

# Back to Office: Reconsidering Business as Usual

## **Back to Office: Reconsidering “Business as Usual”**

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### **Abstract:**

Virtual work technologies and mediated interactions were heavily leaned upon during the pandemic as a way of continuing daily operations, communication and meetings when it was not possible to meet face to face. As companies, large and small, are moving out of the pandemic and returning to work, it is important to understand the breach in workplace norms caused by the crisis has fundamentally changed how we work. Attempting to simply “go back to the way things were” is a flawed approach refusing to see that employees’ understanding of work, workplace, and organizational culture have been altered. However, there are significant benefits to face-to-face meetings and work, that can, if used intentionally, greatly enhance workplace culture and productive interactions. This paper applies organizational, performance, and communication theory to the process of BTO (Back to Office) to offer concrete suggestions for companies to most effectively navigate this period of change and uncertainty. The paper details specific suggestions for when to utilize virtual and face-to-face communication, as well as approaches to more effectively communicate these decisions across the organization.

### **Key Problems Addressed:**

1. While many employees desire and see greater logic in remote working options, leadership in many organizations is eager to get people back physically into the office, face to face. This top-down approach reflects a disconnect within organizations and will provide significant challenges for recruitment and retention of talent.
2. Often face-to-face communication is considered the only way to build community and foster creativity. Simultaneously, just because many were able to work remotely out of necessity, there were both benefits and set-backs to fully remote working. While many organizations are eager to return to the office with a face-to-face model of working norms, many employees are keen to hold onto the flexibility and work-life balance afforded by remote labor.
3. The old ways of doing things have changed and now organizations need to be creative and flexible as new norms are developed. Ideally, new norms integrate a balance of what once worked, what was learned and changed during remote work, and what new potential approaches can leverage the strengths of all the different ways we work (uses of zoom, remote and face to face models of communication, meeting operations).
4. It was a less flexible, but easier model to manage when organizations were either fully in-person or fully remote (during the work at home orders and quarantine). Now, organizations need guidance for how to best structure work across differing modalities in order to maximize efficiency, employee satisfaction with work, and team building.

### **Core Benefits of Remote Work:**

Many employees will be resistant to go BTO, seeing now that a significant portion of work can and has been accomplished remotely. Thus, remote work and remote gatherings, using virtual tools, offered many clear benefits that should not be discounted or minimized. Briefly, these include:

- A. Minimizing commute time and cost.

- B. Minimizing travel and office costs in support of sustainability initiatives.
- C. Remote work can offer greater flexibility of work life balance for employees.
- D. Allowing efficient informational relay and gathering general collective feedback (if properly leveraged).
  - i. Less “air to fill” pre-, post- and during meetings, emphasis on tasks at hand and the transactional communication required to get work done.
- E. Allows access opportunities in terms of several elements of DEI.
  - i. Equalizing of hierarchy, interactive, shifted rituals.
  - ii. Eliminates some power cues.

*Brief Discussion.* The issues of cost and convenience will be, for many, highly significant. Remote work saved time, money and allowed folks to manage dimensions of their personal life more effectively. For many, as well, the efficiency of the communication can be a plus, as virtual meetings tend to forefront more transactional ways of impacting information. It allowed for quick, on task interactions and tended to avoid taking up time with small talk. Also, technologies like Zoom impact how institutional power and authority are performed and enacted. In a boardroom, where one sits, how one stands and moves when presenting and a whole host of cues related to norms, authority and status are leveled in a screen of uniform boxes. As a reinvigorated discussion around DEI in organizations occurred during the time of the pandemic, this shift in how power and authority was enacted can also be seen as a potential benefit of virtual communication that ought to be closely considered.

