Work
The New Hybrid Workweek

KEY INSIGHT

When the COVID-19 pandemic displaced office workforces around the world, managers and employees had to rethink how, where, and when they could carry out the responsibilities of their job. Having now adapted to remote work and new digital tools, the question remains: Will things ever return to business as usual?

EXAMPLES

Work routines have shifted dramatically in the last year, creating new norms and accelerating change, with effects expected to endure long after the pandemic has subsided. Companies like Facebook, Twitter, Square, Shopify and Slack have already pledged to allow employees to work remotely even after lockdowns and social distancing restrictions are lifted, paving the way for hybrid virtual and in-person workforces at scale. Google is exploring a model wherein workers work three days a week in the office, and the other two remotely, either working from home (WFH) or working from anywhere (WFA). It is also important to note that these changes primarily affect white collar industries—most manual laborers, service industry workers and others do not have the luxury of working remote.

DISRUPTIVE IMPACT

Participating companies are likely to hold less commercial real estate, and revamp remaining floor plans to accommodate lower headcounts and hybrid meetings between in-person and remote workers. The hope is that allowing workers more flexibility will improve their quality of life and mental health, and thus their productivity, however most companies experimenting with these new models do not have data with which to conclusively support that conclusion, and the opposite could prove true. The changes could also blur lines between full-time, part-time, and contract employees, and potentially infringe upon workers' rights. Companies will also have to make important decisions about what remote work platforms and applications to use, as they will likely play a far greater role within the organization as the hybrid workweek becomes standard.

EMERGING PLAYERS

- The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
- The MIT Center for WorkLife and WellBeing
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration

Office centricity is over.

— Shopify CEO Tobi Lutke

With offices unlikely to ever return to their pre-pandemic capacity, floor plans will be reworked to accommodate hybrid in-person and remote meetings.
KEY INSIGHT
As employees became accustomed to working from their own living spaces over the past year, CISOs raised concerns that insecure and unmonitored home networks could expose the company’s proprietary data, trade secrets, video conversations and more to malicious hackers or industry rivals.

EXAMPLES
The sudden unexpected shift to remote workforces opened wide gaps in cybersecurity for companies around the globe. Soon after the pandemic sent workers home indefinitely, reports emerged that Zoom, which had quickly become the go-to video conferencing app for countless remote teams, had serious security flaws. From unauthorized users “Zoom-bombing” calls, to questionable encryption, to claims that the company was selling user data, the app was unreliable enough to raise red flags for cybersecurity experts, even leading one computer science professor to declare that “Zoom is malware.” Another issue is that housebound employees were much more likely to use personal devices not vetted by corporate cybersecurity officials to access work documents and correspondence, leaving these potentially sensitive assets vulnerable to theft. According to a study by Deloitte, hackers and scammers increased their efforts soon after COVID hit, specifically targeting remote workers.

DISRUPTIVE IMPACT
Companies that were left scrambling to adapt to pandemic-related workforce shifts may not have properly addressed new cybersecurity vulnerabilities. As remote work becomes more widely and regularly practiced, it’s time for CISOs to shore up security measures for off-site employees. Reinforcing cybersecurity best practices, requiring two-factor authentication, installing anti-malware software on all machines, increasing privacy settings on home WiFi networks, and even scanning video backdrops for any exploitable information are some straightforward ways to mitigate risk. Another option is to invest in cyber liability insurance. Any companies that handle highly sensitive or classified materials should consider sending technicians to secure the domestic working environments of all employees with security clearances. Failure to address these vulnerabilities greatly increases the odds of a potentially devastating breach.

EMERGING PLAYERS
- Chubb
- Norton 360
- Malwarebytes
- Wyse

Zoom is malware.
— Princeton computer science professor Arvind Narayanan

Two-factor authentication (TFA) should be standard practice for workforces accessing sensitive company information from home.
Interest and investment in remote work platforms has never been higher, and a crop of lesser known startups are rising to meet the growing demand. Some provide niche solutions, others offer versatile collaborative platforms, but all have the potential to help shape the future of remote work.

**Teamflow**
Founded by ex-Uber exec Florent Crivello, Teamflow is a remote work application designed to replicate the organic interaction and conversation of a traditional office environment in a virtual setting. Users see their video or profile pic in a bubble that appears on a virtual office floor plan. The user can then move through the digital space using their arrow keys, and approach colleagues’ bubbles to engage them in conversation. Users only hear the voices of coworkers whose bubbles are within close proximity, and spatial audio recreates the directional perspective of an in-person chat.

**Gather**
Bringing a retro cyber aesthetic to collaboration software, Gather emulates the routines of office life in order to bring structure to the remote work experience. Customizable avatars can be navigated through a 2D virtual office, designed in charming 8-bit graphics reminiscent of ’80s console games. Logging in and sitting at a digital desk marks one’s arrival and the symbolic start of the workday, and colleagues can gather their avatars in common areas or meeting rooms to conduct work and social interactions.

**With**
Opting for a more conceptual approach, With operates on more of an abstract digital canvas, rather than trying to represent the layout of a physical office space. Workers are represented by subtly animated avatars of animals distributed throughout the virtual space, and can drag documents and tools onto the shared desktop.

**Reslash**
Most work software is designed for clarity and efficiency, but not Reslash—founder Ashwin Gupta says the platform was founded on the premise that remote coworkers can connect during the workday as they “destroy and create beautiful chaos out of nowhere.” The result is a variety of meme-soaked, gif-spangled shared screens, where users are encouraged to make a mess in the name of unstructured creativity. It’s hard to imagine this format directly improving productivity, but it does appear to be a fun, cathartic way to interact with your colleagues.

**Sneek**
This startup has designed its interface to reflect one specific office habit—dropping by your coworkers’ desks to see if they’re free to chat. The Sneek app displays your workmates in a grid format, with still images from their webcam updated at regular intervals. Users can scan the grid to see if colleagues are at their desks and appear available, or if they’ve indicated they are busy and don’t want to be disturbed. To initiate a video call with a fellow worker, the user can simply click their image.

**Around**
Rather than try to faithfully recreate face-to-face conversations with a fullscreen video interface, Around shrinks participants’ videos and places them in the margin of the user’s screen, leaving the desktop visible and accessible so that the project at hand can remain the focus. Ultimately the hope is that this format will even the playing field for remote and in-office workers—even teams gathered in a single conference room at the office can log in individually on their devices, so that every participant is displayed in the same format. The app has even developed a feature so that users in close proximity to one another don’t experience audio feedback or echo on the call.
Managed Meetings

Near-future optimistic scenario
Mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing once proposed a thesis and a test: If someday, a computer could answer questions in a manner indistinguishable from humans, then it must be “thinking.” You’ve likely heard of the paper by another name: the Turing Test. It’s been a guiding force in the development of artificial intelligence ever since. Tests built on either deception (can a computer fool a human into believing it’s human?) or replication (can a computer act exactly as we would?) do not acknowledge A.I. for what it has always been: intelligence gained and expressed in ways that do not resemble our own human experience. Rather than judging an A.I. based on whether it can or cannot “think” exactly like we do, a new test judges the value of contributions made by the A.I. on its own during meetings. The Meaningful Contribution Test would be passed when an A.I. assistant can help manage a meeting, by pushing back on a small but growing consensus, tactfully argue for an alternative plan and recruit another member of the group to support that alternative.