

Restoring Workplace Relationships as Companies Return to the Office



When offices shut down in early 2020 and remote work increased exponentially across the nation, it was like one big social experiment. How would companies and their leaders adapt and cope? But the pandemic dragged on longer than anyone could have guessed, and a new normal emerged. So now, as vaccines continue to roll out and doors reopen, the bigger challenge is suddenly about bringing people back. In particular, what will it look like to restore workplace relationships as companies return to the office?

Why In-Person Work Relationships Matter (and How They've Changed with the Pandemic)

Watercooler conversations. Long social lunches. Hallway chit-chat. These moments of socializing were lost when the business world went remote in 2020. And we appeared to gain productivity as a result. Without these distractions, professionals of every caliber became more focused on their work. But was it a net positive?

Studies suggest that more was lost than we realized. Think back to those breakroom and hallway chats; what seemed like mere happenstance interactions with colleagues actually served to build valuable relationships—and often became opportunities to exchange critical information and ideas that may have otherwise been missed. A [recent Harvard Business Review publication](#) identified these interactions as “social capital.” Social capital is the benefit—the extra help, knowledge, and guidance—that arises directly from these types of relationships.

Importantly, social capital is a key driver of both innovation and employee morale. [Gallup research reveals](#) that close work friendships directly increase fulfillment, productivity, and company-loyalty. And so, when physical work environments that organically nurtured social capital were lost in the wake of the pandemic, an essential element of many workplace cultures disappeared.

Ironically, the remote work environment of 2020 spawned more meetings than ever before. And yet, [employees reported](#) feeling more isolated and less connected. Zoom fatigue isn't a myth. The lack of body language and the constant presence of our own reflection are reasons that video chats and conferences will never fully replace face-to-face interactions.

Deprived of physical workplace connections, it was clear that many companies became more siloed. With workplace friendships reduced to minimal communication about tasks and objectives, many teams have become unexpectedly less productive and innovative than they might have been otherwise. Unsurprisingly, the length of the pandemic, which no one could have predicted or even guessed at, has exacerbated these changes.

Rebuilding Workplace Relationships Post-Pandemic

As virus transmission continues to trend downward and vaccinations become more widespread, many businesses are cementing their plans to return to the office. But have workplace relationships survived the distance?

A [conversation between Microsoft's WorkLab and Yale School of Management professor](#) Marissa King reveals an

optimistic answer to this question: relationships are incredibly resilient. Absence doesn't automatically dissolve trust that was previously established. Thus, rebuilding workplace relationships in the post-pandemic office isn't an exercise that must start from scratch; there's a foundation already there to build upon. That said, these experts agree that work relationships can be fragile; they're founded on a delicate balance between the competing demands of work and community. So, what's the solution?

First, employees must understand [the benefits of in-person interaction at work](#) as leaders seek to bring them back to the office. Many professionals have seen the positives of working from home and have grown used to it; they may need some convincing to come back at all. Communication and motivation are key. That includes clear messaging about your purpose and vision in order to spark excitement and positivity about the return. It also requires clear expectations, engagement, and, most importantly, empathy. Even the most reluctant of employees can quickly re-engage in positive workplace interaction—but only if they are adequately prepared first.

Second, company leaders must recognize that each employee is unique in their needs and preferences towards work connections. As such, there's little value to trying to nurture social interaction for its own sake. [King suggests](#) hosting purposeful conversations or events where people can discuss a range of topics, even (or perhaps especially) unrelated to work. These are opportunities to connect and get creative without forcing an expectation of friendship or personal connection.

Finally, [employee resource groups, or ERGs](#), can be a valuable tool in creating a deeper sense of community and establishing diverse and supportive workplace relationships. Essentially, ERGs are affinity groups, where individuals share a common goal or identity, including race, gender, orientation, and more. Given the last year of social unrest against the backdrop of COVID-19, affinity groups create a safe place for individuals to address questions and concerns while also providing a sense of belonging in the overall company culture.

These are just a small handful of suggestions for leaders to harness the benefits of workplace relationships as they begin to reopen offices and bring people back to work. How has your business experienced this shift in workplace dynamics?