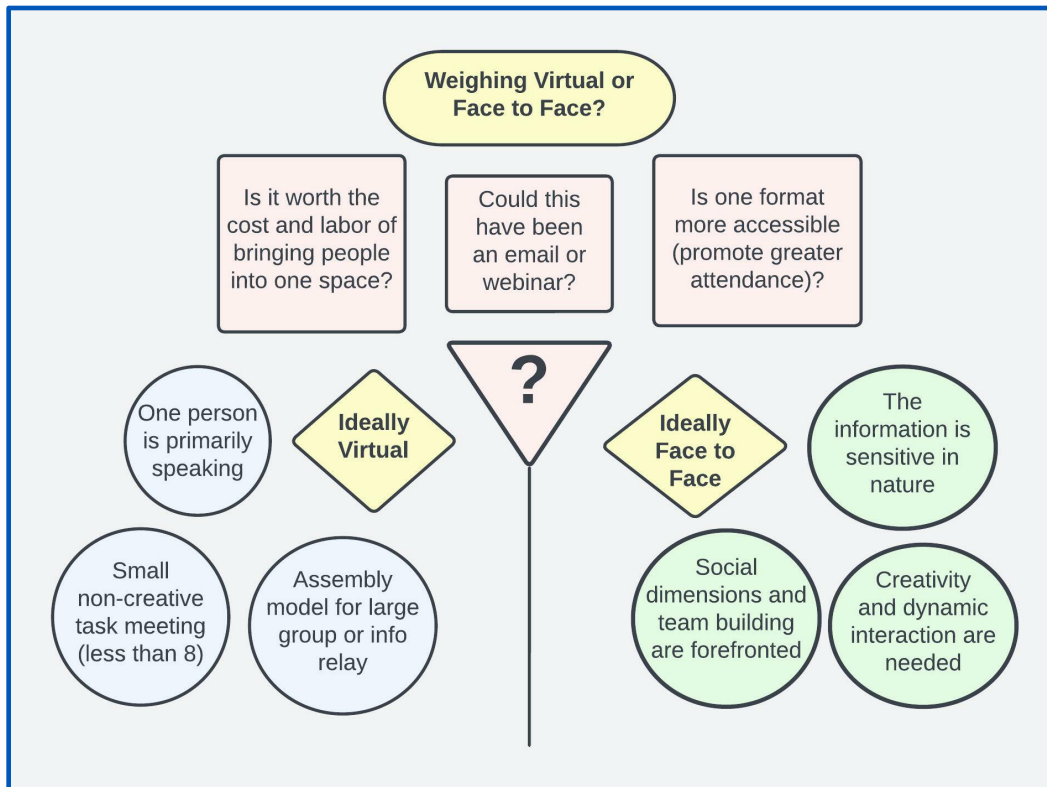
### **Core Disadvantages of Remote Work:**

Although the pandemic did force many to work remotely, and may have created the sense that all work can be remote (and thus, should continue to be) there were significant downsides and limitations that emerged in a fully remote work environment.

- A. Loss of informal interactions, pre- and post- meeting discussions, sidebars, more spontaneous engagement, creative brainstorming and afterthoughts.
  - i. Positives and negatives about rigid agenda.
- B. Absence of embodied workplace, shared space, collective identity.
- C. Indeterminate context. Rather than being “in the room,” each employee is in their home space, amongst home concerns, and is peering into a virtual work space.
- D. Impairs nonverbal channels and negotiations amongst group – inhibits the processing by unspoken cues, discomfort, uncertainty, shifts in energy and affect that do not translate to screen.
- E. Organizational identity and connection to team impaired by physical isolation and loss of ritual of commute, welcome, and workplace daily norms (lunch, coffee, watercooler, dynamic group interaction).

- F. The work ritual, in the home-space, has become more relaxed (wherein, in the early pandemic, a stronger 9-5 ethic has given way to less rigidity).
  - i. Introduces a new obstacle of needing to hold employees to account for the work needing to be done, rather than the duration of the workday.
- G. Difficulty establishing relationships with new hires, risking more isolation and less relational building, leading to difficulty with employee satisfaction and retention.

*Brief Discussion.* By not coming into a physical shared environment, certain forms of more casual and off the cuff interaction, creativity exchange, group work and workplace identity are limited. The hallway chats, nonverbal elements, and experiences of “feeling the room” are diminished. Consider something as simple as laughter, where even if a joke were to happen in a remote meeting, only one laugh could be heard at a time, rather than a communal eruption. Also, in a physical exchange, things like confusion, uncertainty, necessary pause, or hesitation are often overrun online or chalked up to an unstable internet connection. Workplace identity and connection is tied to physical space and the rituals of work. It is why so many found some comfort in mirroring a commute ritual, dressing for work, and trying to draw physical rituals that delineate work and home, even while working from home. Where the 9-5 work day, for many, was closely mirrored in the earlier days of the pandemic, as remote work continued, people began carving out more flexibility of when to work, and multitasking between differing life priorities. This opens up a complication where the idea of working a full day is not about time, but accountability of productivity and outcomes. Put plainly, it introduces greater concern of whether the work is being done, as they are not physically present in visible ways. While members of an organization who had relationships with co-workers prior to the pandemic could rely on some previous face-to-face interaction and history to ground a sense of identity and belonging, for those hired into a remote environment, those connections are less grounded. On the flipside, where some may see how virtual meetings could level power dynamics and institutional hierarchies as a positive, for management and higher status members, this can lead to some complications in asserting leadership and maintaining organizational roles and workflow.



### Recommendations:

In considering the complexity of issues at work, and the many positive and negative elements to remote work (and to fully face-to-face work), below are a series of recommendations to help navigate a negotiated space between rigid BTO approaches and a fully remote framework.

