Fortress Workplace: In Defence of the Modern Office

by Rick Warters

The debate over the "new normal" workplace revved up at the start of the pandemic as the number of people working from home (WFH) increased exponentially overnight. Almost two years into it, stakes are being put in the ground. In the last week, stories in The Wall Street highlighted the philosophical gulf that is the future of the workplace. At one end of the spectrum, "Robinhood Tells Employees They Can Work From Home Permanently". At the other, "Google Doubles Down on the Office, Buying London Site for $1 Billion".

Robinhood will be a "remote first company," limiting some of its teams' flexibility for "regulatory and business reasons." They're playing the talent card. If employees can work from anywhere, they can be recruited from anywhere. That creates a world of opportunity for employers and workers, alike.

Google, on the other hand, said its investment in revamped, team-focused, London space, "represents (their) continued confidence in the office as a place for in-person collaboration and connection."

There is no single right answer. The structure of a company's workplace needs to be built around the work it performs. That said, as a student of employee relations for the last 40+ years, I think Google's got this one right.

Defenders of remote work say productivity is greater absent the distractions of the workplace. The proof of this claim is not universal. Throughout the pandemic, we have heard story after story of the longer work hours and increased stresses suffered by people working from home. Changing the commute from the highway to the hallway gave back some of the lost personal time, but little evidence has backed claims that work-from-home is a more effective for anything except transaction-based work.

CFOs will rightfully argue that shrinking a company's footprint will reduce its assets and its expenses. But at what cost?

The Workplace as a Sanctuary

We get ready for work. We go to work. We work. The others congregated in our workplace are there for the same purpose; to serve the organization's mission.

When extolling the virtue of remote work, people often say home is "free from the distractions of the office." The converse is true. The workplace is free from the distractions of home that have caused many to stress about longer "work" hours when working remotely.

We have blurred the lines in recent years, but workplaces should be free from the noise of the world around us. In the U.S., freedom of speech is not guaranteed inside the employer's walls. Politics and religion have no place at a Thanksgiving dinner, nor should they in the workplace.

The workplace is a "safe" space focused on productivity and filled with zealots who ply their trades together toward a common end. It is an positive echo chamber for ideas and innovation that improve the delivery of processes, products, and services. The workplace is a sanctuary devoted to the delivery of work and nothing else.

Expanding Inequality

Stories of the "haves" and the "have nots" define labor history and have been highlighted by the experiences of the pandemic. The gap between those who work with their hands and those who work with their heads will be further exacerbated in companies with any manual labor component that requires in-person work.

From a labor relations perspective, it's simple:

> *"Us" = those who have to report to work.*

> *"Them" = those who phone it in.*

"We" put ourselves at risk and sweat it out. "They" get flexibility and lounge in the comfort of their home. The "blue collar"- "white collar" divide is increasing as skill requirements migrate to the ends of the spectrum. Remote work will increase the rift that is already spreading.

Organized labor has been looking for an "in." This may be it.

Discretionary Effort

Reports on WFH often left me puzzled. People argue they're more productive, but stress about longer hours. Individual experiences with remote work differ widely based on their circumstances, but it has caused me to wonder whether people feel they're more productive because they're doing less (even if they're working longer hours)?

I have heard people say, "I did my job. I did exactly what they told me." A professional's performance isn't defined by the sum of his/her assignments, but by the overall value (s)he delivers to the company. The extra work that defines "above and beyond" often fills in the gaps between tasks assigned to different people.

Management isn't a science and managers don't have a monopoly on how to best get a job done. But managers assign the work. In remote work settings, assignments need to be more clearly defined and measurable than in settings where regular, informal course correction comes naturally – expectations need to be painfully clear.

Some will argue, "That's just good management." It is, but it is important to recognize that remote work requires more work and better quality from your management team.

(Dis)connection with the Core

I spent my career in industrial organizations. My peers and I worked for a manufacturing company, and we knew "being there" was a prerequisite. When schools closed and service-related companies cancelled workdays because of snow, we knew if the roads were open, so were our factories _and_ our offices.

The more separation you put between the factory or distribution center floor and the offices that support them, the easier it is to forget the core mission.

For our function, it's never HR for HR's sake. Our work is about creating conditions for all employees to support the delivery of products and services to the customer in an increasingly productive way.

