



The leadership dilemmas of the reopening

Once the pandemic recedes, we cannot expect office life to return to what it was. However, we can create a new way of working that will keep employees happy and productive.

About a year ago, COVID-19 forced many companies to send their employees home. Now that the pandemic is receding and more and more people are getting vaccinated, there is the prospect of returning to the old office routines.

But do employees even want to return to the physical workplaces, even though it is safe to do so again? Should companies stop using digital meetings and fully return to how things were done before COVID-19?

Create a new working life routine with happy, productive employees

Before COVID-19, we often used to say, "I am going to work": i.e. a physical activity involving getting on your bicycle, driving your car or taking the bus or train to work. If we were not at the office, we would leave an "Out of office" autoreply on our email. This past year, however, has redefined what we mean by "the office". It is no longer a physical location.

There may be tasks for which physical presence at the workplace is important. Good working relationships and trust are built up over spontaneous conversations and coffee and lunch breaks, and such things are not the same in a virtual setting. However, we can be more flexible in terms of how we ask people to work and find a better balance. The idea that you have to be physically present to be productive no longer applies. Instead, we should focus on how we can make work inspiring, convincing and engaging, regardless of whether the work is done at the office or not.

The shift towards working from home is about much more than a change in where people work from. It is just as much a change in how we work and how work is organised. Much positive experience has been gained in the past year. For example, spending less time commuting has freed up more time for other activities, virtual meetings have replaced physical meetings and less disruptions have generally allowed people to work more focused manner. This new way of working has led many companies and managers to take a step back and consider what the ideal model should look like in the future.

Companies are facing a difficult challenge. Because, how does one deal with the fact that working from home means different things to different employees? Some might have loved working independently, while others have felt starved of social contact, lonely and isolated. The desire to return to normal will vary from employee to employee and company to company. This is a problem. It is much easier to manage extreme solutions - i.e. everyone has to be at the office or everyone can work from home - rather than a hybrid situation such as this, where employees need to be motivated, coordinated and managed in different ways.

Is the solution more flexibility - and is this a good fit for the organisation?

Many employees have now had a taste of flexibility and they want more of that in their future working life. While many organisations are working towards establishing a hybrid model, which involves some working from home and some time spent at the workplace, some employers want their employees to fully return to the workplace once the pandemic is over. This is a dilemma that companies need to pay attention to. Otherwise, they risk losing employees who have appreciated the flexibility they have recently experienced.

Some companies have gone all-in when it comes to embracing the so-called 'virtual first' organisation, where employees can decide for themselves whether they want to go to the workplace or not. They are also free to move to another country - as long as the work gets done. In the end, every company will need to decide for themselves what is best for their employees and their entire 'ecosystem'.

The question is not if working from home will continue; it is more a case of when it makes sense to do so

Conceptually, it is a simple matter. Working from home is most effective when the work involves relatively independent tasks and knowledge can easily be shared virtually. Being together physically is important when tasks are interconnected and require the exchange of knowledge in a free-flowing way, and the needs for coordination are unpredictable. An honest assessment of what kind of work individual employees do should show to what extent their physical presence and closeness at the workplace is required.

In other words, structuring future types of work should be based on what the job requires of us. For some companies, the work tasks would mean that it makes sense to have a mix of some days working from home and some days working at the office. However, a hybrid approach will not work if it is up to the individual employees to decide whether they want to come in to work or work from home on any given day. It needs to be structured so that people are together at the workplace at predictable times.

As a manager, you should consider this dilemma very carefully. Who wants to return? Who wants to keep working from home? How does this match with the work tasks? And how can you ensure that the various employee groups feel that the setup is effective and that things have been done in a fair manner? You may have to agree to some kind of compromise, where on certain days it will be compulsory for everyone to show up at the office, in order to avoid having to manage conflicting views and ensure that your employees feel part of the same team. Over time, if differences of opinion are not managed correctly, it may also result in mixed feelings about working from home, and this could result in higher levels of employee turnover.

A practical tip is to be proactive, ask your employees what their preferences are, and explore different approaches.

