The Four Culture-Driven Decisions that Will Make or Break Your Return to the Workplace

Rethinking Work, Office, and Culture in the New Reality

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Introduction

The last year wasn’t just a pandemic—it was a deep structural change for the world of work that gave employees more power and changed the way we collaborate, the way we supervise, and the way we will use our office space moving forward. That means you shouldn’t go back to the office without first making decisions about how your culture will adapt to these specific structural changes. If you skip these decisions and dive right into the logistics, you’ll end up losing ground, and possibly some of your best talent. Before we get back to the workplace, we have work to do in defining what work itself will look like moving forward.

Time is of the essence, because this summer is when most organizations are making these decisions. I wrote this white paper to help you think through these decisions carefully, because many of them are the kind you simply can’t un-make. Let’s do this right.

There are three sections to the paper. Section 1 provides an overview of how organizations are currently approaching the return-to-the-workplace conversation, and makes the case for a focus on the key culture decisions and structural changes.

Section 2 then presents what we see as the four specific culture decisions you’ll need to make before returning to the office.

1. Employee Focus & Customization
2. The Role of the Workplace
3. Defining Collaboration
4. Supervision and Accountability

Section 3 then digs into where we go from here. For each of the 4 culture decisions I lay out several key questions that you’ll need to answer as you make those decisions. These are the conversations you should be having with your senior team right now, not pricing out new cubicle walls and conference room video cameras. The organizations that adapt to structural change as it’s happening (rather than after) always end up in a better position moving forward.
Section 1:

What Is Your Approach to “Return to Work?”

I (and many, many others) have written a lot in the last year or so about how organizations had to adapt to the pandemic reality. In the spring of 2020, the first shock suddenly shifted so many organizations to a completely remote workforce. Decisions were made within a matter of weeks to enable complex organizations to run with very few or even no employees working from the office.
In the months that followed, we all tackled a slew of logistical challenges:

- How do we get everyone the technology they need to work from home (and via video)?
- How do we adjust for parents of children who are now, effectively, home schooling?
- How do we make decisions efficiently when you can’t just stop by someone’s office to get their opinion on something?
- How do we manage “zoom fatigue?”
- How do we share information effectively (without putting people in even more zoom calls)?

And, of course, we did all that in the context of broader societal adjustments like social distancing, mask mandates, and dramatic changes in how we shop, eat, and socialize. To be honest, I think we did an amazing job. The average organization doesn’t see agility as a strong suit (according to our culture assessment data), yet there we were, changing processes, implementing new systems, and experimenting with new ways of getting work done.

Now it’s a year later, and in the last few months there has been a surge in conversations about going “back to the office.” To be clear, many organizations re-opened their workplaces (with new rules and limitations) starting as early as the late summer of 2020, but they were early adopters of this trend. We’re now in either the early or late majority, at least in terms of starting to plan for the return to the workplace. Given that we’ve just entered summer, I’m predicting that we’ll start to see a slow, rolling wave of organizations implementing a return to the office over the next few months, with a large surge after Labor Day, once summer vacations are finished and the kids are (finally) back at school.

I’m noticing, however, that there is a wide range of approaches to the back-to-the-workplace conversation, based on an assessment of what kind of adjustments the organization needs to make to re-open the office in the “new normal.” I see three broad categories.
Category 1

Little to no adjustment.

The first category consists of organizations that don’t see a need to make any deep adjustments as they return to the workplace. The primary issue for them is safety. That’s why we closed the office in the first place—to stop the spread. But now that we have the vaccine and we’re getting guidance from officials on how to operate safely in an office environment, then back to the office we go! Managing safety may require some adjustments, and, we don’t know what the future will bring with new virus variants, but the ultimate goal for this group is to get the office as close as possible to the way it was BC (“Before COVID”).

Communication to employees on the return to the office tends to be framed in terms of compliance: here are the new rules of the game, and we expect you to comply. If you moved to the countryside during the pandemic and want to work remotely now, that could be a problem. A friend of mine told me of a colleague that informed their boss that under no circumstances would they be coming back into the office before Labor Day, and the boss apparently responded with something along the lines of, “then you don’t need to come back at all.” This category represents a fairly small percentage of organizations, but they’re out there.
The second category has recognized that remote work (which we still anachronistically call “telework” for some reason) is never going back to the way it was a year ago. These organizations still plan to reopen the office. They’re not going 100% remote and they see the value of having a central space where people can work together, but they also recognize that last year’s policies where a very small percentage of employees could apply to work from home one day a week need to be scrapped and rewritten. For decades we debated about whether it was feasible to have lots of people working remotely, and that debate is now soundly over. It worked out better than most of us thought it would.

