

Return to the Office – Myth or Reality

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the way businesses function globally, especially in relation to office-based work. With widespread lockdowns and health concerns, organizations were compelled to adopt remote work strategies. As the pandemic receded, questions arose regarding the necessity of returning to the traditional office environment. This shift from office work to hybrid or fully remote models gave rise to a debate: is work in the office a necessity or merely a legacy system that has outlived its relevance? Will employers be able to bring their employees back into the office? In this article, we will present the results of a survey conducted among employees in Bulgarian companies regarding their way of working, the advantages of office work, and the remote/hybrid model, as well as their readiness and willingness to return to the office in the future.

Keywords: Work in office, Hybrid Model, Remote work, Return, Covid-19

JEL: M12, M54, O33

1. Introduction

Pre-pandemic, the office was seen as the nucleus of productivity, innovation, and organizational culture. However, with remote work becoming the norm during the pandemic, the necessity of returning to the physical office has become a topic of debate. Many businesses have begun to question whether the traditional office space is still a vital part of the corporate ecosystem, or whether it is becoming obsolete in favor of more flexible work arrangements. This shift has prompted inquiries into the future role of office work: is it a relic of the past, or does it still serve an essential purpose?

2. Problem statement

Historically, the concept of office work has been deeply ingrained in the organizational structures of the 20th century. During the early 20th century, the office symbolized control, structure, and efficiency. The office is the central nervous system of modern organizations, generating, transmitting, and storing vast quantities of information. According to Max Weber, the bureaucratic form of work organization is synonymous with capitalist development: the two are interdependent (Weber, 1948). Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy highlighted the importance of formal office structures in maintaining order and productivity within organizations. The office served as a centralized hub where employees would meet, collaborate, and communicate, reinforcing corporate culture and oversight. Office buildings were not just workspaces but also represented corporate identity and success, particularly in metropolitan areas. They provided a controlled environment where managers could oversee work and foster a corporate culture.

In the early 21st century, advancements in technology began to question the relevance of centralized office spaces. Technological advancements such as email, cloud computing, and video conferencing began to challenge the need for strict office-based work. However, despite these developments, office spaces remained predominant, largely due to the perception that physical presence fostered better communication, teamwork, and innovation. The outbreak of COVID-19, however, disrupted this status quo, forcing companies to rapidly adopt remote work solutions.

Impact of COVID-19 on Office Work

The global health crisis instigated an unprecedented shift in workplace dynamics. Within weeks, millions of employees transitioned to remote work, prompting organizations to accelerate digital transformation. The pandemic catalyzed widespread adoption of technologies that enable virtual collaboration, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These tools, combined with cloud computing and VPN access, allowed many businesses to maintain operations despite the lockdowns.

A study by Brynjolfsson et al. (2020) found that productivity levels remained stable or even increased in certain industries despite the shift to remote work. This suggests that many tasks, previously thought to require physical office presence, can be performed effectively from home.

According to research from Gartner, nearly 74% of CFOs reported plans to move employees to permanent remote positions after the pandemic, illustrating a significant shift in how organizations view office work (Gartner, 2020).

After the end of covid, the organizations were faced with the decision of whether to bring employees back to the office or continue remote operations. Many opted for a hybrid work model, blending in-person and remote work. According to a McKinsey report, nearly 50% of employees want to work remotely at least part-time (2021), leading to a shift in workplace policies across multiple industries.

The hybrid model offers a compromise, retaining the office space as a place for meetings and team collaboration, while allowing employees the flexibility to work from home when completing individual tasks. This has led some to question whether the office has become a "myth"—an unnecessary relic of pre-pandemic times—or if it still serves a critical function in modern organizations.

Office vs. Remote Work: Advantages and Challenges

While remote work and hybrid models have demonstrated success, the traditional office still offers some distinct advantages. For many organizations, the office remains a space for fostering creativity, spontaneous collaboration, and a shared sense of culture. Studies have shown that unplanned encounters and face-to-face communication in office settings can lead to innovation and strengthen team dynamics (Waber et al., 2014). Furthermore, the office environment provides structured workdays and fewer distractions compared to home environments, which can boost productivity for certain types of work.

Moreover, some employees benefit from the separation between home and work life that an office provides. While remote work offers flexibility, it can blur the boundaries between personal and professional life, potentially leading to burnout (Eurofound, 2020). Additionally, certain jobs, particularly those requiring high levels of interaction with specialized equipment or collaborative tasks, still necessitate physical presence in the workplace (CapGemini, 2021).

On the other hand, remote work presents numerous advantages that challenge the necessity of the office. Remote work offers flexibility, which can lead to higher job satisfaction and better work-life balance (Bloom et al., 2015). It also allows organizations to tap into a global talent pool, unrestricted by geographical boundaries. The financial benefits for companies are also significant, with potential reductions in office space costs and other overhead expenses.

