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# We Were Forced to Work From Home... Did We Learn Anything?

By Dev Patnaik

*The pandemic pushed every office worker into a giant experiment. Trapped at home, we were forced to learn new habits, adopt new technologies, and develop new ways of interacting. In this article, Dev Patnaik breaks down what we learned about how to optimize our workplaces.*

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Last week, I had a remote conversation with a client of mine. Neither of us had bothered to schedule a Zoom meeting, so instead we just talked by phone. And it was amazing. Because rather than being bolted to our chairs, we decided to pop in our AirPods and go for a walk together. The weather in the Bay Area was finally like the postcards promise, and not surprisingly, our call ended up being a lot more productive and a lot less painful than the rest of our day.

Our walking meeting is just one of the new ways we've all learned to work in recent years. The pandemic pushed every office worker in America into a giant experiment. Trapped at home, we were forced to learn new habits. Adopt new technologies. Develop new ways of interacting. It also opened up entirely new possibilities for how work might happen.

So how is it going?

Four years on, our experiment with remote and hybrid work has produced dismal results. Sure, many of us who traveled continuously are getting to spend more time at home with our kids. We've traded off senseless commutes for more time to run errands. I lost my frequent flyer status, but I learned how to grow a tomato garden.

And while the pandemic may have brought back a little bit more balance between life and work, it's left our work in a generally worse state of affairs. Employee burnout is on the rise. Worker productivity has fallen to historic lows. Employee engagement in the U.S. has dropped to its lowest level in more than a decade. The ability to work from home or telecommute from Tahiti was supposed to create wonderful new ways of working. Instead, we all seem to be stressed out, bummed out or checked out. What happened?

It turns out that we didn't treat the last four years of work like an actual experiment, in that we never stopped to ask what we were learning from the experience. And an experiment without learning isn't an experiment at all. It's an attempt. First, we stayed home. Then, we tried remote. And now, many companies are just forcing people to come back to work three or more days a week. Nobody's thrilled about that...

But beneath all of those changes lie a few insights about the nature of work. And how to use technology. And when you just need to show in person and party like it's 1999. My colleagues and I at Jump reviewed multiple projects and client interactions over the last several years. What we learned is that there's no such thing as work. In reality, there are different *kinds* of work that need to be treated differently.

### **Deep Work**

Sometimes, people just need to think. By themselves. When your people need to focus on the kind of creative or complex problem solving that requires long periods of focus, it may be better to just send them home or to a coffee shop down the street. And when they do, suggest that they turn off their Slack notifications and don't check email until they're done. Cal Newport's groundbreaking book on this topic may just be the prescription for what protects your job from getting replaced by an AI bot.

### **Close Connection**

Much of work is about maintaining relationships. Those interactions typically involve just two or three people sharing how they're doing and what they're working on. Video calls on Zoom and Microsoft Teams are actually quite helpful for this kind of work when people already know each other. However, conflict resolution and problem solving still depends on a prior reservoir of trust. And it turns out that human beings are creatures of flesh and blood, and we pick up on all sorts of nuances that technology isn't good enough to replicate—so far. That's when it's time to close your laptop and meet in person. Companies that require in-person attendance once a week are able to build those connections provided that they create the time and space to do so. Don't force people to come into the office only to spend all day on Zoom calls.

### **Team Coordination**

It's possible to have successful team meetings remotely or even hybrid if the goal is to coordinate what each team member is doing or share the results of a project. You just have to make sure that there's a clear structure and a strong facilitator. These meetings also don't work if you have more than eight people. Importantly, these meetings can produce abysmal results if the work that needs to be done involves any sort of real creativity or problem solving. When that happens, it's best to show up in person. In her book *The Extended Mind*, Annie Murphy Paul provides ample evidence from neuroscience for why this is so.

## **Mass Appeal**

And that brings us to the last type of work. The work that's done most poorly. The kind that everyone hates. The meetings that have ten or twenty or even more people in them. Where people's faces are reduced to the size of a postage stamp, assuming their camera is even turned on at all.

These are the misconceived undertakings of a leader who wants to "get everybody in a room to figure out an initiative." They're the provenance of the manager who can't say no to inviting every person in their professional network to weigh in on an issue. Or be part of the problem.

Large meetings inevitably devolve into a few people talking to the rest. These interactions can usually be replaced by concise emails, videos or Slack posts. On the occasion where a live town hall is required, it will require advance planning, competent management and skillful technology hosting.

Just don't assume that you're going to come up with anything new in those meetings. Large groups are simply lousy at doing this kind of work. A study in the British journal *Nature* showed how small teams are far more adept at creating new ideas, while large teams are more suited to simply rehashing and building on ideas they already have. And that research was done with teams meeting in person before the pandemic... Large hordes on Zoom don't stand a chance at coming up with anything of lasting value.

After years of trial and error, the question leaders should be asking themselves is, "Are we getting the best work out of our people?" Optimizing your workplaces for productivity and efficiency requires getting a better understanding of what work actually is. Which interactions should be in-person, and which should be virtual? What are best practices and resources to use in each instance? It takes time to figure this out, but setting clearer standards leads to better work—making the time people spend more purposeful and worthwhile, wherever they are. There are different kinds of work. But when you treat it all the same, work sucks.

## **About Jump**

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