




Strategic HR 

Operational Efficiency 

Personal Development 

Don't let the office 'die' – for the sake of young professionals

Sunita Malhotra, NOVEMBER 13, 2020



I've heard the phrase 'the death of the office' touted recently. Many companies – including Facebook – have already stated it will permanently embrace virtual working post-pandemic. It is unlikely that many organisations will go back to the traditional, five-days-a-week office environment.

While this may benefit many people, for young professionals and graduates, working from home virtually in the long term could be less beneficial. **Seventy-two per cent of graduates from the CEMS programme in their first year of work stated that lack of opportunities for physical networking in the workplace will be the biggest barrier to their career progression.**

Conversations with former students back this up. One graduate, who has just started work, explained to me that "homeworking is a big struggle. It makes you question if you can continue your career in the long term."

She feels alone and sometimes feels less affinity with what she is doing. Another mentioned that colleagues "feel lonely and lost in terms of expectations" – unable to create connection and sense of belonging.

These young people realise they will need to create a whole 'new lifestyle' for themselves. Working life will be totally different to what they ever anticipated or imagined.

Significant long-term impact

It is the case that most meaningful career development happens through networking. Being physically present creates a sense of belonging, rather than being alone on your own island. Working face-to-face with others creates an affinity for the job and helps prevent blurred boundaries between work and personal life.

Careers have a significant psychological aspect to them; for example 'happy hour' after work is where the collaboration, team-bonding and fun happens. In addition, face-to-face connections are so important for meaningful learning, feedback and understanding. How can a new starter get to grips with company processes and values when they are sitting alone at their kitchen table?

Further reading:

[How remote teams are reinventing the art of 'lucky' creative conversations](#)

[Remote support and supervision - how to keep development apace for junior employees](#)

[HR's role in organisational creativity and innovation](#)

What can HR do?

Firstly, HR teams and senior leaders need to acknowledge that lack of face-to-face contact could be a problem for young hires. Many young people don't believe their struggles with virtual working are even on the radar of organisations.

Secondly, HR must be highly creative in how digital learning is used to create connection. This may seem obvious, but creativity is lacking in many companies.

If it is not possible to enable physical contact, then we can use the amazing technology at our fingertips to replicate real-life. There are so many possibilities out there to nurture curiosity, innovation, camaraderie, creativity and fun, despite restrictions. Here are a few:



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Scrums and learning circles

Establish cross-functional teams to work on cross-company issues, for example a new strategy. This creates visibility to senior management, team collaboration and generates affinity for recent hires with company culture.

Video-biographies

Ask recent hires to make a short video of themselves on a virtual platform, to demonstrate what they bring to the table. Then ask them to send it to executives in the company, before asking for an online one-to-one.

Cross-generational mentoring

Mentoring and reverse-mentoring can still have the same impact virtually, creating visibility for young people with executives.

Buddy schemes

Pair up new starters with colleagues who have been in the company for a while, with whom they can speak honestly online. While young people can take responsibility for setting this up, HR involvement will ensure it is a strategic priority.

Recreational meetings

Companies can successfully run everything from 45-minute virtual lunches to drinks after works, quizzes and cook-offs.

Intervision

This is the concept of peer problem-solving. If someone has a minor issue, they throw it out to a small peer group, to brainstorm and solve. This is not about building a whole strategy but tackling smaller problems.

NextGen Leadership

Create a leadership programme to make sure that the next generation of leaders acquire the correct skills for this hybrid workplace. For example, self-confidence, authenticity, agility and empathy will be key for this post-COVID digital world.

What is your superpower?

LEAD, a network I'm part of, runs a 'superpowers' initiative. People are required to think about what their superpower is – for example courage – then teach this skill to others. This is a simple concept which goes down brilliantly, as it involves both learning and teaching.

These eight ideas are just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more out there that HR teams can do to create connection and a sense of belonging for young professionals, despite the current situation.

Rather than talking about the 'death of the office' we should be talking about its 'reimagination.' We cannot let the office simply 'die.' The careers of our talented young people depend on it.

Sunita Malhotra is a professor at Université Catholique Louvain and managing director of People Insights.