

How Remote Work Is Reshaping the Office

Peter Cappelli¹  and Y. Jasmine Wu² 

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SUMMARY

We examine how office work changed with the move to hybrid/remote operations through 38 group interviews covering roughly 760 employees of a multinational company across 3 countries. The most important finding may be a shift in focus of employees toward their own individual tasks and away from help-giving and collaborative tasks. The social ties that made seeking help and giving it a simple, informal process weakened and continue to erode with onboarding challenges and extensive time spent in dysfunctional virtual meetings. Shrinking of office space, “hoteling,” and lack of enforcement over attendance made rebuilding relationships difficult.

KEYWORDS: remote work, telecommuting, hybrid organizations, work environments, workforce management

The global pandemic from COVID-19 and the shift to remote work created arguably the biggest and surely the most immediate change in the workplace since office work began. While there has been considerable research on remote work, most of it has focused on the experience of individual employees working away from their office. We know relatively little about how work itself may have changed. Post-pandemic remote work, or office work without an office, by comparison, provides insight as to the role of physical proximity in shaping how office tasks are performed. In this study, our focus is to examine the extent to which the execution of work changed when employees work remotely and the mechanisms behind those changes.

We conducted 38 separate group interviews in late 2023 with roughly 760 participants across 3 different countries in the offices of a multinational financial services company. We analyzed the data using Thompson’s framework of task interdependence¹ concerning how connected tasks are with those of others.

¹Wharton School, Philadelphia, PA, USA

²The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Communication Studies, Austin, TX, USA

We find that, overall, when employees have less contact with each other, relationships among them decline, reducing the help and assistance that have traditionally enabled work to get done. We describe this as relational capital, and its erosion reduces help-giving, coordination, and undermines aspects of career advancement. The benefits from social relationships broadly defined fall under the heading of social capital. There is extensive evidence that individuals with more social capital do better on a range of outcomes and that those with less of it do worse.² We illustrate how remote working erodes social relationships and changes how work is done in ways that make it more difficult through, for example, changing norms that give priority to individual contributions, reduced help from peers, fewer opportunities to learn from each other, avenues for communication that are less effective, and unproductive virtual meetings that offer few opportunities for real-time conversations. Hybrid work schedules, especially when combined with “hoteling” space when in the office, do not provide enough interactions to rebuild or even maintain those relationships. We provide suggestions as to how they can be rebuilt.

We recognize that qualitative studies like ours are inductive exercises that do not address how common the developments we describe are. We do, however, provide evidence from other contexts where we believe the findings are consistent. We also know that we are not conducting explicit tests of the explanations we offer. Our context does have some advantage, though, in looking explicitly at the change in work practices where the cause—remote operations—is reasonably straightforward. Studies like these provide a starting point for future and deeper research on how remote operations affect how work gets done.

Because it is the remote or “out of the office” aspect of hybrid arrangements that matters, we use the term “remote work” to describe what we observe.

Prior Studies

Although there have long been examples of individuals working remotely, the most important change following the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 is that remote work arrangements now span the entire office rather than a few individuals. Since the pandemic, the most common practice is the “hybrid” model where all employees are out of the office at least some part of each week and, in theory, together for the remainder.

A central issue in contemporary office work that emerges in the remote work literature is the tension between individual and collective tasks and how the balance changes when in-person contact erodes. Much of the prior research has documented how remote work can enhance employees’ autonomy and work-life balance. Field experiments have found that some remote arrangements may maintain or improve individual productivity in individual contributor roles.³ The advantage of such jobs (e.g., travel agents, patent attorneys) is that performance measures are clear and objective, but the jobs do not reflect typical office work where tasks are pervasively interdependent.

Management and organizational studies scholarship has long emphasized that white-collar work depends on collaboration, knowledge sharing, and informal coordination. Research on social exchange and reciprocity, as well as helping behavior, shows that employees in offices balance the demands to complete their own work with requests to assist others, provide feedback,⁴ or share expertise.⁵ Knowledge workers in an office context already face a tension between protecting time for their own responsibilities and assisting others. Perlow showed that employees often withdraw from helping behaviors to safeguard individual productivity⁶ while other scholars described when being unwilling to help others with their work ends up hurting how we are viewed.⁷ A recent study found that when office workers were able to control where they worked, even within an office, it was easier for them to “hide” and get away from more collective tasks and distractions so that they could advance their individual contributions.⁸

The interdependent nature of contemporary knowledge work depends on repeated interpersonal contact to sustain help-seeking, informal learning, low-cost communication, and coordination, making remote work a shift in the relational conditions that support organizational effectiveness. Early research found an inverse correlation between communication frequency and physical distance.⁹ Later development in electronic communication, especially virtual interactions, questioned whether that conclusion still held. Yet Olson and Olson’s literature review published in 2000 argued that geographic distance still matters and that collaboration worsens with distance.¹⁰ Relatedly, prior research has shown that employees working at a distance from each other report having: increased communication difficulty and barriers with their colleagues¹¹; less uninterrupted time; fewer one-on-one meetings with supervisors¹²; weaker interpersonal ties; fewer opportunities to build high-quality relationships with colleagues¹³; and greater professional and social isolation.¹⁴ Workers are less likely to respond promptly to colleagues at a distance¹⁵; they may hesitate to initiate contact for fear of interrupting¹⁶; and often lack the contextual awareness needed to understand others’ priorities.¹⁷ Studies of distributed teams similarly find that geographic separation can reinforce intergroup bias and increase the likelihood of misunderstandings or conflict.¹⁸