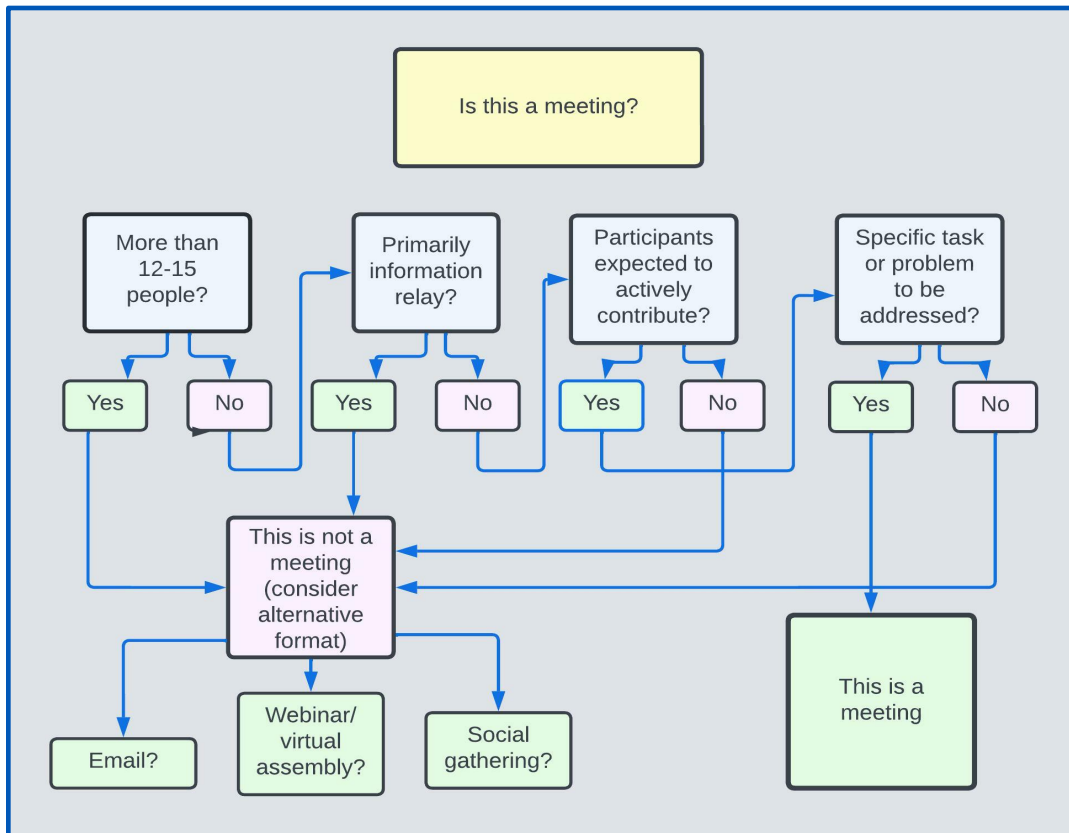
1. We are all in a period of flux. Organizations should willingly embrace that things are changing. Rather than trying to “get back to work”, implying that work only happens in an external office and a return to a normal (now past), there needs to be a negotiated balance of pre-pandemic norms and new norms that are emerging in the post-pandemic era. Neither the pre-pandemic nor the pandemic norms presented the most effective and satisfying workplace for anyone. Thus, it needs to be accepted that **this is a period of adjustments, experimentation, and trial**. Explicit framing of this, rather than top-down demands, will help foster employee buy-in, but also help frame the discomforts of shifting norms in a productive way.
2. Be realistic and understand new norms will be met with a variety of responses. Any framework that embraces the shifting of norms and patterns will first be met with resistance and discomfort. Finding a more ideal balance requires time and an awareness of how patterns and rituals move and shift. People take comfort in habits and to rescript and introduce new patterns will require a period of adjustment. Most importantly, this requires clear communication and timelines. Organizations should be prepared to not only explain new policies and expectations, but discuss the logic and cost/benefit

thinking behind decisions. Establish a time to re-evaluate and reassess. **Change is easier to institute if the “why” is explicit.**

3. Part of this communication is for organizations to **discuss the need, role, and benefit of specific BTO efforts**. What is the understood role and function of the physical office for your work? Do not assume this is a given, but rather, this is best to be carefully considered and clearly explained. Is it about creativity? Innovation? Collaboration? Privacy and security? Shifts in culture? Enculturation of new employees? Retention? Productivity? Be prepared to detail these claims with data and explanation.
4. Much of this requires a sense of respect and good faith that when BTO is called for, it is done **with purpose and intention**. So, it is imperative that organizations actively work to avoid the use of mandatory office time for anything that could be handled remotely. This will diminish commitment for BTO and foster resentment.
5. If part of your organizational framework is to mandate a certain number of “in office” days for specific reasons that are explicitly shared, consider making (some or all of) these days the same for everyone. Explain how by virtue of our collective presence these days are **high contact and high engagement days**. With this model, you might in turn identify deep work days, such as meet-less Mondays, where no meetings of any kind are scheduled, and allow employees to determine what location is best for them.

