

THE EFFICIENCY ILLUSION: HOW COMFORT CAN BE CONSTRAINING

The return to office debate evokes a lot of 'all or nothing' thinking, with a divide between those who think it is good versus those who think it is bad. It also quickly turns into an individual versus organization debate: "The organization requires me to go in, but I am better off at home." Many people are resisting calls back to the office or are choosing home-based working, citing better work-life balance and greater efficiency as the rationale. Whilst these benefits certainly can be taken advantage of, they do not simply materialise by being at home. Time saved by not commuting can be squandered and there are tasks which are less efficient when attempted remotely.

The convenience of home-based working is coloring our judgment. By staying in, our range of interactions narrow and opportunities to step out of comfort zones decrease. We are limiting the opportunity for learning moments, social connection that fosters our mental health and spontaneous interactions that spark creative thought. The pandemic pushed people to their limits in dealing with uncertainty, but have we gone too far to create certain, comfortable worlds? If you have the ability to work in a hybrid way, take a moment to test your beliefs about your working practices and see if any of these efficiency illusions might be distorting your thinking.



ILLUSION ONE: INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY AT HOME APPLIES ACROSS ALL TASKS

Life has become complicated so simplifying where possible is attractive. But our human tendency to make blanket judgments and simplify life is not always helpful. Psychologists call this over-generalisation. Some work is more productive at home: working through a spreadsheet; reviewing revenue streams; writing a Board paper or a strategy plan. However, a significant proportion of work these days requires collaboration which is more effective in person. Collaboration is needed for teams who are striving to be future-focused or increase their innovative thinking. Some of this can be done virtually, but **ask yourself: what parts of my role are most productive at home and what parts of my role would be more productive when working in the presence of others?**



ILLUSION TWO: GAINING THE COMMUTE TIME BACK EQUATES TO GAINS IN WELL-BEING

Having dropped the commute, we feel we have been gifted extra hours in the day. Yet burnout is on the rise and mental health issues from social isolation prevail. Whilst some people might use this reclaimed time to enjoy the activities or company that energizes and replenishes them, there are plenty who end up working longer hours, sitting down for longer on a device and scrolling through more information than our brains can digest. Another component essential to our mental health is movement. There are more opportunities for physical movement – be it walking to and from public transport or car parks, moving to different meeting rooms or popping out to get lunch – on the days spent working outside the home.

Those predominantly working at home for flexibility reasons owe it to themselves to ensure the reclaimed commute time is repurposed into something that is good for you - physically, mentally, socially or

spiritually. For some it may be exercise or meditation, for others a coffee with a friend or time coaching your child's sports team. Coupled with being intentional about how your extra time is spent, consider if you can build it around your most productive periods in the day. **Ask yourself: am I using the extra time to do something that enhances my well-being – physically, mentally or spiritually?**



ILLUSION THREE: FEWER DISTRACTIONS AT HOME LEADS TO MORE CREATIVE THINKING

Most roles require different types of thinking for different tasks: focused analysis of a budget; critical evaluation of commercial choice points; creative thinking to develop a new solution. Creativity has many origins - boredom, spontaneity, positive emotions. Rarely is sitting alone in front of a laptop the source of it. The complexity of challenges facing organizations today require multiple perspectives and breakthrough thinking that comes from lively discussion. Remote working may have given us more space to think and should absolutely be used for some of our work tasks, but, more often than not diaries fill up with virtual meetings and that space for focused thinking is lost. **Ask yourself: am I making home-based working for focused-thinking tasks and the office for exploratory discussions and creative thinking?**



ILLUSION FOUR: FOCUSING ON IMMEDIATE GRATIFICATION OVER LESS TANGIBLE BENEFITS

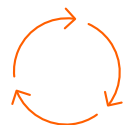
Studies show that we only make a change if we believe the change is going to be worth it. This is compounded by the fact that we give greater weight to known benefits over the unknown. Many of the gains from going into the office are spontaneous and the benefit may not be realised in the moment. A corridor conversation with a colleague may not have an immediate impact aside from a small social boost, but it could lead us to a better idea later that day or help us to have influence in the next team meeting. As leaders progress in their careers, influencing becomes more important and often happens indirectly through the quality of relationships and multiple interactions over time. **Ask yourself: what are some of the benefits of office working that I am missing out on by being at home?**

If any or all of these ways of thinking sound familiar, what can you do to make a change when you have convinced yourself a change is not what is needed?



DON'T BELIEVE YOUR HYPE!

We are all good at telling ourselves a story to maintain the status quo. Studies show us that even when we've knowingly done something wrong, we create a narrative that emphasizes a good reason for the decision. Even for those who seek out change and variety, we are all creatures of habit to some degree. Home-based working is comfortable. Everything around us in familiar and often predictable – even the neighbour's annoying barking dog. Challenge yourself to consider what you are missing out on by not going into the office. What are you choosing to minimise or discredit? Or the next time you go into the office, pause to notice the benefits at the end of the day and tell a friend or family member about those positives so they are easier to call to mind when you are next debating whether it's worth going into the office.



CREATE A NEW HABIT

The efficiencies of no longer organising childcare or not finding a parking space are an easy and often legitimate reason to not go into the office. All those choices and logistics create a burden when done in an ad hoc way. So much of our pre-pandemic working rhythms were habitual and therefore automated, taking a load off the brain. If you are able to work from the office some days, make it easier on yourself by establishing one or two days a week in which office working becomes your new rhythm. This way you can get the benefits of being around others with less decision-making and admin.



REFRAME THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Stakeholder engagement and relationship building are essential parts of working life. A network of strong relationships is particularly important for those in senior leadership roles who need to create the conditions for change through aligning focus and generating momentum across groups of people. Not only do they help us to enact our ideas or spark creative thoughts, but relationships are a primary source of well-being. Many teams experienced relationship breakdowns as a result of remote working. This was often due to less time (or solely task-based time) together which does not build trust in the way more informal, personal interactions do. Don't make the mistake of thinking a coffee with a colleague or meeting someone else in your industry is a 'nice to have.' Build relationship time into your working rhythm and ensure at least some of those engagements are in person as the quality of interaction is far greater.



USE FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Some organizations have discovered putting on meals or drinks is working to bring people back into the office. It is not the 'free food' that is attracting people (well – with inflation rates, it is to some degree), but the social connection that takes place over a meal. Social connection is so important for our well-being, but social conversations often spark other benefits. Create a new rhythm with your team or unit using food as a way to bring people together. Notice the conversations that people are having that wouldn't have occurred in a scheduled virtual connect like the sharing of ideas or debriefing around a challenging customer. Even if it is just bonding over the latest Netflix series and might not seem worthwhile, forming personal connections means people are more likely to reach out to each other subsequently for input or support on tasks.

IN SUMMARY:

When faced with other mega challenges such as the climate crisis, systemic inequities and political unrest, getting people back into the office may sound insignificant. But human motivations are complicated and habits are hard to break. For many, the amount of change and ambiguity during the pandemic pushed people to the limit. Home working gave us predictability that we all craved. It gives us a feeling of control when so much is out of our control. If you are a leader trying to navigate the hybrid work debate, or if you are personally resisting any form of office-based working, consider how comfort and convenience might be constraining you. Enrol a friend to help you review your choices and have a go at creating a new habit to get the best of both worlds when working from home and in the office.

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