Recent post-pandemic studies reinforce the concern and show that the communication networks of employees narrowed and became more static when they worked remotely.¹⁹ Collaboration and lower rates of innovation suffer when employees are not co-located.²⁰

These relational disruptions carry implications for individual careers as well. Prior research found rates of promotion were lower for those working remotely²¹ as were their job performance scores.²² Remote workers sometimes reported extreme efforts to get attention and overcome the face-time advantages of peers in the office,²³ disconnections with teammates located in the office,²⁴ and negative effects on the performance of those still in the office.²⁵ Prior work on schedule flexibility noted that working from home meant not being seen and therefore carried a face-time penalty. Other evidence documents how much we

learn by being proximate to others²⁶ and the need to be around those in power to get promoted, even if those who work from home show the same performance as their counterparts working at the office.²⁷ More recently, the same trade-off is described where engineers who were co-located gave and received more feedback to each other at the expense of their own individual performance, which was lower than when they were physically separate.²⁸

Taken together, the literature points to a difficult trade-off: remote work may certainly benefit work-life balance and may support some individual contributions while weakening the relational capital that enables collective office work. Prior research has yet to examine in detail what changes when traditional office work moves to a more remote context. Our study addresses this gap by illustrating how remote work changed the way interdependent work is performed. We do so in a knowledge-intensive firm that, like many other Anglo-US organizations, had transitioned from in-person to remote during the COVID-19 pandemic and then into a hybrid work arrangement.

Methods

The Context for Our Study

Our investigation took place in a multinational financial services company headquartered in the United States. Office employees were forced to work from home in the COVID-19 lockdowns beginning in the spring of 2020. During the pandemic, the company put a priority on keeping employees healthy and safe with explicit guidelines that they should look after themselves and that the work comes second to their own well-being. These guidelines become crucial later on.

Following the pandemic, the company transitioned to a hybrid work model in which employees were expected to divide their time between working from home and being physically present in the office. The company introduced “anchor days,” intended to bring employees into the office on designated days. Initially, the expectation was to be on-site one or two days per week, eventually stabilizing at two anchor days in early 2022. The remaining days were considered as “flex days,” during which employees could choose to work remotely or in the office.

As part of hybrid work, the company adopted “hoteling” for office space. Instead of permanent desks, employees reserve workspace when planning to be on-site. This was necessary because office space was cut an issue we discuss below, which meant that the offices could not accommodate all employees simultaneously. Even on anchor days, then, employees were not guaranteed to see their co-workers present in the office.

Implementation of anchor days was also largely decentralized. Despite that, senior leadership issued guidance encouraging teams to maintain in-office presence on anchor days and enforcement was delegated to team leaders. Leaders, therefore, determined how the guidance was applied within their teams, including when employees should be present in the office and how the hybrid work

arrangement would function in practice. Despite the “anchor days” guidance, the offices were largely empty during our visits.²⁹

Data Collection

We collected group interview data on the research site. Our interest was to examine how work had changed for the employees with the shift to the hybrid context. The company was interested in learning about how its employees were experiencing remote work and how it differed for them from the in-person context. We shared our plans as to what to ask with the company, but there were no requirements or restrictions as to what we could ask.

We conducted interviews because our research questions were best addressed through an inductive approach. Group interviews are more difficult to secure but have some clear advantages and a long history in social research as a preferred method for getting at “why” and “how” questions.³⁰ Their key element as opposed to individual interviews is obviously interactive discussion: Participants feel the need to explain themselves to others and can question each other as well, providing some check on the accuracy of what they are saying. Evidence also suggests that on factual matters, group results tend to converge with evidence from traditional surveys.³¹

We conducted thirty-eight group interviews across five office centers in the United States, United Kingdom, and India. The group interviews were 90 minutes in length with an average of about 20 employees in each, therefore approximately 760 participants. That constitutes about 2 percent of total employees in the organization. Only company employees attended the groups—no contractors, vendors, or leased employees were invited. Nineteen of those groups were held in the United Kingdom and India. Eight were conducted virtually for those individuals who could not get to a location, and the remainder were held in the United States. A small number of those attending the virtual meetings reported that their jobs were “permanently remote,” a category that the company allows individuals to apply for and local managers to endorse for individual contributor roles.