In this category the focus, then, is on logistics. It’s unclear exactly what percentage of employees will be remote. My made-up rule of thumb is about one-third are desperate to get back to the office full time, one-third are looking for a hybrid with several days working remotely per week, and one-third wouldn’t come back to the office even if they lived next door.

These segments of preference create a lot of logistical challenges around technology set-ups at home, technology set-ups in the office that give the remote workers the same access and presence that the in-person people are getting, and organization-wide process changes to reinvent our long-standing office-first tradition. Communications to employees in this category, therefore, focuses heavily on logistics and asking for patience as these complex problems are solved. A large majority of organizations most likely fall into this category right now.
The third category is made up of organizations that have started to distinguish the forest from the trees, recognizing that returning to the workplace requires a much deeper adjustment to the significant structural changes we’ve experienced in the last year. It’s not only that more of us will work remotely—the very nature of how work gets done has been transformed.

The balance of power between employer and employee has shifted. The purpose of a work “place” has been redefined. The rules of the game when it comes to collaborating or supervising are being permanently rewritten. That’s what a structural change is—when the rules of the game change, and we will never go back to the way it was. That’s what we have experienced over the last year in the world of work.

Organizations that realize this also realize that going back to the workplace is first and foremost a cultural challenge. Before you can tackle the logistical challenges, you need to make key decisions about how your culture will adapt to the structural change. Since the structural change is permanent, your culture needs to take a stand about how it will operate in this new environment. The choices you make at the cultural level will then create natural pathways for solving the logistical challenges.

Organizations in this category follow a deliberate path to make those tough decisions, communicate them clearly to employees, and then do the work of making this new culture real and permanent by solving all those logistical challenges. In my experience, there are unfortunately relatively few organizations currently in this category.

And that needs to change.
Section 2: The 4 Culture Decisions

Structural changes are not common occurrences. The internet (more specifically, the social internet) was a structural change for the world of work 15 to 20 years ago. That was the subject of our first book, Humanize, back in 2011. We recognized that social media wasn’t just changing marketing and communications—it was changing management and leadership. We saw this as the beginning of a major transition, away from the traditional management that was invented in the early 20th century and toward the “future of work,” which was more decentralized, innovative, agile, and transparent (just like social media and, frankly, humans in general).
This change required a fundamental culture adjustment by most organizations. If you wanted to jump on the social media bandwagon, you were required to become more decentralized. Expecting management to approve every tweet simply wasn’t feasible. Many resisted, but the smart organizations made a clear and intentional choice around decentralization, trying to maintain their traditional culture while also doing social media. Guess who was more successful?

Today we find ourselves in a similar situation. Today’s structural changes may lack the national spotlight that was shone on social media, but they still require a cultural response. A year ago, we didn’t all just “go remote.” This grand experiment greatly accelerated some of the changes that started with the social media revolution, finally pushing some of these trends past the tipping point. We’ve permanently changed the world of work, and we’re now presented with four major cultural responses that we must craft if we want to manage this transition well. These revolve around how we focus on employees, the role of the physical workspace, how we collaborate, and how we supervise and manage accountability.
Culture Decision 1

Employee Focus

The context for this culture decision is a shift in the balance of power between employees and employers (in favor of employees). In a capitalist society, employers generally maintain the upper hand (they’re the ones that hire and fire), but there is still plenty of room for shifts in the relative power of employees. As the new work “place” is designed and managed, organizations must decide how to balance the needs of the organization (and management) with the needs of individual employees.

100 years ago, the focus was almost exclusively on management and the company. It wasn’t uncommon for employees to literally die at work, and we felt it was somehow okay to force children into hard labor. The primary context of work was the factory where employees were treated more like cogs in the machine. There was no room for customization of the work experience. You played the role that the machine demanded, and if you didn’t like it, then they’d find someone else to do your job.

Over time, we’ve shifted that balance to include a greater focus on employees. This included paying more attention to basic needs like survival, of course, and introducing benefits like paid vacation and sick leave. The advent of the internet, however, accelerated this trend. We wrote about this in our second book, When Millennials Take Over, in the chapter on “digital” discussing the surfacing of the digital mindset. The digital mindset requires a diligent focus on the “user,” which in the case of the workplace means the employees. That means offering them customization and continuous innovation. Our case study for that chapter actually re-writes every job description, for every employee, every year—based on the changing environment.
This year, that trend toward customization and focus on employee needs was accelerated even further. While some on the vanguard embraced a true digital mindset, most organizations argued that deep customization of the work experience was still too costly or complex. We don’t have the time or resources to enable everyone to work in customized ways, so we tell our people:

- No, you can’t work from home two days a week.
- No, you can’t work from Montana.
- No, you can’t adjust your schedule to care for a child who’s doing school at home.

