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Office space

Collaboration, mentoring, and firm culture in various work environments



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By Miles B. Cooper

The lawyer, pseudo-cocktailing, asked the social circle a favorite post-pandemic question. "Folks at your firm – in office, remote, something in between?" The answers varied, and a pattern reflecting stereotypical demographic attitudes toward knowledge work emerged. Older lawyers trended in-person. They felt collaboration and mentoring simply didn't work without five senses interactions. Yet the most senior folks, the ones generating significant collaborative benefit, tended to admit they were not in the office as frequently as they expected others to be. Younger lawyers were more comfortable with dispersed work. So, how does one collaborate, mentor, and maintain firm culture when not everyone comes to the office regularly anymore? And are there knowledge worker benefits from womb room work environments?

All in

The firms that rotated back to all in-person, all the time, benefit from regular interaction. Maintaining firm culture, keeping the office doors open for collaboration, grabbing lunch, mentoring, these flow more easily with a traditional office. They cannot be put on autopilot, however. Team building requires conscious effort. At the same time, full-time in-person work requirements bring productivity and talent risks. Deep work is best done without interruption, for one. Additionally, with so many hybrid options available, top talent may decide that firms with more flexibility better meet their needs. Fewer commutes mean more time. Flexible hours are attractive, particularly for those with children or other obligations. Is an in-person mandate worth losing talented parents or caretakers?

A common concern: Unwatched workers aren't working (or aren't working as hard as they should be.) A little secret: Shirker employees shirk in the office too. There are plenty of places to hide in knowledge work, where widget production per hour cannot be measured. For more on this, dig into Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y human work motivation and management. Theory X managers trend toward heightened supervision, external rewards, and penalties. They tend to attract Theory X employees, who require heightened supervision, rewards, and penalties, i.e., heavy managerial input, to perform. Contrast Theory Y, which relies on job satisfaction and less direct supervision. Theory Y managers attract Theory Y workers. Theory Y teams trend happier and tend to outperform Theory X teams. And Theory Y teams don't require constant monitoring.

The question in-person firms should ask themselves? Is the in-office requirement truly a mentoring and collaborating tool or simply a Theory X environment for distrusted workers? One metric for this: Are senior members in the office five (or six, or seven) days a week, or do they espouse in-office work for the staff while rarely making it into the office themselves? If the latter, one should acknowledge one operates a Theory X environment. There's nothing wrong with that. Just know that the beatings there will continue until morale improves.

Remote control

Other firms gave up leases and in-office work entirely. They run dispersed workforces. The pros here are reduced cost, flexible work schedules, and more hours in the day without commute or aesthetic worries. Pajama bottoms all day! The cons are the slow evaporation of firm culture and the risk of work ethic slippage. The ethic shift can go either way – less work or working all the time. Neither shift is good for long-term knowledge worker success. Dispersed workforces can be successful at mentoring and collaboration. They can even maintain firm culture. But success requires very intentional efforts. What does that look like? Weekly short (15 minutes or less) all-hands video huddles to celebrate wins, share news, and communicate help. Regular one-on-ones with reports. Office hours for leaders. The willingness to spend on semi-annual in-person get-togethers to deepen working relationships. Developing these requires heightened efforts that can be challenging in busy litigation environments. They stretch the comfort zone for small-business consumer lawyers, most lacking any formal corporate, business, or management training. For this reason alone, many find in-person environments are easier to operate.

Hybrid

We now come to what some perceive as the Goldilocks solution. Some in office, some remote. There are innumerable ways to establish this. Many today require a certain number of days in the office, with the remaining days flexible. To the extent the former allows for fully remote participants, one needs to make sure the system remains fundamentally fair. Allowing some to be fully remote while forbidding others can seem arbitrary and could lead to disgruntlement (or worse). Without effort, remote folks can be overlooked. Regular conscious efforts to incorporate remote members increase their likelihood for success and remaining a part of the team.

Outro

Back to our lawyer at the cocktail party. "We want our people to be able to perform at their best. For some, that's in person. For others it's remote work. We've found that, with effort, we can continue to be a teaching law firm with a dispersed work force," the lawyer said. There are many ways to slay corporate dragons. The best one? Whatever works for you and your firm.

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