However, remote work is not without its challenges. Employees may experience feelings of isolation, and maintaining a cohesive company culture can become difficult without in-person interactions (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Additionally, not all employees have access

to a suitable workspace at home, and the reliance on digital communication tools can lead to "Zoom fatigue," reducing overall productivity (Bailenson, 2021). Balancing these challenges with the benefits of flexibility is key to understanding the future of work.

One of the key concerns for both employers and employees in the shift from office to remote work is productivity. Numerous studies have examined the impact of remote work on employee productivity, and the results are somewhat mixed. According to a survey conducted by Stanford University, remote work can lead to a productivity boost of up to 13%, especially when employees have fewer distractions, no commuting time, and more control over their environment (Bloom et al., 2015). This is particularly evident in industries like IT, finance, and creative sectors, where the nature of the work is more suited to individual tasks that can be done independently.

However, despite the benefits of remote work, some employees still prefer the traditional office environment. Research suggests that younger employees or those early in their careers often favor office-based work because it provides opportunities for mentorship, networking, and learning from more experienced colleagues (Eurofound, 2020).

According to a report by Buffer (2023), flexibility remains the top benefit of remote work. According to respondents, 22 percent say the biggest benefit to remote work is flexibility in how they spend their time, for 19 percent it's flexibility in where they choose to live, and for 13 percent it's the flexibility to choose their work location.

One in three remote workers reports their biggest struggle is that they stay home too often because they don't have a reason to leave. The next most selected struggle for remote workers was loneliness, with 23 percent of remote workers selecting it. These two struggles go hand in hand and paint a picture of how the reality of remote work can be very challenging.

Given the advantages and challenges of both office-based and remote work, many companies have adopted hybrid work models as a way to balance productivity and employee satisfaction. Hybrid models allow employees to split their time between working from home and in the office, depending on their tasks and personal preferences.

Hybrid work models provide a middle ground that combines the benefits of remote work—such as flexibility and autonomy—with the social and collaborative advantages of office environments. According to a McKinsey report (2021), approximately 90% of employers plan to implement some form of hybrid work in the future, recognizing that it can improve both employee satisfaction and productivity by offering the best of both worlds.

The Future of Office Work: Myth or Reality?

The pandemic has permanently altered the perception of office work, with many organizations rethinking the need for centralized office spaces. However, declaring the office a "myth" may be premature. While the demand for traditional office spaces may decline, there is evidence that office environments still hold value, particularly for collaborative tasks, fostering creativity, and maintaining a strong organizational culture.

At the end of 2023, after 3 years of remote work, companies such as Zoom, Amazon, J.P. Morgan, and Elon Musk himself are introducing policies in their companies that require every employee to return to the office from their home. And those who do not agree will have to end their collaboration with the company and their employers. Despite this, there are still employers on the market, such as Dropbox, Gitlab, Medium, and Mobile Reality, that still work 100% remotely from home and have no plan to change it (Wodarz, 2023). Research on the CEO of software company Mobile Reality on his LinkedIn profile in which he asked his followers to pick the form of work that was most attractive to them, shows that the most frequently chosen option by many employees was "hybrid work" (104 votes), next "remote work from home", and "100% in-office work" was chosen by only 4% of voters (Wodarz, 2023).

Similar data are observed in other studies, including ours, the results of which will be presented below. The tug of war between employers and employees over the issue of returning to the office continues. Many companies are taking a firm stance on requiring their staff to resume work from the office.

On the other side, a significant number of employees are resisting this move, preferring the work-life integration that remote work provides. Some are willing to quit their jobs if they're required to return to the office. This conflict highlights key differences in priorities and expectations between organizations and their people.

3. Research results

The aim of this study is to understand the preferences of the respondents regarding office and remote work, the advantages of both types of work, and their desire to work entirely in an office environment in the future. For the purposes of the study, an online survey was used, which was distributed through the author's personal contacts via email and social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram,

etc.). A total of 112 respondents participated in the survey, with the largest group being people aged between 25 and 35 years, and the smallest group between 19 and 24 years (see fig.1).

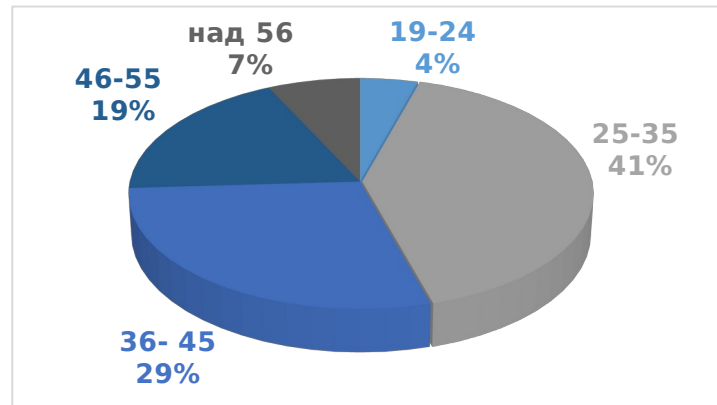


Fig. 1: Age of the respondents

Source: Own image

The largest portion of the respondents work in the IT sector (22%), commerce (21%), and manufacturing (20%), with the smallest group being in healthcare (5%) (see fig.2).

