

OUR INSIGHTS

Practical advice on common business challenges
direct from our International team of business experts

INSIGHTS, LEADERSHIP, MATT CRABTREE

Back to the Office?



Returner



Worrier



Remainer

How to lead the transition to post-pandemic hybrid working

As the public debate begins to rage about the extent to which our pre-pandemic office working model will return, three things are certain: returning to the workplace will be a relief for many, difficult for some and different for us all.

The consensus seems to be settling around various degrees of hybrid working for knowledge workers. [CBRE's workforce sentiment survey of more than 10000 people](#) reveals that only 6% see themselves back at the office full time post pandemic.

As you begin to engage your team in discussions about how they want to work in the future you'll likely be faced with people in three different states of mind:

1. RETURNERS

These people cannot wait to get back to the office. Maybe you're one of them? Maybe you're already back or never even left?

The reasons for people wanting to return to the office range from having wholly unsuitable home working facilities right through to a genuine need to collaborate face-to-face to get their responsibilities accomplished.

Just last week I delivered a virtual speech to more than 350 people in a global technology business and in an on-the-spot Slido poll **27%** of them identified as Returners.

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Two suggestions for you as a leader of Returners:

- Take care not to make them into heroes. If you yourself are a returner (and I know many leaders who are) you might just be tempted to talk a little too much about how pleased you are that they've come back in – or want to. A perfect way to alienate and demotivate the Worriers and Remainers!
- Take care they do not get preferential access. If you're going hybrid all those techniques you've developed to keep in touch with remote workers need to be permanently maintained. If you're having a team meeting and some of the team are remote perhaps it's time to consider everyone joining on camera from their desk whether in the office or not?

2. WORRIERS

These people probably want to come back to the office but they're still worried about pandemic after shocks.

Concerns like vaccine efficacy, immunity length and even other viruses fuel the anxiety of people who'll have legitimate concerns either about their own health or of those they love.

■ In the same event last week, a not insignificant **12%** identified as Worriers

Two suggestions for leading Worriers:

- **Unconditional empathy required.** You might know exactly why someone is worried about commuting back into a crowded office again but you might not – and they don't have to tell you. Take care that you don't start with the assumption they are lazy and prefer working in their pyjamas!
- **Discreetly understand the root cause.** If you don't know why someone is reticent to return to the office perhaps it's time to discreetly ask them? 'Inspiring' team announcements about safety protocols just won't cut it with some, whereas as manager who is genuine in their concern might just be rewarded with candour.

3. REMAINERS

This group includes those who've been telling you for years they can effectively work from other locations (including their home) and assuming they performed as well as anyone else over the last year have been proven correct.

The genie is out of the bottle on working remotely. It works for many and anyway talent will migrate to organisations with a mature, progressive and flexible attitude to it.

■ **61%** of my large, multi-national audience from last week said they were Remainers

Two suggestions for leading Remainers:

- Engage in constructive dialogue. Despite the recent views of the Goldman Sachs CEO this is not a good time to lay down the law on this issue. Instead it's a chance to talk to your team about what they prefer and agree the working protocols that will support it. Either that or live with a shrunken talent pool.

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- Be clinically clear on boundaries. You've every right to determine the degree of remote working you consider acceptable and you'll no doubt experiment with different hybrid balances to find the right approach for you. You've also an obligation to everyone (whether remote or not) to set boundaries and acceptable standards for your remote workers.



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No one is saying that working together in inspiring and fit for purpose offices does not have value. If the last year has taught us anything it's that most of us crave being together. More than that home working is no panacea for all. For some it's truly horrible and for others it's intrusion in to their personal life just isn't acceptable and not what they signed up for when they took the job.

But we've got to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that commuting to, working within and commuting home from some of our offices had become a deeply dispiriting experience for many, many people. The pandemic has been a mass experiment in remote working and we'd be crazy not to objectively examine the results.

It's time to ask our teams what they want, what the pandemic has taught them about where they work best and as leaders for us to become truly agnostic to their future preference so that we might make the adjustments to our working practices to ensure everyone is able to give the very best of themselves (nearly) every day.