And then this year, we suddenly said yes—to all of that. Our hand was forced, of course, and it was by no means easy, but we just demonstrated to all of our employees that customization based on the needs of employees is much more possible than we’ve been saying all these years. And that toothpaste is not going back in the tube. That’s the structural change.

Now that they know customization is possible, their tolerance of standardized solutions has shifted. And that presents organizations with a cultural choice, particularly if they want to attract and retain top talent. Are you willing to be more focused on customization and meeting the needs of employees moving forward?
Culture Decision 2

The Role of the Workplace

The word itself—workplace—is at the heart of this cultural decision, as if there is a single “place” where all “work” happens. That myth was completely busted in the last 12 months, and everyone is rethinking the purpose(s) of a central, physical space maintained by a single organization. Again, the roots of this issue go back to the industrial revolution. When the workplace was a factory, there was only one place where work happened (well, most of it anyway), and that was the factory floor. Even in the pre-industrial economy, work happened in specific locations (fields or shops), and that was it.

As we evolved to office work, we still maintained the notion that you leave “home” to come to “work,” where individual organizations would temporarily house people (Monday to Friday, 9 to 5) in a single location, providing them with the tools needed to collaborate and get work done. We had to create policies to carefully manage/enforce time spent in the workplace. If for any reason you couldn’t be at the workplace (sick, doctor’s appointment, vacation), you had to account for that; but otherwise, you were expected to show up to work and do all of your duties in that location.

Again, most of that makes perfect sense in an assembly-line context. But even pre-internet, if we were to break post-industrial “work” into its component parts, we’d see there are plenty of them that don’t require in-office presence. I’ve never witnessed a “typing pool,” but in theory, they could have left the office at 3pm and brought some of it home to type at the end of the day. And consider the time we all collectively spend in our offices doing focused work by ourselves—that kind of work doesn’t require a central office location.

Of course there are several components of work that DO require centralization and a single place, like collaborating in group meetings, sharing expensive office equipment or other resources, socializing and building relationships, and achieving that passive transfer of information and insight that happens when people work together in the same environment (and let’s not underestimate the importance of that one).
Section 2: The 4 Culture Decisions

To be honest, I don’t think we ever thought about any of that. We weren’t considering which parts of work required a central location and which did not. It was simply a given (for most organizations) that work required coming to the office. Again, even the advent of the internet didn’t transform that idea, as “telework” was fundamentally resisted and permitted only for a small percentage of employees.

When we went 100% remote last year, it prompted many of us to consider what parts of “work” require an office and which do not. A lot of us quickly started feeling the strain of not being able to do those office-based activities. For example, many organizations started organizing virtual happy hours or coffee chats to maintain the relationships, and they started using technology to share information more quickly to replace what we lost through that “passive” transfer. Video conferencing platforms quickly replaced the “meeting,” and we began to (finally) use that intranet more for collaboration and document sharing.

And that’s when the structural change became clear. Today, we have the technology to replace almost all of the work that used to require a central “place” of work. The element that pushed us over the edge was the way we embraced video calls. As much as zoom fatigue is a real thing, the ability to conduct nearly every “meeting” we used to have without needing to change out of our pajama pants is the real game changer here. A zoom meeting is definitely not the same as being face-to-face, but we’re also realizing how much of our work doesn’t actually require that.

For the record, I don’t think workplaces will completely disappear, and the internet doesn’t replace ALL of what can be accomplished in an office. There are limitations to what we can do virtually, and if we got smart about it, we’d analyze the subtle impacts of in-person interactions that drive effectiveness, and then design our work “places” around that. This is the cultural choice we face: are we willing to design our workplace with culture and success in mind? Will we be disciplined in determining what kinds of work SHOULD happen at the office?
Culture Choice 3

Defining Collaboration

On the surface, you might not think that shifting to 100% remote would transform the way we collaborate in organizations. If anything, you might point to the collaboration impediments we started experiencing.

We worked with one management team that was struggling with the speed of their decision-making once the pandemic hit. They couldn’t figure out why key decisions were taking so long, but then they realized that their culture included a strong emphasis on bringing in lots of voices when making key decisions. In the “Before Times,” they’d simply stop by people’s offices and ask them to pop into a quick meeting about a key decision. With everyone remote, however, that meant asking people to hop onto a quick video call, which was much harder to coordinate (since that person was already on a video call and didn’t see the email). This organization ended up accepting that certain decisions (where speed was a key issue) would involve fewer voices.

That kind of shift, however, is not at the heart of this culture decision. We’ll need to figure out how to best manage participation in the virtual environment, but that isn’t particularly a game changer. The bigger shift related to collaboration is one I don’t think most people have noticed: the way we manage boundaries has been transformed.

