

Alexandra Shulman on working from home: it's not an adequate alternative

Yahoo's Marissa Mayer caused a stir this week when she banned staff from working at home. British Vogue editor Alexandra Shulman explains why she agrees with her

Alexandra Shulman

The Guardian, Saturday 2 March 2013



'I believe in the collective creativity of an office' ... Alexandra Shulman, editor of British Vogue, in her London office.

It doesn't seem right, does it? Marissa Mayer, a woman who has succeeded where so many women have not yet, in reaching the top of one of the world's most important technology companies, has let us down. This week, she ordered that the 11,500 Yahoo employees in the US should work in the office or leave the company. She wants them at their desks, round the water coolers, swiping their entry passes, day in, day out. Not for her, and no longer for them, the option of working from home.

The fact that Mayer – not just a woman, but a young woman with a small child – has nixed the rights of her employees to take advantage of the arguably more child-friendly and independent option of working outside the office has disappointed many. It may be a way to reduce the substantial staff numbers at Yahoo, but that is  not the issue. The issue is that nowadays we have come to believe that working at home is a completely

adequate alternative to showing our face in the office.

But it's not. Working from home is exactly that. Working in the office is something different. At Vogue, there have been many occasions when a member of the team has suggested to me that it would be incredibly helpful for them if I would consider them working from home for part of the week. We wouldn't notice the difference, they often say. The rest of their department are happy to make this work. They would be on their mobile and email all day (a notion that always makes me think of some strange person wired into electrical sockets from their bed). Honestly, they would get far more done.

Invariably my reaction is the same. Sorry, but no. This is not born out of some stubborn recalcitrance where I believe that you are only productive if you are seated at a desk in my sightline (far from it – I am always urging people to get out and about), but because I believe in the collective creativity of an office. Some of the best stories in any publication I have worked on have come out of a glancing remark somebody has made about their night before, or a piece of gossip, or a joke. The daily download of chatter within the office feeds into what we produce in an incalculable way. Having half the team sitting at home, fiddling around on a search engine from the kitchen or pasting up mood boards from the sofa does not replicate that.

Every now and again, of course, it is fine for somebody to work at home. If you are trying to write a 3,000-word piece, it's much easier to do it away from the meetings and coffee runs and other people's phone messages. I do it myself. I know what working at home means. It means you don't have to get dressed. It means you can totter into the kitchen to put the kettle on 10 times a day. It means you can take a break and check whether that really is a daffodil poking up in the garden. It means you can be there to let in the electrician, and if you add up the hours you would have taken to get to work and take a lunch break, you are entirely justified in picking up your kid from school. Sometimes when I work from home, I finish what I'm doing at 4pm. It's too late, I argue to myself, to head into the office. Why not use the time for a run, or make something nice for dinner?

It's pleasant and often very constructive, but it is not doing the same job as I do at work, and nor is it for anyone else. They might be able to edit a piece of copy at home, but I can't ask them to change a headline or query a fact without getting involved in a tedious ping-pong of emails. If they have the right system, they might be able to do a page layout, but all the relevant parties can't look at it together, putting in their tuppence-worth and coming to a conclusion then and there. I can't suddenly call a meeting to thrash out a problem, and I can't spontaneously have a chat about an idea. Yes, I could call them on that mobile, but it's funny how often you get the voicemail, and then, when they ring back, slightly fraught at having missed my call, I'm in a meeting (with somebody who is there). Anyway, I want to be able to see their reactions, and them to

see mine. It's a human thing.

Call me old-fashioned if you will, (inflexible or out of touch with developments in telecommunications are other options), but when I go to the office, I like my team to be around. It's when I don't even notice whether or not somebody is there – that's the time for them to start worrying.

Alexandra Shulman is the editor of British Vogue

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