The organization selected employees at random to invite to the group interviews and sent them invitations via email. The invitations described the open-ended nature of the discussion and emphasized that participation was voluntary. Those invited then decided whether to attend the group interviews. Attendance varied from roughly one-third to half of those invited. This participation was far better than typical attendance in the office, which we took as evidence of interest in the topic. No record was kept of who appeared, and we never learned the names of any of the participants, except on the few occasions where they referred to each other by first name. To our knowledge, no management representatives were there to take note of the conversations and report back. Our debriefing with the company suggested that they did not know what the conversations contained. Recordings of meetings conducted by non-employees were not permitted under the company’s general security policies. Therefore, we took notes

on laptops. While we did our best to capture direct quotes, what we report is often paraphrasing. We use quotation marks to capture quotes from participants.³²

Our representation to those attending was that we were academics interested in understanding research questions about how hybrid work and was functioning and that the company was not directing our questions. We shared a report documenting aggregated results with the company leadership after completing the interviews. We made clear that participants' comments were anonymous, and we had no way to identify who was speaking or indeed who was in the room as there was no record of who attended.³³

Our questions asked participants explicitly how work is different for them now than before pandemic-related remote work was introduced. We used the same question template and format for each focus group, which we began by asking every participant to interview a partner near them about the biggest difference in working remotely as opposed to their prior experience in the office. Some indicated that they did not work for this company before the pandemic, but they were a small number. This exercise was mainly used as an icebreaker, but it also framed our inquiry as being about the comparison between work in the office and work remotely. The question template is attached in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

The guiding framework for the interviews and subsequent data analysis is Thompson's task interdependence with: *pooled* (where individual tasks are largely independent); *reciprocal* (where the work of tasks flows back and forth); and *sequential* (a structured and linear flow from one task to the next) organization of work. Pooled tasks are associated with individual contributor tasks and are invariably included in one's job description.³⁴ When respondents talked about their KPIs, they were referring to pooled tasks. Reciprocal tasks map onto help-seeking activities where requests are often unstructured and unpredictable. Some tasks, such as mentoring or helping new hires, are not in job descriptions. Sequential tasks in this organization identify most closely workflows between teams.

To analyze the interview data, we followed Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis.³⁵ In the initial round of open coding, we created codes based on the research question (the shift toward individual tasks) as to how work may have changed when the same jobs were being done remotely and what might explain this. These codes are descriptive and meant to reflect what participants said. We then identified broader topics that emerged from our data (e.g., within- and cross-team norms, learning, social relationships, organizational culture, career advancement, and equity issues). These codes served as broader themes that describe the interactional processes. The initial second-order codes include: reduced help across teams; more self-care priority; more focus on individual KPIs; fewer opportunities to build new relationships; decline in informal learning; reduced informal advancement; "camera-off" norms; and heightened meeting load.

Our interview data were then coded iteratively between the data and conceptual themes within Thompson's task interdependence framework. The mechanisms illuminate how the tension between individual and collective work unfolded across different aspects of work before and after the pandemic. Table 1 describes the overall results organized by this framework.

Results

The mechanisms we observed that inhibited at least some aspects of getting work done are as follows:

- A shift in performance expectations toward individual KPIs (Pooled and Sequential Interdependence)
- Decline in help-seeking and a shift to asynchronous communication models (Lack of Reciprocal Interdependence)
- Erosion of social networks and ties, and effects on learning (Lack of Reciprocal Interdependence)
- Dysfunctions of virtual meetings as a time sink (Reconstituted Reciprocity)
- Management decisions that limit social relationships

A Shift in Performance Expectations Toward Individual KPIs

Arguably, the most consequential change caused by remote work that we observed was how employees changed their thinking about their job responsibilities, especially as against obligations to others or to the organization per se, perhaps the central research question about the relationship between location and work.

When we asked how remote arrangements were going, participants frequently replied, "The work is getting done." Upon further probing, it became clear that "the work" referred to their own tasks and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), not team goals or broader organizational outcomes. Supervisors and team leaders had been instructed to focus on individual deliverables starting in the pandemic through more formal check-ins and meetings. This shift reinforced pooled interdependence where separate contributions accumulate into organizational output without in-person and frequent interaction. But it is also the case in most organizations that many of the more collective obligations (e.g., looking after new hires, helping someone with a question) were never part of formal job requirements and were created by social connections. When those connections erode, so do the obligations to help others.

The focus on individual performance was also influenced by the company's awareness early on of the stress that employees felt during the pandemic and the need to look after their mental health. As one employee explained it, "The company's self-care (guidance) told us to find the way to work that is the best for me,

TABLE I. How Changing Forms of Interdependence Reshape Relational Processes in Remote Work.

Interdependence Type	Description	Mechanisms	Representative Evidence	Theoretical and Conceptual Interpretation
Pooled Interdependence	Independent, modular work streams aggregated via metrics	A shift in performance expectations toward individual KPIs	“The work is getting done” “Find the way to work best for me”; local managers “don’t know where the org heads to.”	Socialization shifts from mutual sensemaking to self-definition; authority diffused to the team and individual level.
Sequential Interdependence	Dependence on prior inputs and delayed reciprocity		“I get my work done first . . . then check messages.” “If it’s someone I know, I call them up.”	Socialization narrows to transactional exchanges; cross-team learning reliant on pre-existing ties.
Lack of Reciprocal Interdependence	Lack of mutual adaptation and feedback	Decline in help seeking and a shift to asynchronous communication models Erosion of social networks and ties	“No new friendships.” “We schedule a call to catch up on gossip.” “New hires struggle to understand the org.”	Informal socialization erodes; newcomers learn only procedures, not culture, and make limited personal connections from work.
Reconstituted Reciprocity via Virtual Meetings	Symbolic reciprocal interdependence through mediated collaboration	Dysfunctions of virtual meetings	“Camera-off” norms, “We have to send summaries after meetings.”	Formal meetings simulate reciprocity but yield divided attention; socialization becomes procedural.