As humans, we’re hard-wired to collaborate. But the game changes as soon as you introduce boundaries. Collaborating with “us” is always easier than collaborating with “them,” whether that means people outside of your immediate family, your work team, your department, your organization, your community, or your nation.

In our culture assessment, there are two questions that are typically at opposite ends of the spectrum for an organization. The general willingness to help people out is usually quite present in the culture (the human side of collaboration), but the siloed question—do we eliminate boundaries, do we prevent territorialism—is often not supported by the culture (the structural side of collaboration). We’re not good at eliminating boundaries.
I don’t think boundaries should be completely eliminated, but I do think we should be adept at managing them when necessary. Historically, organizations have used physical barriers that actually prevent our ability to manage boundaries. It started with the office. Pre-internet, collaboration between two organizations could only happen if one organization were to physically allow the other inside the four walls of their office for a meeting. And within the office, we tended to keep different departments grouped together. This is helpful for collaboration within the department, but can present a barrier for cross-functional collaboration.

I remember an association colleague told me of a place he worked that was large enough to operate on several floors of an office building. Departments were housed together on the same floor, logically, but the building security system was wired so your keycard would only let you into YOUR floor. I imagined someone wanting to collaborate with their colleagues in the marketing department down on the 4th floor and having to stand at the door, peering in wistfully, waiting for someone to let them in. The limitations of our physical space have always had an impact on boundaries, and therefore collaboration.

Last year, however, we witnessed the introduction of a new (and permanent) layer in the way we collaborate: the virtual layer. This has actually been the source of much complaining—zoom fatigue—and in doing so, we’ve overlooked the structural change. We can now add anyone, anywhere in the world, INSTANTLY to our collaboration efforts. That doesn’t mean we will, of course, but we can, and that changes the game when it comes to how groups collaborate inside and outside of our organization. It eliminates boundaries. And it’s not that collaboration ONLY happens via video conferencing, but that layer is always available to us, which means we need to think more intentionally about how we collaborate, and with whom, knowing the boundaries are not as strong as we thought they were.

With an email and the click of an “admit” button, I can suddenly have someone from another organization participating in my internal strategic conversation. I can do the same with people from other departments, or people from other levels in the hierarchy. In the Before Times, a meeting with the most senior level in a big corporation required an elevator ride to the 18th floor, and successful negotiations with one or more gate-keepers. Those senior leaders can still maintain that exclusivity in the virtual environment, but they can also decide to change that instantly. We have control over boundaries like never before.

And that presents our organizations with a cultural choice: how open will we make our collaboration? Now that we have the choice, where will we remove boundaries and where will we maintain them?
Culture Decision 4

Supervision and Accountability

For supervision and accountability, we’re currently having an Inigo Montoya moment (“I do not think those words mean what you think they mean”), and we now have an opportunity to build more effective systems for both. Once again, you can trace the evolution of this cultural decision back to our industrial heritage. The roots of the word “supervision” are “over” and “see.” It goes back to when workers were not to be trusted and required some sort of superior to literally watch over them on the factory floor and make sure the job was done correctly.

> Supervision is a system designed to ensure quality and learning, and accountability is a system designed to ensure results.

But even today, where so many of us do office work using the internet (that’s no factory floor), many organizations haven’t strayed too far from that concept in their approach to supervision and accountability. One of the main reasons that we rejected remote work before the pandemic was related to “trust.” In other words, can we trust people to be working if they are not in the office? Ultimately this is a ludicrous question. If you can’t trust your employees, then why did you hire them? We just can’t seem to shake that unspoken assumption or underlying mental model held by managers that comes from the industrial age: if I can’t see you, then you’re not working.

> Accountability is an equally abused and misunderstood word, and truth be told, in most workplaces it’s just an extension of our idea of traditional supervision. That is, when you screw up or don’t do your work, your supervisor will hold you “accountable.” So supervision is about spying on people we don’t trust, and accountability is about punishing screwups. Of course, it doesn’t have to be that way.

I have very different definitions of supervision and accountability, and I think they’re most effectively understood as systems, rather than actions taken by individuals with power or status. Supervision is a system designed to ensure quality and learning, and accountability is a system designed to ensure results. We’ve been so myopically focused on what individuals do when they supervise and hold others accountable that we’ve stopped paying attention to the systems we have in place (or could have
in place) to ensure those outcomes. When managers supervise, they should be implementing a system that ensures employees are learning what they need to learn and that quality is maintained. Similarly, you should have an accountability system in place that helps people deliver the results that are needed.