### **Is this a Meeting?**

One area of BTO that is central to this discussion is collective workplace interactions. We are careful here to not immediately call this a “meeting,” because it is not productive to think of every gathering at work in these terms. A meeting suggests that relevant stakeholders are being brought into a specific discussion in order to address, solve or process a specific problem resulting in a tangible outcome (e.g., a decision, a plan, etc.). Thus, very commonly what is called a “meeting” falls short of satisfying these criteria. Central to balancing the remote and BTO work environments is carefully thinking about when, how and for what purpose collective gatherings are being scheduled.



1. **The Large Assembly:** For collective gatherings that are primarily information relay and sharing, virtual mechanisms are ideal. If the group is there to primarily serve as audience, and to receive information, this is not a “meeting.” Resist calling these forms of gatherings “meetings”, as that framework is not accurate. The suggested approach is to use virtual options here, encouraging members to listen and turn off the camera.
  - A. Encourages presenters of information to be respectful of time, come in prepared, and demonstrate respect for those on the call.
  - B. Those receiving the information will see that elements of remote work are being thoughtfully adopted, enlisting many of its benefits (commute, cost, work/life balance, etc).
  - C. If members are only there to listen, this is not a meeting that requires physical participation or video presence. Use a webinar format if possible. Allowing members to be present but off camera is helpful for focus and minimizing burnout.
  - D. Additionally, it communicates to members a specification of their role in a given gathering. By explaining this is more of a webinar, and inviting them to turn off their cameras, it underscores the importance of a different form of engagement in actual meetings.
  - E. Such an approach also works to better use face to face time for the forms of tasks and work where face to face is most necessary and beneficial.

- F. For larger assemblies, remove the impulse to end with “are there any questions?” For virtual assemblies, you may direct people to a chat. For face to face, consider a virtual format for questions to be responded to when a large group is present.

**2. Actual Meetings:** In the circumstance where members of an organization are brought together to collectively help address a question or a problem, by definition an actual meeting is required. In reality, any group larger than 10-12 in a face-to-face situation is less effective in an open exchange of ideas for problem solving (yet, a larger group could be useful for generalized brainstorming and smaller breakout groups for discussion and creative problem solving). The number for participants in an effective virtual meeting, however, is less, wherein numbers of 6-7 are more effective. When holding an actual meeting:

- A. Communicate explicitly why the people who are there are present and what their role is.
- B. The use of virtual versus face-to-face modalities for actual meetings depends on a range of factors.
  - i. The cost for assembling everyone in person.
  - ii. Sensitivity of information. At times meetings are about keeping certain information “in the room” as it is explored. These are ideally face to face.
  - iii. The role of creativity, processing and brainstorming in the meeting objectives. If dynamic interplay of members is central to the goal, face to face is more ideal.

**3. Social Gatherings:** Beyond the tasks to be accomplished, workplaces thrive when the human relationships between employees are nurtured and supported. This is where networking, organizational identity, and teambuilding are fostered. If people are being asked to come together, because being in the same room is important, social ties and connections are extremely important in this process. If you are bringing people together in person, make it interactive, relational and engaged. The last thing you want is for everyone to be thinking “this could be done online” or even worse, “this could have been an email.”

- A. The most effective face-to-face work benefits from shared organizational networks, identity and teambuilding - the intersection of the social and the professional.
- B. Face-to-face interaction humanizes employees in relation to one another – allows colleagues to be seen as whole people rather than simply a name behind a memo or an email.
- C. Physical interaction on site builds organizational identification and connection to place in addition to people. Consider how the locations of such gatherings can be



- welcoming and inviting while reinforcing the look and feel of the organizational brand.
- D. Social gatherings create traditions and foster social ties. When sponsored and encouraged by the organization, it signals an investment in and valuing of employees as people and members of the community.
  - E. Together, these factors are key to organizational satisfaction and belonging, thus supporting retention and reducing turnover.

*Brief Discussion.* The biggest obstacle organizations face is that these three (the large assembly, the actual meeting, social gatherings) are often blurring, and by not delineating between these three forms of gatherings, their purposes and benefits are obscured, while their downsides are exacerbated. Employee satisfaction and morale is low across all industries. This is tied to a range of factors. Two most relevant to this discussion are a sense of disidentification between employees and their work (and workplace). A second is an understanding coming out of the pandemic that a lot can be accomplished remotely. To effectively navigate this organizations need to isolate in transparent ways when and why it is enlisting a particular form of communication, while being cognizant of their strengths and limits.

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