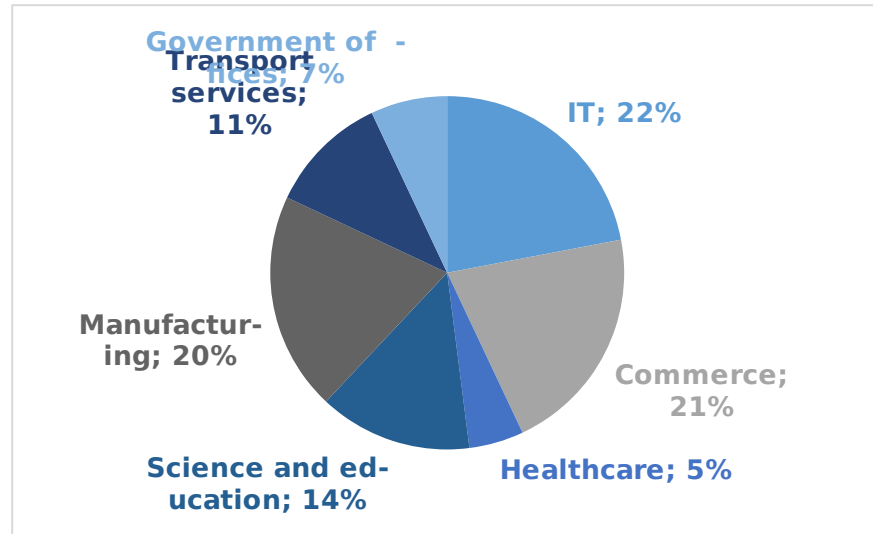


Fig. 2: Distribution by field of activity

Source: Own image

A total of 25% of the respondents work entirely remotely from home (0 days in the office), 44% work in a hybrid model with 2-3 days in the office, and 31% work entirely in the office (5 days a week) (see fig.3). Around one-third of the respondents (32%) employed in the IT sector report working entirely remotely, 64% work in a hybrid mode, and only 4% of IT specialists work entirely in the office for the whole workweek. Employees working entirely in the office are mainly from sectors where introducing a remote or hybrid model is impossible or very difficult, such as manufacturing, commerce, and public administration.

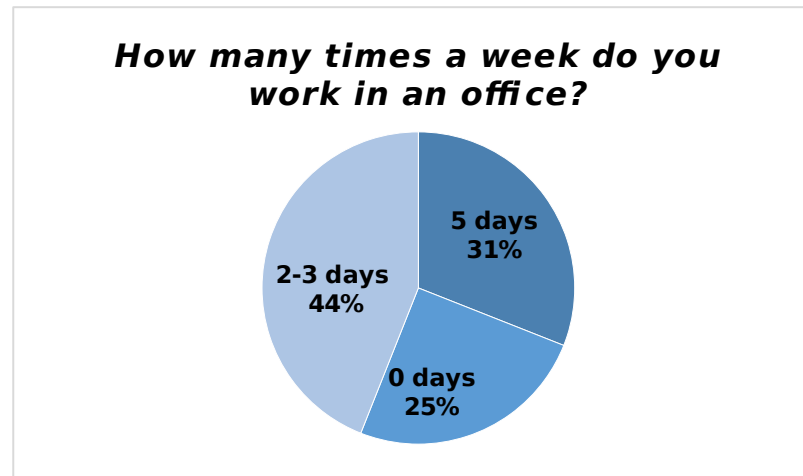


Fig.3: Frequency of working in the office (with a 5-day work week)

Source: Own image

As the main advantages of in-office work, about 2/3 of respondents highlight better communication with colleagues (19%), socialization (31%), and immediate feedback (24%). The latter is likely due to the fact that a large portion of our respondents are young people (between 25 and 35 years old), who require additional training, guidance, and mentorship. The two biggest advantages of remote and/or hybrid work, as indicated by the respondents, are flexibility (41%) and improved work-life balance (34%).

The last question of the survey, "Would you return to work entirely in the office?" was asked only to those respondents (69% of the total sample) who indicated that they work in a hybrid or entirely remote mode. Nearly 2/3 of those surveyed responded with a "absolutely not" (68%), another 29% said they would return only if they had no other choice, and only 3% stated they would prefer to return to work entirely in the office. The results of this question strongly support the claims of many specialists in the field of human resources management that the hybrid work model will continue in the future, and employers should seriously consider how to make their workplaces more flexible to attract more and suitable employees.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the question of whether office work remains a reality or a myth after COVID-19 is complex and multifaceted. While remote work has proven to be effective in terms of productivity and employee satisfaction in many sectors, the traditional office still holds value, particularly in fostering collaboration, creativity, and corporate culture. The rise of hybrid work models suggests that the future of work will be flexible, allowing employees to choose where and how they work based on their personal and professional needs.

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