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Beyond the screen: a personal account of integrating with my virtual team in the physical office

“You’re on mute”

Phrase of the year for 2020.

Number of times “You’re on Mute” was used

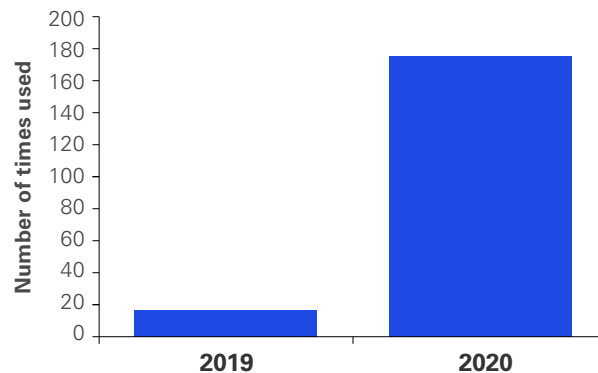


Figure 1: According to an analysis that The New York Times performed, the use of the phrase “You’re on mute” increased by 1000% from 2019 to 2020, in a sample of more than 20 000 corporate presentations during the year.

Four years after lockdown, many of us have had to adapt to a rapidly changed work environment. From completely remote, to in-person, to hybrid models, each situation has brought its unique set of challenges but also allowed us to collaborate with familiar faces and strangers across the globe.

Recently, I found myself presented with the intriguing opportunity to work in-person with a team that I had already become accustomed to through a year of remote working. This article is not an attempt to add to the wealth of articles exploring the benefits and drawbacks of in-person versus remote working. Rather, it will focus on sharing some personal insights and lessons I have learnt through this experience.

Setting the scene

I had already become quite familiar with the concept of remote working when I started my stint with this team. One thing that COVID-19 taught us is that almost all white-collar jobs can be done with a laptop, an internet connection and some, in my case not optional, coffee. I would bet that almost all my readers have at some point worked remotely and each person would have their own levels of fondness for it.

When presented with the opportunity to work in-person, I initially agreed with my only expectation being to enhance my relationship with my remote team - and while I’m being honest, perhaps as an excuse to travel a bit. I did not expect it to have any effect on my own working experience and I definitely did not imagine that I would be writing an article about it.

My working period there, while short (only two weeks), coincided with one of the busiest periods during the year. Throughout the two weeks, I tracked my hours diligently, as a good consultant does, and performed minor analyses on them for the purposes of this article. Additionally, I collected data from an equally comparable two-week period of remote working, to allow for consistent comparison in terms of workload and pressure.

To avoid any judgement from my peers, I split my hours into the following groups:

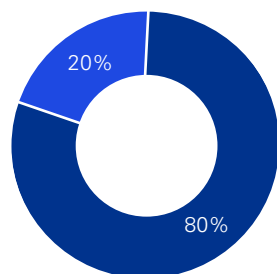
- Productive hours - hours spent behind my laptop screen;
- Socializing; and
- Time spent in meetings and collaborating with people regarding work.

It is important to note that only hours spent in the office were included and not any post work hangouts. However, the impact of this kind of time spent is touched on when we unpack the differences in “socializing” time in the section below.

We can also safely assume that any time spent behind my screen was in fact spent doing work related tasks and not trying to improve my chess.com rating.

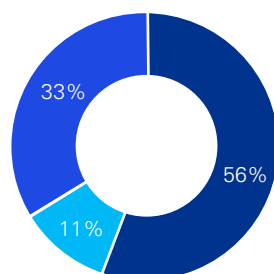
Here are the results:

Virtual world - average hours per working day distribution



■ Productive ■ Socializing ■ Meetings

"Real" world - average hours per working day distribution



■ Productive ■ Socializing ■ Meetings

Figure 2: A comparison of the breakdown of the hours in my average working day during my remote working experience (left) versus my in-person working experience (right)

Analysis of productive hours

One of the major noticeable differences is the dominant slice of “productive” hours in the remote working chart. In line with this, but not explicitly shown in this analysis, the volume of my working hours were by my standards at least, quite impressive. I was willing to put in extra hours after work, often without realizing so much time had gone by, especially when working from home was an option.

