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What to Expect When You Get Back to the Office After Lockdown

● A guide to the parts of pandemic work culture that are here to stay, and those that aren't.

By Arianne Cohen

Things are about to get weird at work. In many places where offices have reopened, businesses haven't returned to business as usual. We spoke to managers and employees around the world about the aspects of pandemic work culture that are here to stay —and those that aren't.



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The Socially Distanced Desk

Majid Fareed is a digital marketer for a clothing company with a 50-person office in Karachi, Pakistan. After lockdown, he returned to find the desks 12 feet apart instead of 6. “We wear masks, and each of us has sanitizer,” Fareed says. He goes in three days a week, and on those days the colleagues on either side of him work from home. For meetings, his supervisor stands in the front of the room “like a teacher giving a lecture in the classroom. We don’t move from our desks.” Even so, he prefers office days. “If I stayed home, I’d be more depressed.”

Goodbye, Groomed Work Identity

“On almost every call, something unexpected happens, like a kid walks in,” says Paul Daugherty, chief technology officer of consultancy Accenture Plc. “We’re seeing each other as real people. I think it’s really powerful and has profound workforce implications.”

Homebodies

“None of our customers want to see us!” says Ravin Gandhi, CEO of GMM Nonstick Coatings,

which has offices and factories in the U.S., China, India, and Europe. Instead, they're saying "we can do it via phone and video." This has forced a massive cultural shift. "Some of the sales team is shell-shocked. We're a very high-touch business, flying all over to see clients"—something Gandhi expects to be scaled back considerably.

Meetings in Gallery View

A weekly Beijing team meeting for Preferred Hotel Group Inc. used to take place in a conference room. "Now three people are in the office and two are at home, and each sits at her own desk," says Caroline Klein, executive vice president of corporate communications. One unexpected benefit: "When you're sitting next to someone in a conference room, you're not necessarily seeing their facial expressions—you can't look at 10 people at the same time. But on video, you can. You laugh more."

Kickoffs! Check-Ins! EOD Meetups!

The Shanghai office of S4 Capital Plc recently reopened after two months. People working from home "said productivity went up because of the kickoff meeting," a daily 10 a.m. video chat

where staffers share their plans and do a bit of schmoozing, says Asia boss Michel de Rijk. He likens it to a restaurant's 5 p.m. staff meeting. "Everyone comes together and talks about what the daily menu is and fires up the troops for the busy evening."

We're All in This Together

"People are volunteering to do work outside of their jobs," says Denise Broady, chief operating officer at WorkForce Software LLC, where vice presidents and above have agreed to delay their bonuses by five months so lower-level employees can receive full bonuses. "It's having such a positive impact on the workforce—people are thinking about the collective whole, not just themselves."

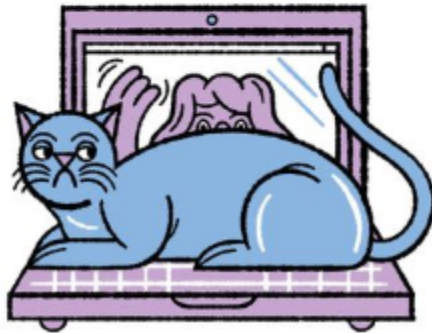
Young-Employee Flight

"Junior-level staff are dropping out of work, through fear or family request," says Humphrey Ho, U.S. managing director for Hylink Digital Solution Co., China's largest digital advertising

agency. “Some can’t handle it, or they’re too stressed out, so they’re not coming back.” He says few remember previous crises such as SARS or the 2008 recession. To fill the gaps, he says, “companies are demanding people with more maturity.”

The Death of the Open Office

“Before Covid-19, everyone was pushing density,” says Michael Silver, chairman of commercial real estate firm Vestian. “To get more density, they were ‘hoteling’ or ‘hot desking’ ”—where employees don’t have assigned seats. “Now everyone wants to be very careful about the air they breathe,” he says. “No one wants to be in an open office or coworking environment.”



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But You'll Probably Still Commute

“I hear a lot of companies saying, ‘Oh, this gave us a chance to experiment with remote work,’” says Barbara Larson, a management professor at Northeastern University. “I’m thinking, Oh God, please don’t make any conclusions based on these months,” when many people stuck at home had jobs unsuited to remote work. Her prediction: Full-time remote workers will increase to almost 10%, about twice the pre-pandemic rate, and part-timers will jump to 30%, from 24%.