so that is what I do.” That self-care policy was mentioned in several groups to justify the prioritization of individual work, that is, get your work done in whatever way is best for you. Company guidance never said to ignore other, collective tasks, but by default, they got less attention. That focus on self-care initiated by the company during the pandemic extended into the post-pandemic period. The company leadership had not tried to change norms back to the pre-pandemic period.

Remote work also created an incentive to get one’s work done faster at home because employees could turn to home-based tasks and issues.³⁶ In the office context, that was not the case, and there was more slack time when it was not disruptive to be asked a question, to answer them, or as simply to talk about issues related to work and the organization.

The focus on individual tasks and the inability to monitor employee behavior in person with remote work also affected career advancement. As several respondents noted, office-wide remote work eliminates the special challenge of impression management with leaders who were not their supervisors.³⁷ We did not hear any concern about competition for attention driving employees to be in the office more. A possible explanation is that managers themselves were working remotely, and being in the office would not necessarily produce more “face time” with leaders. The fact that employees themselves chose when to come into the office meant that the chance of just running into the boss was slim.

Employees argued that promotions and recognition are now “based largely on individual KPIs,” focusing more on measurable outputs than on physical visibility or informal networking, which previously played a significant role in career advancement.

It was also the case that the shift toward greater reliance on individual KPIs created some consternation because of the relative lack of information about how candidates would operate working with others. One manager noted the downside of the lack of informal chats in understanding career progression, “I can’t believe they promoted that person. Have they seen how they interact with others? It is important that people can get along, and we don’t see that now.” The lack of “small talk” makes the rationale of career advancement even less clear to employees.

The changes that came with remote work had a noticeable effect on how employees thought promotions and other aspects of advancement operated. It advanced the importance of formal policies and practices and reduced the role of the informal. A junior employee said, “We don’t have the opportunity to signal our ambitions now.” That might have included mentioning to a boss when a project is discussed that they would like to work on it. The comment was echoed by other junior employees in the group, indicating the lack of informal channels for career advancement. The informal channels are even more important if employees are trying to signal or get information from superiors who are not their immediate bosses. “Catching them in the hall is much easier than trying to schedule a

meeting with them, as that also has the appearance of trying to go around your boss.”

These illustrations show the organization shifted from reciprocal interdependence, where continuous feedback loops sustain coordination, toward pooled interdependence, where individuals’ independent efforts are rarely synchronized. The role thus becomes self-defined: individual contributors and managers decide primarily by themselves how to perform their roles.

Decline in Help-Seeking and a Shift to Asynchronous Communication Models

If pooled structures emphasize autonomy, sequential interdependence depends on the smooth relay of work and information between employees. Under remote conditions, that information sharing and help exchanges were much more difficult. Employees described a dramatic decline in spontaneous help exchanges. Setting up a meeting to ask for help, they explained, carried higher stakes because it signaled a significant need and required “considerable assistance.” Helpers may also overestimate the likelihood that people will keep asking for help (i.e., they will not stop asking me if I reply) and underestimate the role that discomfort plays in not asking for help, making employees less likely to respond to important requests for help.³⁸

The company encouraged employees to communicate with colleagues through the chat function of Microsoft Teams, an asynchronous medium. But sending pings and answering them are not the same events. Employees may find it easy to ping any time of the day and at the same time resist answering pings from others. Many defaulted to deferring responses, “I get my own work done first, and then I check to see if there are any messages asking me to do anything. If it’s the end of my day, I wait until morning.”

Some participants indicated that they checked their chats regularly and responded right away, but clearly not everyone did. One participant in the most raucous group interview, where the most concerns about remote work were raised, reported “I tried for three months to get an answer. They didn’t even return my call.” That person was also relatively new to the company, having arrived since the pandemic began, and had no work friends in the company.

Not everyone followed that protocol of pinging colleagues through chat, of course. As one employee noted, “If it’s someone I know, I call them up.” In these practices, we saw the importance of pre-pandemic social relationships. When calling someone you knew, help came quickly; if not, it was quite likely delayed. Pings that are not answered promptly at a minimum do not encourage those interactions in a positive way and ultimately erode them. The result was a narrowing of information breadth; employees shared information readily within teams and pre-existing relationships but rarely across them. Over time, the pre-pandemic ties erode and disappear as employees leave the company.

Beyond pings, the availability features of the enterprise social media platform reinforced the fragmentation. Team-based software in this organization and elsewhere allows employees to post an “unavailable” notice on their site for traditional “out of the office” reasons, such as travel or personal time, but also because they are working on their own tasks. The idea is to use this when one is working on tasks that require focus and uninterrupted time. Given that most all their effort is now directed at their own KPIs, which could allow them to be unavailable most of the time, we asked whether teams had rules or norms of establishing how much of their time could be unavailable or when that could be. They did not; it appeared that employees managed that decision on their own.

