

# Even Slack's CEO is still trying to figure out hybrid work

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Photo: Joy Asico

The pandemic turned messaging tool Slack into a pillar of office communication inside many companies coping with a sudden shift to remote work two years ago. But Slack CEO Stewart Butterfield finds the emerging post-COVID world of hybrid work as tricky to master as anyone else.

**Why it matters:** Butterfield, who spoke Tuesday at the Axios What's Next Summit, says each company and each employee makes different calculations about what kind of work environment they want now.

- "A lot of people who are fresh out of college have a much higher desire to get back to the office — it's the basis of their social life," Butterfield said. "And then there's people like me, who have an 11 1/2-month-old. There's no 'time to get the last train to get home before he goes to sleep' or anything like that — in fact, between calls I can go downstairs and play with him."
- But a general yearning for flexibility gives "the distributed model a little bit of an upper hand," he adds.

**The shift to remote work** certainly transformed Slack.

- "Two-thirds of our employees have been hired post-pandemic," Butterfield says. "We did an \$800M convertible bond offering and then this whole acquisition [by Salesforce] happened with no meeting in person at all. But now it just seems normal."

**As companies partially reopen** their workplaces, Butterfield foresees a need for new, more flexible kinds of office designs.

- In the hybrid-work-era office, the least valuable use of space is providing employees with spots to work alone on their laptops, he says.
- But places to bring recruits, host customers and "project power," as well as meeting rooms, training program spaces and places to eat, will remain important.

**More work-from-home** will mean that homes have to change, too.

- "If we were all going to work from home, we wouldn't have built or designed our houses the same way," Butterfield says.
- He predicts a "reconfiguration of the home and the canonical set of rooms that people imagine there."

**What's next:** Slack's continuing evolution, he says, will bring more "asynchronous" tools that allow workers to leave messages that can be absorbed later, as well as "a kind of sociological support or guidance for organizations to become more effective at this way of communicating."

- Butterfield argues that, in a hypothetical 10,000-employee company that spends \$1 billion on payroll, 50%-60% of the average employee's time is spent on communication of one sort or another.
- "So you're spending \$600 million — and how much investment do you put into training them to be more effective communicators and have better meetings?"

**The bottom line:** We're just beginning to understand and adapt to pandemic-driven workplace changes.

- Butterfield: "I feel like we have 10% of the tools we need."