Can you guess when I came up with those two systems-based definitions? The pandemic, of course. In March 2020, we all became 100% invisible to each other, yet (interestingly) we continued to get all our work done (and then some). Quality was maintained, learning took place, and results were delivered, and no one had to look over someone’s shoulder for that to happen. It turns out we have fledgling systems for both supervision and accountability that aren’t rooted in the behaviors we thought they were. The structural change related to supervision and accountability was the final busting of the myth that we need to see each other in person to maintain a shared commitment to results, quality, and learning.

We need to stop worrying about how people will supervise without being in the same location, because that ship has sailed. The culture decision we’re faced with now is, are we willing to rewrite the rules of supervision and accountability? Can we build robust systems for both that don’t rely on the bottlenecks of traditional hierarchy?
Section 3: Making the Culture Decisions

So where do we go from here? Once you see these structural changes, you can’t “unsee” them. And you’ll quickly realize that you didn’t design your current culture with these changes in mind. So that means you need to make some key decisions, BEFORE you map out your logistical plans for returning to the workplace. Here are the four key questions you and your team will need to work through.
Key Question for Culture Decision 1

How employee-centric will you be moving forward?

The answer to that question isn’t really along an objective continuum or compared to other organizations. It’s really self-referenced: are you going to become more employee-centric than you used to be? Remember, in the last year, you WERE more employee-centric than you used to be, so how much of that will become permanent, or would you consider expanding in that direction and extending customization into other areas of employee experience and work?

Honestly, I didn’t have “becoming more employee centric” on my 2020 bingo card. We’ve been gathering data around this issue in our culture assessment for years, and it routinely shows up as one of the least present aspects of culture (yet has always had one of the strongest correlations with employee engagement). It just hasn’t been a priority. But the structural change could change all that, so now you have to decide if it’s a priority or not.

If you do, there will be some costs. Customization can be expensive and time-consuming. And a deep focus on employee needs requires something we haven’t traditionally asked of top management: empathy. Rolling the clock back on customization, however, could generate a big blow to employee engagement and make it much harder to attract top talent. There are a number of key areas that your management team will have to think about in making this decision.

Flexible Work Schedule

Exactly what would a truly flexible work schedule look like for your organization? We’ve experimented around the edges on this one over the last few decades, offering things like “flex time” (which lets you come in an hour early and leave an hour early), or a compressed summer schedule where you add an extra hour so you can take every other Friday off. That’s not what we’re talking about any more. We’re talking about employees setting their own schedule and working when they want. Are you willing to give up that control?
The upsides are significant, as noted in this Hubspot article written back in 2018:

- Your people will work more hours.
- They will take better care of themselves and their families.
- They will work when they are more productive.
- They will more easily ignite their passions.
- You will support more autonomy (see Dan Pink’s book, Drive).

Will scheduling team meetings be harder? Yes, though not much harder than it has been during the pandemic. It’s the same with finding time for team building or harnessing the energy of in-person interactions—but these challenges are now a permanent part of the landscape.

HR people are going to get mad at me here, but ultimately, I think we’re headed toward the end of the industrial-age concept that work is measured in hours (I know, I know…labor laws would disagree). I don’t know how to deal with the labor laws, but I do think now is the time to start preparing for the future where hours aren’t a unit of work.

**Supporting Working Parents (Mothers, in Particular)**

The U.S. is known throughout the world for not supporting working parents. Whereas other countries give new mothers several months to a year of PTO, in the U.S. you’re lucky to get a few weeks. And many workplaces still give fathers zero PTO or don’t account for adoptions and other circumstances. But this issue is not only about the specific policies around maternity and paternity leave. It’s about parenting.

Working parents have a very different life than non-parents. The historical trend has been to down-play that difference, under the argument that it is not fair to treat people differently in the workplace. If parents can have time off to pick up their children from daycare, then non-parents should get extra time off to do something they care about as well. This desire to treat everyone exactly the same is derived (once again) from an industrial mindset, and is yet again rooted in an hourly view of work that is fundamentally ineffective. But most of all, it doesn’t look at employees as humans. Humans should not all be treated the same, because they have different needs depending on their circumstances, life-stage, and many other factors. Some of your humans are parents—how will you adapt to support them?
And within this category, we need to take a closer look at mothers in particular. If it feels off to you to single out one gender over the other, then first take a look at some numbers.

During the pandemic, working mothers weren’t able to come back to the workforce at the same rate as any other category of employee, according to a recent paper by three economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. This is a complex issue, and I don’t pretend to have a complete answer, but I’d put my money (and attention) into how organizations are designed to support (or not support) working mothers. This is way too large a segment of your workforce to ignore.
A Work-From-Anywhere Culture

When you think about being employee-centric, you have to consider where work gets done. Obviously, during the pandemic, we quickly adjusted to having very few or even zero employees in the office. We had to scramble, in some cases, to get people laptops or adjust for home bandwidth. Now we’re planning the return to the office, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you need to abandon a “work from anywhere” mentality. This is a key choice. Is the office simply one of the locations where people can work, but you’ll support them in working from anywhere? Or are you declaring it the primary place where people will work, and anything outside of that is considered extra and will be supported at the organization’s discretion?

