

# Why Technology is a Key Factor in the 'Return to the office' debate

Marcel Schuster, Head of Customer Experience Workplace at Fujitsu

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*The "should we, shouldn't we?" debate has been raging for a year. It's finally time for employees and employers to decide whether to return to the office – and technology plays a more significant role than many people would think in influencing this decision, says Marcel Schuster, Head of Customer Experience Workplace at Fujitsu.*

Remember those crazy days at the start of the Covid pandemic when almost everyone who worked in an office switched – overnight – to working from home (WFH)? Remember how people were tweeting pictures of their makeshift home office setup?

The reality today is that, almost three years on, too many office workers are still hunched over their make-do remote working solution: a laptop at their kitchen table, in their bedroom, or even working from the couch. And for parents working from home, the problem of constant interruptions during calls isn't going away. Clearly, this is not a viable strategy in the long term, nor is it ergonomically sustainable.

Let's face it, does anyone want to spend the rest of their career working like this? As many workers consider a return to the office, it should be no surprise for employers that the better the technology and office equipment, the higher the employer's chance of coaxing remote employees back to their desks. This data point comes from a survey conducted in the [Office 21 Project](#) by the Fraunhofer IAO Institute (available only in the German language).

Remember also that even the relatively small percentage of knowledge workers who went all the way in equipping their home or remote workplace with the latest tech is more prepared to return – at least for two or three days a week – to an office equipped with "excellent" equipment. And finally, on this point, don't forget that first-generation state-of-the-art WFH tech purchased at the start of the pandemic is now also three years old!

## **Whether you work remotely, from an office, or in a hybrid, it's still clear the world of office work has changed forever**

Employers must be pragmatic and recognize that the world has changed. Daily office occupancy rates of 80% of the workforce or higher are a thing of the past – despite the free lunches, snacks, and other perks. Many employers have already downsized their office space, in any case. And a recent study led by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development<sup>1</sup> found that 15% of employees would quit and look for a new job if they were mandated to return to the office five days a week.

Fraunhofer's study shows that technology is one of the biggest draws when it comes to coaxing employees back into the office regularly. This is especially relevant to the tens of thousands of office workers still making do with a temporary desk at the kitchen table. Remote working can be a solitary, lonely existence, hardly a "lifestyle" that anyone wants to keep up for the longer term. Anyone hunching over a laptop in a makeshift "office" for more than a couple of weeks will feel the impact on their physical well-being – especially their posture and eyesight.

You can't win them all. Return-to-the-office policies don't cut it with employees who sold their commuter-zone property and moved further afield. But employers should also be lenient – taking a radical approach of insisting that employees show up in the office is terrible for morale and will only be a short-term fix – until these people can find a new job elsewhere.

## **Consider the soft benefits as well**

One finding from the Fraunhofer<sup>2</sup> survey was that employees are 15% more productive when working from home. But – and this is a big but – people are not machines and success is not measured only in productivity. The 15% gain comes at the cost of social interaction that's so much better face-to-face.

Therefore, employers should look past the headline at the in-office benefits of social interaction between co-workers and cultivate a culture of being part of a close-knit team and celebrating success. These values are fundamental to employees

who are Millennials or Generation Z. Partly because younger generations often don't have the space at home for a dedicated working space. Nor can they build up their internal network when every interaction is formal, remote, and distant.

Ah, I hear you cry – but what about workers stuck on conference calls all day long? WFH is mostly a solitary experience – especially for people keen to climb the career ladder. Being together in the office is a good starting point in reducing endless calls. Being in the office enables more informal interaction – chats by the water cooler, going to lunch together, or just shouting a question across the office. You don't get any of this with remote working, even with messaging apps.

The pandemic also changed the way that leaders measure productivity, placing a greater emphasis on how to encourage employees to concentrate on their work-life balance. Therefore, people managers must be role models and encourage employees to follow their example by returning to the office.

I asked Dr. Nektaria Tagalidou from the Applied Neurocognitive Systems department at Fraunhofer IAO to comment. She told me: "The answer to the question 'Home office or office?' depends on an individual's tasks and preferences. It is relatively clear that creative meetings and socializing work better on site, while concentrating on silent work is easier in an undisturbed environment. If you are still unsure about the right environment for you, smart technologies could help in the future. In neurowork science, we are researching how, for example, wearables can be used to measure the state of stress and concentration levels and how working environments could be adapted accordingly."

### **Modeling the office of the future**

Any employer just pulling the wraps off the old office after three years and expecting people to return must think again. Office layouts have evolved, and technology has improved. Fujitsu works closely with organizations of all sizes to rethink and remodel their workplaces – and to make them more people-centric. Alike, hybrid is here to stay and so do home offices require a rethink and employers are part of the equation. How are you going to adjust the variables?

Our innovative CX Lab is an example of Fujitsu's capabilities. This new virtual co-creation metaverse is designed to facilitate creative dialogue between customers and partners. It aims to create a stimulating environment to exchange ideas more efficiently and for contributions from participants to enrich each other. In close dialogue with Fujitsu experts, our customers discuss every milestone of their journey. The short but content-rich virtual event provides new insights into office design, enabling planners to make strategic decisions about future workplaces. If you'd like to know more, visit

[www.fujitsu.com/global/cx](http://www.fujitsu.com/global/cx).

#### **Marcel Schuster Head of Customer Experience Workplace at Fujitsu**

Marcel Schuster of Head of the Customer Experience Team for Workplace at Fujitsu Products Europe.



In this role, Marcel is responsible for exploring the elements that redefine our way of interacting with customers, applying consultancy in the wide field of workplace solutions, and determining the relevant go-to-markets. He has worked in the IT industry for almost ten years.

Before moving to his current role, he held various positions in Product Marketing for Data Center Infrastructure and Healthcare and Manufacturing Industry-focused solutions. He has a Business Administration degree.

<sup>1</sup> **Source:** Sample of N=21,366 Global WFH respondents surveyed in February 2022. Study *Working from Home Around the World* by Cevat Giray Aksoy (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), Jose Maria Barrero (Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de Mexico), Nicholas Bloom (Stanford University), Steven J. Davis (Booth School of Business, The University of Chicago), Mathias Dolls (Ifo Institute) and Pablo Zarate (Universidad de San Andrés), published March 22, 2022

<sup>2</sup> **Source:** Milena Bockstahler, Mitja Jurecic, and Stefan Rief: Home Office Experience 2.0 Changes, developments and experiences regarding working from home during the Corona pandemic, published 2022