicholas Bloom, and Steven J. Davis, 2021. “Why Working From Home Will Stick,” National Bureau of Economic Research
- 2 Accenture, *The Future of Work: A Hybrid Work Model*, 2021
- 3 Microsoft, *Top 5 Risks of Not Having a Hybrid Work Model*, 2021
- 4 Gallup, *Why We Need Best Friends at Work*, 2018