Within teams, help requests were answered quickly, sustained by dense interactions and moral obligation. Across teams, however, coordination relied on personal relational capital or bridges: “If we needed something from another team, we’d see who knows anyone over there? Then we’d have that person call.” In other words, the team was relying on social ties that individual members developed before the pandemic to solve those communication and sharing problems. As noted above, as employee turnover breaks these ties, collaboration and cooperation across teams erode as well. Because the authority over when to reach out or respond to whom comes down to each individual, the chain of sequential interdependence was breaking.

Erosion of Social Networks and Ties—Onboarding and Learning

Beyond immediate workflows, the decline in social connections and ties weakened reciprocal interdependence, the mutual exchange of cultural understanding that sustains learning.

Arguably, the most important management task where reciprocal interdependence matters is in the onboarding of new hires because they are learning from every interaction by observing other employees, listening to conversations, asking questions, and participating in formal processes. The few who self-identified noted the difficulty they had in understanding how to do their work. It was widely acknowledged by other participants that new hires arriving since the pandemic struggled to understand the organization. That included not only less tangible issues, such as organizational culture, but also acquiring practical skills and knowledge.³⁹ The issue was not limited to company-specific knowledge. One manager from a customer-facing unit stated it clearly, “I am concerned about young people. They did not get the interpersonal experience, which would be critical for their career.” Similarly, a leader from that group added that they found that new hires right out of college, but also lateral hires, had a noticeable knowledge gap three months into work compared to those who had been hired before remote work. “We had to create a special training program for them in our office to make up for what they should have known.”

One team leader developed their own workaround to the lack of onboarding: “I make up a list of the key people for them (new hires) to meet across the office, and I call them up to arrange for a meeting. ‘We have a new guy; I think it

is important for them to meet you’.” A limitation to this approach is that both the new hires and those key contacts have to be in the office at the same time to make a connection. Otherwise, doing so virtually turns the encounter into another meeting of which the key employees already have more than enough. Anticipatory help through a scheduled meeting from a more senior or higher status employee might also be seen as an opportunity to be evaluated and threatening to newcomers.⁴⁰

Onboarding and developing shared knowledge in organizations is more difficult in the virtual context. As one participant put it, “Learning from each other is harder. Guided learning is tougher, and surprise learning moments are rarer. Now it’s mostly learning by doing, and coming back with questions.” Another employee pointed out the advantages of learning through direct observation and deeper interactions: “It’s easier to learn something if you can watch someone else do it and ask them about it right then. It’s also easier to find out what is new and important talking in person.”

We also asked every group whether they thought their social networks had changed since the pandemic. The response to this question was somewhat more muted than the response to the question about friendships, perhaps because the information needed to answer that question is not easy to recall, but no one reported that their networks had broadened. When pressed, everyone who responded reported that theirs had narrowed. We asked about networks outside of work, and most of the answers suggested that those had narrowed as well.

An immediate impact from the narrowing of social networks was on the flow of information, especially informal information, including gossip. An example from one participant concerned employee turnover: “[Referring to someone important], I didn’t even know they had left let alone why.” Many of the participants in the room nodded in response, suggesting this situation was not unique. The situation where employees leave is often not reported to employees in any formal manner in physical offices, but it is a topic of real interest, which is why it features in face-to-face, private communications. Employees reported that it felt awkward to gossip or even have small talk in virtual meetings because others are listening.

In remote settings, “small talk” requires intentionality. At least two different participants reported that they would, on occasion, arrange a call with employee friends from before remote work to share this kind of informal information. “We schedule a call to catch up on gossip.” However, we did not see any evidence of “virtual water cooler” effects where remote employees arranged to meet up regularly online as suggested elsewhere.⁴¹

Reciprocal interdependence relies on high-frequency, multi-directional information flow, where employees internalize routines and culture through interactions. The transition to remote work attenuated this and led to the opposite: fewer shared experiences, less unstructured observation, and more dependence on explicit scheduling. Employees still learned, but as above, mostly by

“doing and coming back with questions.” Surprise learning moments became rare. Guided learning, especially through vicarious observation, nearly disappeared.

Dysfunctions of Virtual Meetings and a Time Sink

Virtual meetings are a key mechanism in changing how work is performed in remote contexts and in pushing it from reciprocal to pooled interdependence. In this organization, as in most with remote work, virtual meetings emerged as about the only avenue for personal interactions.

As other researchers found in other settings,⁴² when we asked participants whether meeting time had gone up with the remote context, the answer was always yes. Workdays being longer was also often explained by participants as caused by more time in meetings. The respondents identified reasons why there were more meetings, why they were bigger and longer, and why they were less productive. They noted that the size of meetings was no longer constrained by office size. “Let’s meet in my office” limits the meeting to a handful of people. Without that, as one employee noted, “it’s easy to add people to a meeting, and people don’t want to be left out.” Video conferencing technologies that removed physical constraints expanded information breadth but diluted depth. Larger meetings took up more time and slowed discussions because more employees are in more of them, and they are less useful because more people who are not relevant are in them. Larger group meetings also heightened preparation demands. As one participant noted, “We need pre-meetings to prepare for big meetings.”