Your decision will have obvious implications for technology. At perhaps the most basic level, if you want a work-from-anywhere culture, then don’t go out and buy people fancy desktop computers—get everyone a laptop! But ultimately, your tech decisions are driven by both this primary culture decision but also many process details, like the degree of creativity in your process and how you deliver your results (is that digital or analog?). I asked Rick Bawcum, CEO of Cimatri, a strategic IT consulting firm, about how to manage the technology decisions in a work-from-anywhere culture, and interestingly, his response was primarily about culture:

“You have to ask yourself, are your leaders command and control or are they servant leaders? As with all structural changes, the impossible suddenly becomes possible. It’s up to us to decide whether the change is durable and desirable. That is what culture is about.”

There are many other factors to consider, like legal and tax implications. This is all part of the giant logistical hairball we’re facing. But you need to make that bigger decision first. Are you committing to customization? Are you committing to being employee-centric? Make your decision, then set about detangling the logistics.
Section 3: Making the Culture Decisions

Key Question for Culture Decision 2

What is the cultural value of your work place?

Since you already have an office, planning on how to return to it tends to place the office itself at the center of the universe of that discussion. In fact, your culture should be the center of the universe, and the office is simply a tangible aspect of work that clarifies and reinforces what is valued in your organization. What is the real purpose of that space? What kinds of work or activities do you think SHOULD happen there, as opposed to in a virtual or hybrid environment? We have an incredible opportunity to be intentional about the true value of “the office,” and we shouldn’t waste it.

The costs of this decision can feel daunting, particularly if you just signed a 10-year lease. And even if you own your own building, there’s nothing inexpensive about reconfiguring an office. But I think in this case, the opportunity costs of flatly returning to the status quo could be equally expensive. Because the office has been the center of the universe, I don’t think we even considered that the way we were using it was causing tremendous amounts of friction. Solving that could be huge. There are a number of key areas that your management team will have to think about in making this decision.
What Space is Needed for Deep Work?

In the Before Times, I remember wanting to do some work from home because the office was so distracting. People were continuously interrupting to have meetings, and while I enjoyed the social interactions throughout the day, it also prevented me from getting in a real flow. But at home, once my kids went to school, it was just me and my computer, and I would have the time and space to do the deep concentration that certain aspects of my work required (like writing this white paper, for instance).

During the pandemic, however, a lot of employees saw those tables turned. In my rule of thumb about one-third of employees wanting to come back to the office full time, I’m assuming most of those are coming from households that had two parents working from home and multiple children completing school from home. It suddenly became nearly impossible to do the deep work in that environment.

Depending on the answers you come up with for Culture Decision 1 (customization), it’s possible that moving forward, home may not be that quiet place it used to be. So how will you design your new office space to satisfy that need for your employees? Sending everyone back to their noisy cubes cannot be your only answer. And the common practice of having offices only for certain levels of the hierarchy may not make as much sense. You might need to analyze the need for deep work by position, and design your space accordingly.

What Space is Needed for Group Work?

Perhaps the most obvious role of the workplace as we emerge from the pandemic is to support in-person group work. We have sorely missed this part of work over the past year. Zoom has been a life-saver, but it cannot fully replace in-person collaboration. As humans, there are elements of three-dimensional interaction that lead to better results when we are collaborating, period. We need that energy. We need the subtle clues we glean in the conversation from real-time body language in a group setting—being able to see what’s written on a white board, and then turn to a colleague to discuss it. We can simulate that to an extent online, but not fully.

Pre-pandemic, our answer to this was the “conference room,” and I think we might need to up our game here. In *When Millennials Take Over*, we wrote a case study on the American Society for Surgery of the Hand in Chicago as an example of what it meant to be “digital.” What originally attracted us to them was how they completely redesigned the office space with the needs of employees in mind, rather than following tradition.
They created multiple spaces for collaboration. Members of specific teams didn’t have their own offices. Rather, their desks were connected together in pods, so routine collaboration could happen instantly. Of course, there were also several enclosed conference rooms to support those kinds of meetings, but also a “coffee area” for more spontaneous collaborative conversations (it turns out, that space ended up being used more for deep, solo work). They even had a separate room called the innovation ranch with eclectic, non-office furniture (including a tree-house) to spur creative thinking. You don’t have to be just like ASSH, but since we’re all reinventing our space right now, it’s a good time to think outside the cube.

