

Will pre-pandemic office life ever make a comeback?

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As the COVID-19 pandemic wanes and remote work gradually turns into hybrid work, organizations will pay close attention to which workers and occupations function well in a hybrid-work arrangement, said Amit Kramer, a professor of labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who studies the relationship between work, family and health. Credit: School of Labor and Employment Relations

Amit Kramer is a professor of labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who studies the relationship between work, family and health. Kramer spoke with News Bureau business and law editor Phil Ciciora about the future of office work.

As the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs, remote work is gradually turning into hybrid work—three days in the office, two days remote, or vice versa—with no return in sight for the pre-pandemic five-days-in-the-office work week. Will hybrid work be the norm going forward?

Yes and no. Organizations are likely to pay close attention to this and see which workers are as productive—or even more productive—when they work in a hybrid environment and which ones aren't. In addition, organizations are also collecting and analyzing data on which occupations and tasks are better performed in a hybrid environment. For example, it's possible that some human resources functions can be performed in a hybrid environment just as well as at the office, while other HR functions such as talent development are better performed in an office environment.

Another thing to consider is the very low unemployment rate right now. This won't last forever, and it'll be interesting to see if organizations become more strict about a full return to office work when unemployment increases and organizations aren't as concerned about workers leaving.

Ultimately, I expect employees with power—professionals with high skills that are difficult to replace, the so called "top-talent"—will be able to choose their [work environment](#). Employees with lower skills who are easier to replace won't have that autonomy.

Just how much did the COVID-19 pandemic reshape

traditional white-collar office work?

I think it made both organizations and white-collar workers reconsider what they perceived to be the only way "work works." Organizations see that some white-collar office workers are just as productive or even more productive when working from home. This allows organizations to shape hybrid work arrangements as a perk to attract better employees. It also allows them to recruit from a wider pool—that is, not just candidates who are, say, a 40-minute drive from the work's physical location, but perhaps those who are a 100-minute drive.

It also allows employers to more seriously consider the savings that hybrid work offers: lower costs for offices, utilities and benefits; a lower carbon footprint; and the attraction of better talent and better retention rates, to name a few.

For white-collar office workers, some of the benefits are similar: the ability to consider more job openings at [remote locations](#) that one would not have considered before; and the ability to control time more efficiently, thereby allowing investment in other domains such as children, hobbies, elder care and community involvement.

Importantly, for those who aren't completely dependent on their work for financial reasons, it has changed perceptions about how "work works" and how one can find new ways to combine work and life outside work.

What are the potential downsides to hybrid work?

My biggest concern with hybrid work is that it will halt or even reverse the progress that's been made toward greater gender and racial equality.

I'm really concerned that we'll see a two-tier labor force across different dimensions. The first dimension is the high-skill, high-demand workers versus the low-skill, low-demand workers.

High-skill workers will have another great benefit beyond high income, interesting work and great benefits. They will be able to choose a hybrid work arrangement if they want.

Low-skill workers will be forced into work arrangements that the employer dictates. Some will have to work from home even if they don't want to, others will be in inflexible hybrid work arrangements and some will be forced to work full-time from the office.

The second dimension that concerns me is where disadvantaged groups and individuals are forced into a hybrid or work-from-home arrangement that represents a dead-end job. Most of these people, unfortunately, are women, single mothers and people of color.

With the lack of enthusiasm from so-called knowledge workers to come back to the office full-time, is there a deeper signal here about their dissatisfaction with pre-pandemic work norms and office life?

That's a good question and I'm not sure I have a good answer. Overall, there is evidence that creative work, face-to-face brainstorming and informal meetings in the hallway are essential for performance. So companies such as Apple or Goldman Sachs certainly have a good reason to bring employees back. These workers are highly compensated and have great benefits, but perhaps the pandemic made some of them understand that they are locked in a golden cage.

So yes, I would say that there is dissatisfaction with having your entire

life revolving 24/7 around work, even if you have great benefits and a high income.

How has the rapid shift from full-time office work to remote or hybrid work affected younger workers? Do you foresee them clamoring for a return to the pre-pandemic work experience?

I don't. I think many older workers will get back to the office and want to be at the office. Younger workers, who are already much more "connected" and "online" than older [workers](#), have a different generational perspective and much stronger resistance to [full-time office](#) work. Many of them are also at a stage in their lives where they are willing to give up higher compensation for more control over their time.

I'll be curious to see how this develops and whether we will see a big generational rift around this issue.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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