Notably, larger group meetings encouraged multitasking, largely caused by the “camera-off” norm across the organization. When asked what attendees were doing with their cameras off, the uniform response was, “They are doing other work.” The “camera-off” norm makes multitasking even easier. It is easier to speak up in a small in-person meeting, where the organizer can often read body language and call on someone who has something to say. “You can’t read the room when you are losing people on Zoom.” Virtual meetings limit moderators’ ability to adjust the pace of discussions based on participants’ social cues, contributing to inefficiency in interactions, people not paying attention, and thus multitasking. Participants’ multitasking behavior during meetings could lead to even more meetings. One team leader said that because employees are not paying attention, “We have to send summaries around explaining what happened in the meeting, and we sometimes need follow-up meetings when people want to talk about what was on the summary.” More meetings, in turn, created the time squeeze and reinforced the need for multitasking.

Despite the acknowledgment that having cameras off was dysfunctional for meetings, it did appear to be more stressful for employees to have them on and something that conflicted with the self-care norm created during the pandemic. To the extent that meetings represent a collective activity and the work they were doing when multitasking was an individual activity, the “camera-off” norm and

the multitasking that followed represent a shift from collaborative to individual attention and effort. In more than one meeting we heard, “What if they don’t feel like being on camera that day?” “Camera-off” seemed to fit in with the company’s broader self-care norm. This norm continues post-pandemic and reflects the difficulty in changing practices back to the pre-pandemic status quo.

Why the “cameras-off” norm persisted even though employees saw the obvious drawbacks can also be traced to a leadership choice to leave practices to local managers. As one team leader noted, “I pushed for camera on, but I didn’t know how to make it happen. Then I gave up.” Enforcing a “camera-on” policy put them at odds with what their own employees wanted, with the self-care norm, and with what other teams were doing. Other team leaders noted similar circumstances.

Larger group meetings also created challenges for learning. As one participant noted, new hires were “largely being ignored, but drawn into big meetings” because they did not yet have any sense as to which meetings were important for them. Yet in many meetings, they did not have enough background to know what was going on. A team leader noted a positive aspect of larger virtual meetings, especially featuring senior leaders: “I feel it’s easier to bring new hires to virtual meetings so that there are more opportunities to get exposed to conversations with senior leadership and clients.” But the negative aspects were hard to miss. One was the minimal personal follow-ups. We then heard this pushback from a junior employee from the same group, “The rumination of those high-stakes conversations afterward, when working from home, leveled up the stress and anxiety. I have no one to casually talk with when everyone logs off. We need low-stakes interactions with senior colleagues in the company.” The comment resonated with head-nodding among other junior employees in the group. The learning opportunities for newcomers to be in larger meetings may have been more imaginary than real.

Collaborative tasks such as brainstorming and conceptualization are difficult to conduct effectively in virtual meetings. Consistent with a previous study,⁴³ brainstorming was top of the list of difficulties in remote work. Another common problem was strategy and planning exercises, although respondents reported that virtual “whiteboards” and related software did help with those tasks. These are tasks that require rich, real-time interactions where each participant’s input shapes others.

Meeting software easily records meetings and can provide transcripts: “Now things are more written. And the whole journal is visible.” Documentation contributes to a shared memory that is especially useful when team composition changes. Some of these equalizing effects reinforced the move away from collaboration, though, because knowledge was documented and distributed, not co-created in real time. Meetings became in part a ritual of maintenance of preserving the appearance of group cohesion while concealing the disintegration of socialization processes.

Management Actions Limiting the Rebuilding of Relations

The hybrid model in theory provides the opportunity for face-to-face interactions with other employees that might build new relationships or rebuild others. As we noted above, however, the shrinking of office space to cut costs meant that it was not possible for everyone to be in the office on anchor days, which is a severe blow to any of the benefits of hybrid arrangements. Hoteling allocation of office space exacerbated this problem by essentially randomizing seating, making it unlikely that any employees would sit near each other very often.

A further challenge was the absence of centralized enforcement of anchor day requirements. Implementation was delegated to local managers, a decision that created difficulties for some supervisors responsible for ensuring compliance within their teams. As one manager described the post-pandemic practices: “Senior management gave site-based recommendations of anchor days. But there is a big disparity in complying with recommendations to be in during anchor days [across teams]. Site leaders can decide what to do. But we managers [a level below them] are lost. We don’t know what the senior leadership wants, and where the org heads go.” In practice, then, team leaders set the policy concerning attendance.

No team leader wanted to be the bad guy and force their employees to come in if others were not. The result was that managers frequently did not enforce rules on attendance and hybrid policies at all, which is why so few employees came to the office despite anchor day requirements.