Who Else Should be in Your Space?

One use of your workspace that you might not have considered is allowing people outside of your organization to use it. I’m not talking about sub-letting space here. This is about intentionally inviting people who are not your employees (but have some obvious connection to your organization) to use your space in a way that will benefit both you and them.

Take your customers, for instance. How could they actually use your space? What if there was an opportunity for them to collaborate—not with you, but with each other? Many associations, for example, will have space in their office for facilitating meetings of volunteer groups like Boards or Committees. That’s great, but that’s your customer collaborating with YOU. **What if you held a space where your members could convene for their own purposes? What if your space became a hub for learning in your particular community?** It’s only tradition that says we shouldn’t use our space for that, so think creatively here.

Too often we don’t think of our office space as a part of our culture, but it is quite central. As we return to the workplace post-pandemic, we have an incredibly rare opportunity to be more strategic in our choices about how we design and use our space. So take the time to get clear on what the true cultural value of your workspace is, and then make the crucial design decisions based on that clarity.
Key Question for Culture Decision 3

How open will we make our collaboration?

You can’t go back to the office without clarifying how and why the rules of collaboration have changed. I assume you can see, at this point, that these culture decisions are all inter-related. The collaboration game is not separate from the value of the workplace questions, so you won’t be tackling these in a linear fashion, and that’s okay.

Your main challenge will be in embracing the complexity, clarifying where the virtual layer fits in, and redefining the boundaries. You probably already have a culture where people like to help each other out—that’s not the issue. It’s how you’ll expect different groups to work together, and how you’ll adjust your space, roles, and processes to support that. There are a number of key areas that your management team will have to consider. How much will you “work out loud?”

Part of opening up collaboration is more about transparency than collaboration. We create boundaries that inhibit collaboration by simply limiting who can see or hear what we’re doing and what we’re thinking about. When more of that is visible, then new opportunities for collaboration can emerge. This has implications for work space, technology, and process.

For example, another of our case studies in *When Millennials Take Over* is a software company named Menlo Innovations that has all of their employees working together in one room. As chaotic as that sounds, I was there for two days doing research, and it’s quite calm—quiet even. But when people need to reach outside their team to get a question answered, it is handled immediately.

On the process side, Menlo also uses what many organizations are turning to these days: the daily stand-up meeting. In Menlo’s case, they simply go around the circle and each person simply states what they’re working on that day. It sounds boring,
and it can certainly get repetitive, but when that 10 minutes is over, employees spontaneously break into small groups to share relevant information or ask questions about what they’re working on that day.

**Where will you expand your collaboration circles?**

Now that you have the digital layer of collaboration available, you will need to be intentional about how much you want to open up your collaboration circles. Historically, the qualifications for being in the “room where it happens” were generally clear to everyone, and it was based mostly on function and level in the hierarchy (and, frankly, the size of the room). Today we need to think clearly about what kinds of input or participation will noticeably improve the results of our collaboration and then find ways to include those people.

A lot of our clients are putting effort right now into clarifying decision-making roles and making them explicit using the RACI framework, which stands for Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed.

**RACI Model**

Increase speed and quality of solutions by assigning only four simple decision-making roles: Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed.
Section 3: Making the Culture Decisions

Those are decision-making roles, and the work of identifying who falls in what category (in particular, the Consulted versus Informed roles) can streamline the decision making process. With the virtual layer of collaboration, however, perhaps there is more room for adding people into both the Consulted and Informed roles to expand participation and improve the quality and impact of the decisions.

How will you change your collaboration processes?

Opening up your collaboration circles will have some implications for how you are doing your collaboration to begin with. Part of this is something I’ve been advising organizations to get intentional about for years: the design of “the meeting.” Most of the time, collaboration is accomplished by people gathering to have a meeting. While those collaborative conversations are important, there are an infinite number of ways to run a meeting, yet we tend to default to forms that are undisciplined, inconsistent, and, frankly, ineffective.

How do you plan on managing open-ended conversations that are a combination of in-person and virtual. (Hint: this must go beyond the Before Times version where some people connected by conference call, and roughly every 40 minutes or so someone would ask people on the phone if they had anything to contribute.)

Maybe you’ll need more breakout rooms to accommodate more decision-makers. Maybe you’ll want iterative but shorter meetings, since we all have learned that a three-hour zoom meeting is pretty much unbearable. Maybe you have to flip the model, where presentations are recorded online and viewed ahead of time so the deeper analysis can happen in the collaborative venue.

Changing processes is how you change your culture, so it’s critical to be intentional about how you will change your collaboration processes.
Key Question for Culture Decision 4

What new systems will you create to manage supervision and accountability?