This is also in line with multiple studies which show that remote workers end up working much longer hours than their in-person counterparts. Owl Labs' 2021 State of Remote Work¹ reported that approximately 55% of workers find themselves working longer hours remotely. If you are a corporate that focuses purely on the bottom line this sounds amazing.

Before we continue further, I need to make an important distinction - even though I have up to this point referred to this time as “productive” time, it actually only refers to screen time. A more accurate analysis would be to state that there was a marked decrease in screen time with in-person working in comparison to remote working. This distinction leads us to the question: Does an increase in time spent behind a screen equate to an increase in productivity? Keep this in mind as we will revisit it once we are done with our analysis.

Analysis of socializing hours

Unsurprisingly, the data to the left shows an increase in time, from 0% to 11%, spent socializing with my teammates in an in-person setting compared to remote work.

Studies have shown that time spent socializing increased camaraderie and the feeling of belonging within a team. Personally, the feeling that my work is seen and matters, increased steadily over the two-week period. This led to an increase in motivation and a willingness to dedicate extra hours towards making sure that my deliverables are of a high quality.

¹ Owl Lab's State of Remote Work 2021 - <https://owllabs.com/state-of-remote-work/2021>

The post-work hangouts I had mentioned earlier always led to an overall brighter atmosphere in the office the following day. The working day started with a discussion of the prior day's activities, and any inside jokes helped maintain the bright atmosphere even during the lunch time slump.

This time enhanced team spirit. Even if one only focuses on the business aspect, people generally build more meaningful business relationships with those they trust and a good starting point for building trust is talking about things other than work. This can be as trivial as sharing weekend plans, or if you are an Arsenal fan, discussing the appalling performance of your team from the night before.

Analysis of meetings hours

Perhaps the most surprising difference for me was the increase in time spent in meetings. This included any time spent in formal scheduled meetings as well as quick discussions on work-related topics. I felt as though I could learn more effectively in-person in comparison to the various virtual meetings I had been a part of. One reason for this was feeling more comfortable to ask "the stupid questions" in person, as a quick in-person chat felt much less intrusive than setting up a virtual meeting or calling someone over Teams. These quick in-person chats also fed into the increase in time spent discussing work and were incorporated into the analysis as meeting time.

Due to the unintrusive nature of these chats, I also tended to struggle a lot less on my own before asking for help on certain issues - this usually meant a much quicker resolution of issues. It is worth noting that while it is true that some struggle can be "character building", as one of my previous managers and personal mentors referred to it, the law of diminishing returns kicks in after a certain point and it can be more beneficial to just ask for help.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Human Dynamics Lab did a study² which backs these observations and confirmed that people tend to be much more receptive to information in-person. They measured things such as tone of voice and body language, over hundreds of hours of meetings and concluded undoubtedly

that in-person communication is more effective. They also show that an increase in interactions with people can speed up completion times for complex projects.

The impact – so what?

Overall, comparing the sample period of my two-week in-person experience, I found myself working slightly longer hours remotely (about 0.7 hours or 42 minutes to be exact) – however, time spent in front of the screen was significantly reduced as a result of either meetings or coffee breaks.

Another major difference that cannot be quantified is a considerable shift in how I viewed things. I felt more responsible for my work in-person, especially if I had to present it to someone standing right next to me. An interesting point to note here is that this feeling seems to have lingered on even after having returned to the remote workplace. Perhaps this happens once you realise someone has an entire body beneath their shoulders. This might be phrased as a joke, but I think it is quite a good analogy. People are much more complex than what you see and perceive through a screen - things like body language and tone tend to get lost even over video. Once you have built up some form of personal relationship with somebody it becomes difficult to forget.

I also felt less mentally and emotionally drained in comparison to my remote working experience and so the prospect of an in-person busy period seems less daunting than a remote one. To summarize, I felt an increase in job satisfaction due to the increased social interaction with my team and subsequent increase in team spirit.

