

The Great or Not So Great Return to the Office

By Nicolene de Beer and Nicol Mullins

“Work is a thing we do. Not a place we go.”

- Ryan Jans

Malcolm Gladwell, the world-renowned best-selling author is not in favour of working from home. Elon Musk summoned Tesla workers back to the office in June 2022 saying that “if you don’t show up we will assume you have resigned”. Sundar Pichai, Google CEO tried to find a middle ground and Airbnb, led by Brian Chesky has embraced a full flex working policy. The return to office debate, or often decision, is playing out across the world – somewhat of a three-step waltz in organisations.

The concept of new ways of working is designed around the constructs of where, when, how and by whom work is done. New ways of working require new ways of thinking. Organisations are grappling with many internal priorities, with returning to the office taking a front-row seat on the people agenda.

Several return-to-office models have surfaced from extreme flexibility to complete rigidity. It needs to be acknowledged that not all roles can work from home and not all are required to work from the office. Leadership matters. We observe this by contrasting Twitter’s complete flexible approach to Tesla’s 40 hours a week required to be physically present at the workplace, or get fired.

What is driving the return to the official agenda? The why should outweigh the how and what. If forming social connections is at the heart of the decision, work is not the primary driver for the decision being taken – but social connections are. If social connections and building social capital – 3 days in the office 2 days from or inverse will not result in the desired outcome. [Sundar Pichai](#) shares three themes that should form part of an organisation's thinking process around the employees’ return to the office:

Purpose | **Choice** | **Flexibility**

Is hybrid working the way to go?

A hybrid model with some days a week being spent in the office and the remainder at home seems to be the intuitive decision to take. It caters for a level of pre-lockdown freedom, but leans toward a level of “normality”. It allows for semi-flexibility and embracing a new way of work. It however also takes away from applying our minds to what it is we need as an organisation. Laura Cassidy and David Rock in their article titled “*Why the most popular hybrid model isn’t working*” outlines two common biases that play out in this decision making:

- **Expedience bias**, prompts us to act quickly rather than taking the time to fully understand a situation – also known as level II thinking.
- **Experience bias**, which tells us that our perception (work is more efficient from an office) is the objective truth – it isn’t always true.

Global lockdowns placed a level of trust in the hands of employees, removing authority from managers and leaders - an equilibrium that seemingly needs to be restored in the majority of organisations. A workaround is the hybrid working model; however, the last couple of years have allowed many knowledge workers to set their own hours.

There is no doubt going to be a knock-on effect on many other HR practices, talent and performance management at the forefront of imminent changes. Companies demonstrating the ability to adapt to the shifts taking place globally may thrive.

Not inviting employee input and not being clear on the company's hybrid working principles and rules will inevitably trigger a threat response that will leave employees feeling anxious, threatened and uncertain about their future.

Key questions that organisations may ask themselves in the return to office journey:

- What defines our culture?
- How will we build social capital as an organisation?
- What experiments can we run to see what works for us, even if it is in pockets?
- How can we adopt a growth mindset when learning from the experiments we undertake?
- Where do employees feel most efficient?
- What "habits" can we share in a hybrid model that will build our culture?

There is no wrong or right answer when it comes to this debate. Autonomy, freedom and choice work. Make employees part of the decision-making process. Apple employees might have phrased it best in their open letter to management:

" . . . let us decide how we work best, and let us do the best work of our lives."

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