Supervision and accountability are the links that connect culture with execution. The traditional “management by walking around” is really not available to us anymore, so you need to get culturally intentional about what supervision and accountability really mean, and how you do them. The “what they mean” part is ultimately about how you define the true value of your hierarchy, and the “how” part is about creating systems that don’t require “helicoptering.”

Moving to new systems will throw people for a loop, because our deep-rooted ideas about what constitutes supervision, in particular, haven’t been questioned for a long time. And people tend to have their identity wrapped into the hierarchy, so that can be hard to change as well. But the upside could be huge if you can get people aligned on what priorities everyone is focused on and how you can measure progress and adapt when needed. There are a number of key areas that your management team will have to think about in making this decision.

Management layers

Including different people has become much easier than it was before, and that’ll require you to be more clear and intentional about why you have as many layers as you do and the purpose of each layer. I’ve already seen some organizations experiencing an increase in the number of people who want to be included in meetings and met with a knee-jerk “but that’s not for people at your level” reaction. Okay, but can you explain precisely why someone from that level participating in the meeting would cause a decline in quality or learning (which is the purpose of supervision)?

There’s nothing wrong with layers, and I’m not saying everyone should be invited to every meeting. I’m saying that part of our job right now is to rewrite the rules of supervision and accountability, so the decisions we make regarding management
Yet another case study from *When Millennials Take Over* is a healthcare company that maintains a traditional hierarchy, yet they have woven some decision-making standards into the hierarchy that enable people to cut through layers easily. In their case, the standard is based on in-depth knowledge of the individual patient’s hopes, dreams, and aspirations. The staff (regardless of layer) who know the most about that get to speak first, even if the CEO is in the meeting. You won’t need the same rubric, but now’s the time to think about new ways of doing things.

**Success metrics**

For a new approach to accountability, you will want to take a hard look at the success metrics in your organization. At PROPEL, we are fans of Verne Harnish’s “Scaling Up” methodology (we’ve integrated it into our coaching program). It offers a disciplined approach to developing success metrics that stretch throughout every layer of the organization. You probably have high-level success metrics for the organization as a whole, but *every individual should measure their own success on a frequent basis.*

Accountability is not about punishing people for under performing. **Accountability is about ensuring results, and by developing everyone’s ability to identify the right success metrics—for them—you’ll be building that capacity.**

Instead of writing up a detailed job description for the people on my content team (to which I would hold them accountable), what if I sharpened the outcomes the marketing department was shooting for, specifically in ways that connect to organizational sales and growth goals. Then I turn it over to my team to start connecting the dots and let them develop some metrics that they think would be leading indicators for hitting those bigger targets. They may be off at first, but the sooner you experiment, the faster the metrics will be on target.

The point is, you can’t declare your old systems of managing accountability dead without replacing them with something tangible and specific.
Section 3: Making the Culture Decisions

Tracking and Sharing Performance

Beyond creating metrics, **new systems of supervision and accountability need those metrics to be visible.** This touches on issues of transparency and collaboration, but if your goal is to improve results and quality, then people need to be okay with their numbers being visible, perhaps to everyone. This is part of a transition we’re in where accountability will be accomplished out in the open, rather than behind the closed door of your supervisor’s office.

There is a cultural imperative implied in this approach that’s focused on learning rather than blaming. Not hitting your numbers doesn’t need to be celebrated, but it can’t be met exclusively with anger and disappointment either. If we didn’t hit the numbers, then why? What assumptions did we make that turned out to be wrong? Where did execution fall through (so we can solve for that ahead of time in the next quarter)?

We use **Align software** both internally and with some of our clients as a platform for tracking and sharing metrics. It allows organizations to experiment and learn about which metrics to track on a quarterly basis.
Getting Started

Given the deep, structural changes we’ve experienced since early 2020, it’s critical that we not fall victim to a lazy narrative about what we’re facing now as we prepare to go “back” to the office.

We’re not going “back” people. We’re not “returning” to the workplace. **Even if everyone is vaccinated and every single employee goes back to their same desk or cube, the workplace you have in the summer of 2021 will simply not be like it was in 2019.** Failing to acknowledge that core fact can completely derail your efforts to re-open the office.

So don’t treat this like a logistics puzzle. Take some time internally to work through the four key culture decisions, and then set your team in motion to tackle the implications and logistical challenges around space, technology, and internal processes and systems—all guided by those culture decisions. We can help you frame and facilitate those important conversations, and we can bring in insights from experts in strategic IT and commercial space planning who understand the bigger changes that are going on.

Instead of going “back to work,” let’s launch the “work moving forward” initiative to establish the parameters for what it means to work in the new organization.

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**Let’s Talk**

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