Discussion and Recommendations

Remote work creates the opportunity to see the extent to which the way white-collar work is traditionally organized in the office is because of its historical face-to-face arrangement. By removing the office and operating more remotely, we get a chance to check that.

Perhaps the most general change has been the greater focus on individual or pooled tasks at the expense of cooperative or sequential and reciprocal tasks like helping others. There is wider evidence that these collective tasks are being shunned. A 2025 survey found nearly one-quarter of employees saying that they are only doing the tasks that are in their job description now, and over one-third block time off their calendars to prevent others from getting on it.⁴⁴

Some of the changes we observed may have been influenced by the continuing influence of self-care norms established during the pandemic and not just hybrid work. After several years where employees essentially managed their priorities themselves, the organizational change efforts needed to pull them off that approach are beyond the ability of local managers. It is reasonable to believe that the current practices will become even more difficult to change as the remaining culture and norms from the pre-pandemic days slowly erode and are replaced by

team-by-team norms, albeit ones that seem to give employees considerable discretion as to how they do their jobs. The directive to find one's own best way to get their work done contributed to the pulling back from reciprocal tasks. "Camera-off" norms in meetings was the most wide-spread example. Another was delaying help to colleagues if it interfered with one's own tasks or their "post-office hour" time.

A more general mechanism shifting attention and effort across tasks worth exploring in future research is the fact that when working from home, employees can easily "leave early" and shift to home activities when the day's work is done. They do not have to wait for the office hours to end, the period when they might socialize or compare notes with colleagues as in the office.

Virtual meetings create a clear mechanism through which these changes take place. The manner in which they are organized, often with many participants and cameras off, reduces interaction, and the large number of meetings and the time spent in them squeezes down the time that is available for our own work, crowding out resources available for collective efforts. Perhaps the most obvious example of this squeeze is where employees are in the office on anchor days but nevertheless find themselves in virtual meetings because other participants are remote.

An important concern about post-pandemic practices is that social relations are not being rebuilt. The most obvious example is the lack of systematic onboarding of new hires, which will surely weaken collective orientations and organizational culture going forward. Perhaps the most surprising and wide-spread phenomenon extending beyond this organization is the fact that "anchor days," which one would expect are used to create social connections and informal sharing of information, are not being observed. Coming back to the office and not seeing colleagues disinclines one to return, and when attendance is not enforced, employees simply do not come in.

The changes associated with post-pandemic work are widespread, and it is important to note that our study only looked at how work changed and not the effect on individual employees and their life outside of work, the focus of pre-pandemic research. As we noted above, employees seemed to highly value the ability to work from home, but in terms of how work is performed, especially from the perspective of the employer, it was difficult to see aspects that were improved by remote work. The main positive example was likely to be tasks that required uninterrupted time, although those who lacked private space at home did not see that benefit. The fact that some respondents saw advantages for some groups, such as women, minorities, and introverts, from *not* interacting in person is indeed important. One might think that the most important questions this raises relate to the unfair nature of many office cultures rather than the fact that in-person contact per se is troublesome.

It is also important to recognize that the change in work practices we report illustrates these issues, but as with all qualitative research, it does not

allow us to infer how widespread they are. We do see little in this context, however, that would cause the changes to be unique to this organization, and we present some evidence of similar issues elsewhere. We are reporting what employees say the changes were in work that accompanied remote operations, but their reviews do not constitute rigorous proof that remote operations, per se, caused those changes. However, there are, of course, also good reasons for thinking that it did.

Surprisingly, we did not find that results varied in any noticeable way across cities and countries. Differences that we might expect would matter may have canceled each other out, too. For example, employees in India reported the most difficulty with commuting, which would make them especially supportive of remote work, but they also reported the most difficulties with distractions working from home, which cuts the other way. The biggest difference was with the focus groups at company headquarters, where participants aggressively defended the current arrangements and felt entitled to have them continue. Employees at other locations noted that headquarters staff have always felt entitled to have better work arrangements (e.g., meetings tended to be set by their schedule), so this may not be unique to remote work.

We recognize that there are different types of remote work arrangements, although for the most part these differences reflect varying degrees of how frequently employees see one another. Even organizations with no offices may bring employees together reasonably frequently for interactions. But it is reasonable to ask whether we would expect similar, or perhaps even more severe problems in organizations that are fully remote and where employees rarely, if ever, come together. Those companies are rare and much smaller on average. They began as fully remote (avoiding change issues) and crucially tend to rely on extensive rules and procedures that require detailed documentation, responsiveness, and interactions to make up for the lack of face-to-face interaction.⁴⁵ Otherwise, we expect the extent of the problems we see to vary with the extent to which employees are together with each other. As we see in this case, physical proximity depends not only on the formal rules (e.g., the number of anchor days, whether all employees have the same anchor days), but also on the extent to which the rules are enforced. We might expect, for example, a few differences from full-time office work in arrangements where employees work remotely only one day per week and actually come in the other four. Future research should explore whether the relationship between time spent together and the problems we observe varies in some clear direction.

Suggestions for Practice

Recommendations for improvement flow neatly from the challenges: If the current arrangements are not providing enough in-person contact for social relationships or relational capital to develop, then alternatives should try to make up that gap.