The more removed you are from the core work and interaction with the "floor," the more likely you are to create policies, programs, and processes that reflect your reality, not theirs.

Informal Communication and Feedback

The head of a large engineering organization once told me, "Communication decreases by a factor of two every time you have to walk through a door, down a hallway, up a flight of stairs, or to another building. And if you have to pick up the phone, forget it." So, in 2022, what if you have to join a video conference?

Remote work is dependent on intentionality. You have to decide to pick up the phone. You decide to schedule a call or video conference when you need something. You decide to call around when you're missing necessary information. Interaction is deliberate. Information sharing is purposeful. Inclusion is calculated.

What's lost are the informal and incidental opportunities to share, pick the brains of others who are not miles-deep into a project, and get other perspectives.

A young gentleman who used to work for me said, _"The real value of working with you was sitting in on meetings and teleconferences that you'd just pull me in to because I was there. I learned things that would have taken years on my own."_

Experiential Development

A senior HR executive once shared with me the story of two people in a rotation program. Both came to the company with similar bona fides. Both were assigned similar tasks. One worked in the company's headquarters. The other worked remotely.

Both performed well during their months-long rotation, but the person at the center progressed dramatically ahead of her off-site peer because of the incidental experiences, informal relationships, and keener understanding of the organization. "Being there" and having a place to be makes a difference.

Retention Power of Place

Early in my career, a manager told me, *"We love it when you guys get married and take on mortgages. Then we know we've got you."*

Remote workers can work anywhere. Robinhood is looking forward to attracting the best talent from anywhere. If employees don't have to uproot their families, dispose of their houses, and endure the other hassles involved with moving, they are more likely to remain perpetually "open to other opportunities."

Retention Power of Relationships

Several years ago, a large multinational told employees it was shutting many of its offices and people could live and work from their location of choice.

Employees who had spent years with the company were thrilled to move to the places they expected to retire. They knew the corporation, understood the culture, had the established support systems they had established over the years. What could be better?

New employees found it difficult to assimilate, difficult to navigate a culture they didn't understand, and they left. A few years after dismantling the offices, the company created a system of distributed workplaces and brought people back in.

The relationships we build influence our perspectives about our organizations and our ability to contribute to them. The metaverse may one day facilitate the informal interactions that lead to lasting and productive work relationships. We're not there yet.

The Workday and Work-Life Balance

When you're at work, you're at work. When you work from home, you're always at work.

We live in an "always on" world. When most people in an organization "go to work," most people don't expect a response to a 10:00 PM email until the next business day. And most people understand and respond to the 10:00 PM cell phone call because, "It must be an 'emergency'."

When everyone works from home with increasingly flexible hours, "always on" means "never off." Work-life balance is much easier when people in an organization share a relatively common experience of "workday" in the workplace and "homeday" at home.

Company leaders should arrive at their answer to workforce (co-)location based on the work their people do, the interdependence of employees upon one another, and the cross-functional cooperation the delivery of their product or service demands.

Most will adopt a hybrid model that affords employees more flexibility than the pre-Covid era, but that still requires some level of physical presenteeism.

Yes, there are clear savings associated with shuttering offices and shrinking the corporate footprint. There are costs as well. None of the challenges of "remote first" outlined above is insurmountable. Each can be

overcome with a new set of skills and technology applied with intention. Taken as a whole, however, this is a heavy lift that should not go unconsidered.

The value of any organization is that it is greater than the sum of its parts. Efficiency comes, in part, from "scientific management." We build organization charts, we divvy up the work, and we establish targets.

But real learnings, breakthroughs, and efficiencies come from the informal relationships, cross-functional ties, and discretionary productivity that happens when smart people are brought together with a common purpose in a "safe" space – a fortress workplace.

Rick Warters

Rick held senior positions at United Technologies as a Human Resources client manager and an Industrial Relations specialist for 35 years. He led the employee and labor relations function at Carrier and Pratt & Whitney for seven years and managed employee and labor relations issues on the ground in more than 20 countries across a spectrum of representative and regulatory environments.

Rick retired from UTC in 2019 but remains active keeping up a years-long tradition of lecturing at Cornell as well as developing and delivering a new Employee & Labor Relations course at the University of Connecticut's Business School. He engages selectively in labor consulting and continues to support HRPA Global's development activities.

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