



TYLER WILSON

COMMUTING HABITS

A VIEWPOINT ON RETURNING TO THE OFFICE

“ There are times when it can be hard for leaders to express opinions that challenge the prevailing discourse.

In this **Viewpoint**, we look at whether we have reached such a time – the time to start making the case to return to the office. ”

📍 SAFETY FIRST

Ever since lockdown began, the emphasis of communication, from Government downwards, has been on the personal and not the professional: stay at home (rather than at work), protect the NHS (rather than the economy) and save lives (rather than livelihoods). Email sign-offs have been replaced with ‘stay safe’ and ‘keep well’. The manicured lawns of our working lives have been allowed to merge with the meadows of domesticity.

For many, this blend of habitats has proved highly satisfactory: we have adapted to our forcible eviction, installed ourselves in a quiet-ish corner of our homes and fashioned a new balance between work and home responsibilities. Introverts have been in clover; extroverts have replaced face time with something virtually as good. In this, we have been sustained by a clear mental model of the office from which we are dislocated, the firm culture that we share and our role in the teams to which we belong.



PERSONAL EFFECTS

For law firm leaders, however, the sudden dislocation of the workforce creates a concern that their firm may cease to exceed the sum of its parts. Adapted work routines have become more individualised, intra-team communication more idiosyncratic. The Instagram chatter is of reclaimed commuting time, mid-morning exercise, terrace working and family moments. As with cleaner air, empty skies and clearer birdsong, such gains are not willingly sacrificed, once discovered. Surveys asking people how they feel about their commute have given oxygen to the belief that WFH is now a keeper.

What has been missing from the narrative, so far, is the business benefit of office working. This is not to precipitate an immediate, full-time return for all: there will necessarily be phases of return, and alternative versions of normality for different teams and roles, but these cannot be achieved by volunteerism alone.

Repeat an activity three times and you have started to create a habit – replace the daily commute with a move to the kitchen table 100 times, and that new habit becomes difficult to break. Staff are not rushing to remind bosses that their terms of employment concede the right to control not only what they do but also where they do it, but that is how it is. Coming to work has never been a prerogative of individual choice.

THE ABSENCE OF PRESENCE

So what are the business benefits? These will vary between firms but, mainly, affect three axes of operation: clients, collaboration and culture. The first observation is that, however efficient Zoom calls are, they are somehow not as effective. Remote communication, like the virus, brings a type of anosmia, making it more difficult to establish presence, maintain attention and develop rapport. Partners have checked in with staff and clients over the weeks, but have started to run out of gas. It's not the real deal.

The second observation is that all work has become screenwork. This is the main argument for WFH; yet it is fallacious. Collaboration is not built in set-piece meetings but in side conversations, coffee breaks and water-cooler moments. Screen gatherings may succeed in assembling a chorus but lack the fine-tuning that is achieved by informal pairings between performers. The same is true for supervision: much of the process of becoming a good lawyer is by osmosis. The optimal pathway for today's trainees becoming tomorrow's partners surely involves them being in the room where it happens, not a muted black square in the corner of a screen.

LOSING TOUCH

The third observation is that culture and cohesion are currently sustained by a shared mental model of the firm drawn from recent lived experience. The more distanced staff become from this experience, the more they will forget 'the way things are done around here'. With the fading of these memories will come erosion of trust and confidence: trust in being involved, valued and 'in the loop' on key issues; and confidence in knowing how the firm wants judgment calls to be made on its behalf. This mental model may be clear now, but it will be pretty pixelated by Christmas.

For new recruits, it will be even worse. Without a positive conception of the collective undertaking, it will be hard to engender loyalty and commitment and to prevent isolation and detachment. Mental fitness will be tested; remote management of these issues may prove impossible.

CARPE DIEM

Now is the time to start restating the benefits of a return. The messaging to effect a change of narrative needs careful crafting, and to hold a number of diverse audiences in mind. Some are struggling with the after-effects of the virus, have lost friends and relatives to it, or have underlying conditions that heighten their vulnerability. Others are thriving or comfortably surviving its effects. There are different degrees of busyness, different levels of personal concern for practice areas or sectors and different shades of apprehension about travel.

The longer the hiatus, the greater the task of managing expectations. While the new and old 'normals' will be more closely related than current wisdom has them, there will still be adjustments to make. Some roles may reach the end of their shelf life, while screen-based roles in business services teams may remain externalised. Attention is focused on the reconfiguration of meeting rooms, workstations, libraries, canteens, changing rooms and other facilities. All this needs explaining, to build trust in the safety of return. However, the most difficult challenge will be getting partners and staff to break their newly-embedded habit of WFH.

In short, the shift of emphasis from individual to business interests will need to be delivered in measured doses, which will take time. The process of commuting new habits for old ones needs to be started now, before they become too firmly locked down.



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