Now I think we can come back to the original question posed, does an increase in time spent behind a screen equate to an increase in productivity? In my case, no. Not only did I manage to have the same output in-person despite the shorter screen time, but I also felt more fulfilled, less drained and like I had learnt more from my colleagues during the period.

² MIT Human Dynamics Lab study - <https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/mining-face-to-face-interaction-networks-using-sociometric-badges-predicting-productivity-in-an-it-configuration-task-december/>

There are many research studies that prove that most people would take a pay cut to work for a cause that personally resonates with them, provided their basic needs are taken care of. The Harvard Business Review also wrote an interesting article in which they quantified the impact of increased productivity due to “Highly meaningful work”, as an additional \$9,078 per worker, per year in the American context³.

Even if you are a corporate that values the bottom line more than anything else, my advice would be - play the long game and invest in building team spirit, even if this is at the expense of working time. It is a much better deal in the long run than a few extra hours of screen time.

To quote Paul Krugman – “Productivity isn’t everything, but in the long run it is almost everything.”

The wrap up - lessons learned

As you are reading this, you are most likely to be in the insurance industry, I want to link my findings to some lessons that you can take away.

A big problem facing employers at large insurers is young talent attraction and retention. Even though the industry employs millions of people, it is not viewed among the more glamorous industries that younger people aspire to be part of. According to Gartner⁴, this problem is especially evident in the actuarial and analytics roles which is my field of work. They go on to say that a “lack of workplace culture” in the industry is one of the major challenges that needs to be addressed.

This is made worse by the fact that millennials are not shy to move if they are unhappy in comparison to their non-millennial counterparts. A recent Gallup report⁵ on the millennial generation reveals that 21% of millennials changed jobs in the past year, that is more than three times the number of non-millennials over the same period. Millennials also show less willingness to stay in their current jobs with only half of

millennials voting “strongly agree” when asked if they plan to be working at their current jobs in one year. In other words, half of the millennial work force does not see a future with their current employers. With millennials projected to make up almost 50% of the workforce by 2025, the industry is forced to re-strategize to hire young talent.

Culture is a deal breaker, and it needs to be an area of focus for employers, if they want happier, more productive employees that stay on for years to come. Each team is different and each person is different. This means that employers need to take a tailored approach. In my case, the move to in-person working helped in achieving a better work culture, but it will not necessarily be the same for everyone.

My experience has helped me make the link between social interactions and an improved work culture. My two takeaways for employers and team leads in the industry can be summarized as follows:

- Encourage honest and transparent communication. This is perhaps the most important and yet most difficult area to implement. There is no one size fits all approach for increased team culture, and companies will need to run regular pulse surveys (and make sure people respond to them, which is a science in itself) and have managers that are open to informal feedback to ensure that any approaches taken are successful. Measuring team spirit is not easy, but some flexible metrics are needed, as the old adage goes: What gets measured, gets done.
- Conduct top-down company policy reviews regularly and be willing to change policies that are not working. Many employers have already introduced company policies aimed at ensuring job satisfaction, but these can quite often be hit or miss. For example, is remote working really as flexible as marketed or do remote workers end up feeling like they have even less work life balance?

³ Harvard Business Review - <https://hbr.org/2018/11/9-out-of-10-people-are-willing-to-earn-less-money-to-do-more-meaningful-work>

⁴ Gartner report: Gartner report, 16 June 2022, Spiceworks, 10 May 2022

⁵ Gallup report: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238073/millennials-work-live.aspx>

Bringing it all together

To conclude, job and employee satisfaction is not simply an idealistic concept, it is an investment into the heart and soul of a business. A stronger team culture will lead to an increased feeling of belonging and can make a job more meaningful, which will lead to reduced turnover rates.

Gone are the days that increased pay alone would result in job satisfaction (to my managers, I would like both). As early as 1974, Studs Terkel equated meaning and pay as motivating factors for American Workers in his introduction to "Working". As such, I feel it is appropriate to end with a quote from his book⁶:

"[Work] is about a search...for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor, in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying."

⁶ Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (The New Press (February 28, 1997)).