- Establishing attendance policies is a straightforward practice. Anchor days alone will not be sufficient if space constraints now prevent everyone from being in at the same time. Alternative scheduling could help address this—for instance, designating Tuesday for some divisions and Wednesday for others.
- Collective activities like meetings should be scheduled for office days.
- Mandatory days should be intentional and strategically coordinated. Teams and their supporting units should align their in-office schedules to enable meaningful collaboration. Small mixed-group meetings across teams during shared time, such as over lunch, can facilitate communication about interdependencies.
- Allowing employees to self-determine their office attendance can undermine collaborative activities that are integral to organizational functioning. However, targeted accommodations can balance their needs. For instance, permitting remote work when employees are contagious or mildly ill (well enough to work but not to be physically present) can reduce workplace transmission and decrease costs associated with sick leave accrual.
- Onboarding programs require substantial expansion. Organizations should consider cohort-based approaches where new hires progress through orientation together and help each other make sense of their organizations. Onboarding should extend beyond immediate teams to include cross-functional networking and help new hires understand the broader organizational structures.
- Tasks such as mentoring new hires and supporting colleagues should be explicitly incorporated into job descriptions and performance criteria to ensure they are not deprioritized in remote work.
- Organizations should sometimes require camera-on during video conferences. When meetings include both remote and in-office participants, those physically present should convene together rather than joining individually from separate locations to preserve some in-person interactions.
- Most organizations already have some arrangements outside of work where employees meet each other, such as volunteer work. These initiatives merit continued or expanded support, as they strengthen organizational culture, which otherwise erodes quickly due to a lack of interactions.
- Promotion decisions should be based on more than performance on individual KPIs.

While the recommendations outlined above require organizational change, they are relatively modest adjustments to existing practices. Their success, however, depends on leadership commitment. Without that, even well-designed interventions are unlikely to take root or produce meaningful results.

Statement of Participant Consent

The interviews were organized by the employer. Invitations were extended at random by the employer for each location where the interviews took place. Invitees were told that they were under no obligation to attend, that no records were kept of who attended, and that all comments would be anonymous. We repeated those details at the beginning of each interview. Company policies prohibited recording the interviews. We never learned the names of any of the attendees nor who made which comments, and we were never asked by the employer who made which comments, nor the site where specific comments were made. In the few cases where we noted the role played by a speaker, it was based only on what they stated in their comments.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe how your work-life boundary changed during Covid-19 and now with hybrid?
 - a. What has changed about your home life since working remotely?
 - b. What has improved, what has gotten harder?
 - c. What was your reaction to the company's "return to the office" policies?
2. If you think about the work-related conversations you had in the office and compare them to the ones you have online, what is different?
 - a. Is there anything noticeably better or worse about your virtual technologies?
3. What help do you need to be effective when working remotely, and do you have it?
 - a. Do you need different information when working remotely than when you were full-time in the office?
 - i. If you need information that you do not have, how do you get it when you are working remote?
 - b. How often does anyone ask you for advice or help when you are working remotely and are the questions different than when you are in the office?
 - c. If you have been working on a project, what is different about it now as compared to when we were in the office full time?
 - d. What if any new tasks have you been doing since working remote—how do you compare that to before working remotely?
 - e. Have you learned any new skills or process since working remotely? If so, how did you learn them?

4. How is your experience in the office different now with the hybrid model?
5. Have you developed any new work friendships through remote work?
 - a. Has your social network changed?
 - b. Is there more or less work-related gossip when remote? (“Gossip” is how culture is communicated.)
 - c. Have there been any successful efforts to build community—or unsuccessful ones—with the hybrid model?
6. What is different in your relationship with your supervisor now that you are remote?
 - a. Are your conversations about your work different—do you have more or less of them, are the topics different?
7. Career advancement and mobility—does anything seem different now about how to get ahead?
 - a. Have your expectations changed for career advancement?
 - b. How easy would it be to find a similar job elsewhere with similar arrangements?
8. Does the workplace seem more or less “fair” with hybrid?

Author Biographies

Peter Cappelli is the George W. Taylor Professor of Management and Director of the Center for Human Resources at the Wharton School and a Research Associate at the NBER. (cappelli@wharton.upenn.edu)

Y. Jasmine Wu is an Assistant Professor of Organizational Communication and Technology at the University of Texas at Austin and a Senior Research Fellow at Wharton People Analytics, University of Pennsylvania. (jasminewu@austin.utexas.edu; jasminwu@wharton.upenn.edu)

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33. Our sense from the interaction of the groups was that relatively few of the participants knew each other. This was illustrated by the fact that they would explain to each other where they worked and what they did in the back-and-forth discussions, and relatively few of them said hello to each other as the groups were setting up. An explanation as to why more of them did not know each other when coming from the same office begins with the fact that most of the offices were large with more than a thousand employees, but three years of employee turnover since the pandemic kicked off remote work, and, of course, remote operations per se eroded the connections that otherwise would have been there.
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ORCID iDs

Peter Cappelli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9627-4027>

Y. Jasmine Wu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6499-2374>