

# Back, Into, Work and Other 4-Letter Words in Today's Office



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**W**hen did work become a four-letter word?

More importantly, why did it become a four-letter word?

How did we get to a place where the phrase “back to the office” is treated like an obscene phrase, muttered by those who see no value in returning to the workplace.

Perhaps “back to the office” got a bad rap when we realized how good we were at working remotely. The why is likely because employees have seen the perceived benefits of working from their homes. But it's our responsibility as leaders to rebuild the reputation of the workplace by creating a valuable and meaningful destination – to give employees an office they want to come back to.

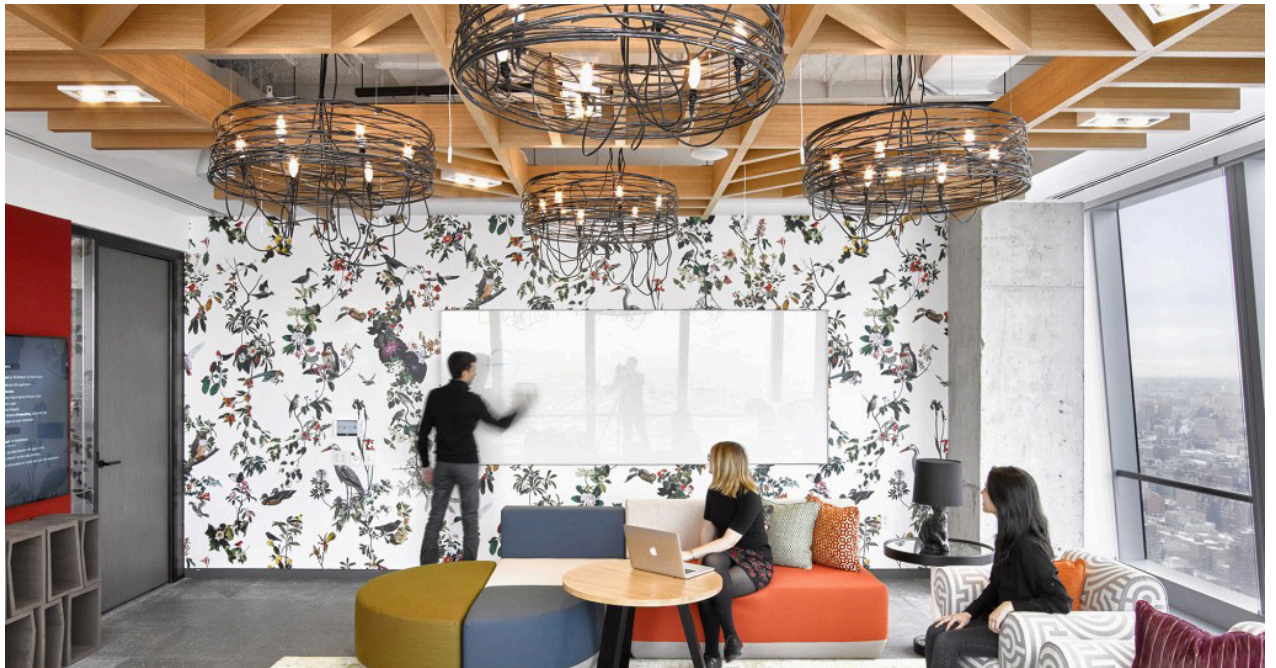
Working from home is nothing new. Even before the pandemic employees asked to work remotely. Some employees were met with limited support, however, some organizations did have the capacity to work remotely, pre-pandemic. According to research by Gensler, flexible work strategies were very much in existence pre-pandemic. In fact, offices in the U.S.



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were occupied around 80% of the time between 2016 and pre-pandemic 2020. Top-performing companies were hovering at an even lower rate (67%-74%) of occupancy during this time.

But now that we've all been working remotely for the past two or three years, we've collectively proven we can do it effectively. Leaders were forced to trust individual contributors and vice versa. And guess what – we were able to deliver. We trusted one an-



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other, we got creative and we got the work done.

Working remotely also gave every employee the power to better balance their personal lives during a time when they needed it the most. It created an environment where employees could control their surroundings. It empowered employees with choice. A choice about when and where to work. The choice to prioritize their personal lives, their humanity, over the 9-to-5 lifestyle.

Now, employees ask why they should go back to the office. It's a good question.

And it's a question you have to answer.

Ultimately, the workplace acts as a destination. One universal place that gives every employee something in common and levels the playing field. The workplace is a place specially designed to foster collaboration, ideation, and build culture.

Creating a separate space outside of the home where employees can focus on goals that exist outside of personal lives should be alluring. It should also give employees an opportunity to focus on relationships that aren't just their families.

Because of the talent reshuffling that has occurred as we emerge from the pandemic, many employees are onboarding, training and building new work relationships from scratch. Of course, all of this is possible on Zoom, but it takes more effort and much more intention. A well-designed workplace can make some of these otherwise labor-intensive and intentional encounters serendipitous and implicit. That's the power of place.

Additionally, the workplace acts as a metaphorical melting pot. It gives employees an opportunity to experience people, encounters, and tools they may not normally be exposed to. Spending all day, every day with your 5-year-old and your partner doesn't provide much opportunity to shake things up at best, and at worst fosters the unconscious bias to surround oneself with similar looking people.



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The workplace should create spaces for people to step outside of their comfort zones to experiment, innovate and try new things. Don't bring people back into the office and expect people to continue sitting in front of their computers, on Zoom, with their headphones on or earbuds in. Create spaces and scenarios for people to engage with the space and one another. Here are some questions you can ask yourself or your workplace if you're thinking about transitioning back to the office:

- Does the physical space support the goal of driving engagement?
- Do you have flexibility in your furnishings and technology?
- Have you designed spaces where employees can do focused work?
- Do employees have access to the right people in the workplace as part of a high-performing team doing their best work?
- Do people want to come into the workplace because it delivers things that they cannot get at home?

At the end of a long day of work, how memorable is working from the dining room table? Are you sharing your great accomplishments and successes? Are you collectively learning from failures? Are you creating memorable work experiences with others? How often are you breaking bread, laughing over coffee, and looking one another in the eye as you move through your day?

As leaders in our field, it's our responsibility to create intentionally designed work environments and rebuild the reputation of the four-lettered word "work." Together we can create the workplace of the future; not just an office, but an ultimate destination – a place where we can shift our thinking from me to we. \\



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