

Career Path: Don’t WFH Yourself Out Of A Job

Career Development



I can't tell you how many people have told me I'm dead wrong for suggesting offices are still relevant (see Career Path: There Has Never Been a Better Time to Go Back to the Office). "That ship has sailed," they say, or "The future of work has forever changed. I'm never going back to the office." Indeed, at first glance, it does appear that the balance of power has shifted, with employees demanding flexibility in working arrangements and employers with no choice but to accommodate them.

I understand full well what employees are thinking. Work from home is great. Freedom, flexibility, casual dressing, and no commute. Researchers are busily collecting evidence, or at least anecdotes, about how much employee productivity is going up as a result of all the goodness.

While this is undeniably true, let me offer two thoughts for you to consider. The first is a reminder that we are hardly objective in evaluating evidence when we have a strong interest in the outcome.

Even if you trust your own thoughts, and good for you, the second item I offer for your consideration might give you pause. Namely, **if it is true that your job can be performed perfectly well remotely, does it necessarily follow that your job can only be performed by you?**

A case for hybrid work schedules

I came to this line of thought by asking myself why aren't we hearing more from companies

themselves pushing back on the WFH phenomenon? Sure, there are a few prominent examples of companies saying they will insist all employees must return to the office, such as the big investment banks.

But most companies are either silent, or have publicly embraced the idea their employees can "work from anywhere."

Before you embrace the revolution, and congratulate yourself once again for the wisdom of having avoided investment banking, have you heard what the CEOs of those banks gave as reasons for asking their employees to return to in-person work? Check out these quotes:

> *Most professionals learn their job through an apprenticeship model, which is almost impossible to replicate in the Zoom world. Over time, this drawback could dramatically undermine the character and culture*.
>
> - Jamie Dimon, JPMorgan
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> *This is not ideal for us. And it's not a new normal. We know from experience that our culture of collaboration, innovation and apprenticeship thrives when our people come together, and we look forward to having more of our colleagues back in the office*.
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> - David Solomon, Goldman Sachs
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> *[The office is] where we teach, where our interns learn. That's how we develop people. Where you build all the soft cues that go with having a successful career that aren't just about Zoom presentations.*
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> - James Gorman, Morgan Stanley

Are you confident your job does not involve any elements of collaboration, innovation, and learning? Or are these CEOs just dinosaurs who don't realize yet the world has shifted under their feet?

More worryingly, let's assume you're right: your job *can* be performed remotely. Moreover, you work for a forward-looking company that goes to great lengths to work out the technology glitches, establish training programs for new hires, and reinforce a shared culture. Google is an example of a company that announced early its knowledge workers could work from anywhere.

If you are working in a developed market, say the United States or Europe, you are an expensive employee. Among the most expensive in the world. Not only that, but you also may have strange ideas about the purpose of a company, and are not afraid to sue the company for the slightest perceived unequal treatment. Tell me again what exactly makes you so desirable as an employee?

More to the point, as wonderful as you no doubt are, how much less attractive does an employee have to be who costs your company but a fraction of what you do, is grateful to have a job, and is willing to work extremely hard because they do not take their good luck for granted?

Needless to say, who is based in a country where successful lawsuits against employers are rare, and class actions do not exist.

You don't need to be overly cynical to wonder if companies are simply biding their time. Companies

will learn from the pandemic-driven measures that forced home offices upon us how to make WFH efficient. Then, as a simple, reliable, and predictable productivity measure, they will replace a percentage of the workforce every year with lower-cost employees.

After all, we've insisted that offices are irrelevant, and work can be performed from anywhere. Ironically, by pushing this issue so hard, expensive employees may be hastening their doom by inviting such an easy, direct comparison with employees globally.

Great news if you are in a developing country. Not so much if you are in Europe or the United States.

Be well.

PS. Don't be too depressed with the possibility that WFH will make you uncompetitive and therefore redundant. Turns out that it's not just the investment banks who realized face-to-face collaboration is kind of important. They were just the first ones courageous enough to say it. In September 2021 Google itself announced it was paying US$2.1 billion to buy a Manhattan office building. "Wait, what? The WFH champion adding office space? Whatever for?" Google's comment accompanying the purchase speaks volumes:

> *We know that our employees, in order to be really happy and productive, need to collaborate. Because of that need to collaborate, we've been investing more and more in office space.*

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