

As Microsoft is showing, workers may never come back to the office

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June 25, 2022 at 6:00 am Updated June 27, 2022 at 5:38 pm

By

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There was a period early in the pandemic when it was fashionable to say [it was going to change everything](#).

Then, as the disease surges came and went, it seemed it had changed nothing.

Now, more than two years on, it's becoming clearer the pandemic has dramatically shifted at least one big thing: work.

Because it sure looks like work from home is winning.

"At Microsoft, a back-to-office 'normal' may not happen this year" [was the headline this past week](#). This is a big tell, as Microsoft has had a policy for three months now that employees should be in the physical office 50% of the time.

They aren't. The company now suggests it may not meet even this 50% goal until 2023.

Downtown Seattle offices are [still only 38% occupied](#), according to an office-space tracker from the Downtown Seattle Association. This is only slightly above what it was in February.

Meanwhile, hotel room demand downtown has soared to a nearly full 96%.

If hotels are full and skyscrapers mostly empty, it means it's not a pandemic phenomenon anymore. Workers just aren't coming back to offices. It's starting to look like they may never come back — not without a fight, anyway.

Microsoft's own impressive research on remote work tells the story.

The company recognized early on in the pandemic that "we are all right now participants in a giant, natural, uncontrolled remote work experiment" (at least for those who used to report to traditional offices).

So they assigned researchers to track it — everything from the moods of software engineers, as judged by nightly diary entries, to the brainwaves of admins sitting in Zoom meetings, hooked up to electroencephalogram skull caps. The company has now put out [more than 50 research papers](#) on the remote-work phenomenon since it first sent all its employees home in March 2020.

Last month it collated it all in a ["New Future of Work Report."](#) It's 111 pages, with wide-ranging pros and cons. But allow me to grossly simplify the big picture, if I may.

Workers love work from home. Bosses don't.

Up to 80% of workers want either remote or hybrid arrangements (some office, some remote, with flexibility desired to switch between the two). Meanwhile managers by and large want you back at your desks.

Some workers are flatly refusing to take jobs now if they have to physically appear in an office.

"Sorry, Bosses: Workers Are Just Not That Into You," [headlined The Wall](#)

[Street Journal recently](#). "American workers are going back to bars, movies, sports arenas and weddings — pretty much everywhere but their offices."

The Microsoft report notes that workers are so enamored with remote that they'll even pay to get it. One study found "employees willing to forgo over \$4,300" per year in salary to be able to work from home full-time.

"So, how much are you willing to pay?" the researcher asked. "It may not be that long until your employer asks you."

This could be a counterintuitive way businesses might try to entice you back to your cubicle — by paying you more to show up in person.

The flip side is there are warning signs all over the research about rather severe problems with remote or hybrid work.

One major Microsoft study, which tracked the emails, calendars, instant messages, video/audio calls and workweek hours of 61,182 Microsoft employees, found that remote work caused silos to form that blunted collaboration. The paper concluded it would likely "impact productivity and, in the long-term, innovation."

Microsoft also monitored "trillions of productivity signals" through the use of its Microsoft 365 products. This found that worker output is being maintained remotely, but only by means of longer work hours and a barrage of "digital intensity."

"Time spent in Microsoft Teams meetings has more than doubled," [one report concluded](#). "The average meeting is 10 minutes longer, increasing from 35 to 45 minutes. The average Teams user is sending 45 percent more chats per week and 42 percent more chats per person after hours. The number of emails via Microsoft Exchange Online in February, when

compared to the same month last year, is up by 40.6 billion."

I think I got about a billion of those emails.

Consider this: There's now an entire body of study, with 45 scientific papers published, devoted solely to "video meeting fatigue."

[Another paper](#) looked at 10,000 IT workers and found they did keep up their output working remotely. But only by working *ten* hours longer per week.

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This has been my personal experience. What started as working from home is morphing into living at work. A lot of the recent Microsoft research is focused on artificial intelligence tools that might improve the remote work experience. What we really need is a robot to make us stop working.

The Microsoft researchers insist this is no passing fad. So it should be no surprise that Microsoft itself is also struggling to get employees to come in. One paper posits we've already entered a new age, a "sixth era," in how and where we work. We've had the industrial revolution, the skyscraper, the suburbs, the edge city, the superstar tech city, and now this.

It's impossible to know where it's all headed (a crackup? a rebellion? skyscraper labor camps?). And the pandemic has already made fools of all forecasters. But one place we don't look to be headed? Back to the office.

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