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Back to the Future: Work-From-Home Edition

Way back in 2013, when Yahoo! was still hanging on to the fringes of relevance, the company's hoped-for savior, CEO Marissa Mayer, caused a bit of a stir when she reversed a long-time policy that encouraged telecommuting in favor of requiring pretty much all employees to work at the office. In the years following Mayer's change of heart, talk about telecommuting waxed and waned, but not a lot changed on the ground. Certainly, the phenomenon had little discernable impact on the commercial real estate business.

Fast forward to 2020, and the pandemic has put telecommuting on the front burner, with pundits and iconic entrepreneurs, among many others, speculating that pandemic-enforced work-from-home regimes are working out so well that many businesses will never go back to the office-centric employment model. Mark Zuckerberg, for example, recently speculated that over the next decade perhaps half of Facebook's employees may become permanent telecommuters.

As it turns out, I wrote a short piece on Mayer's "no telecommuting" edict back when she announced it in 2013. I've reproduced that piece, below, and having read it again find it ... interesting. Read it yourself and see what you think. And then read what I think about, seven years and one pandemic later.

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Some Thoughts on Telecommuting

(Circa 2013)

Marissa Mayer, over at Yahoo!, is making a fair amount of news these days, most recently for reversing the company's longstanding embrace of telecommuting and insisting that employees work at the company's offices. A lot of people were surprised by the move, mostly, as near as I can tell, either because it seems to go against the idea that the workplace of the future, enabled by modern technology, is best defined by where people are (say, at home) than where they are supposed to be (say, at the office), or perhaps

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because being a new mom, it is assumed that Mayer will want to make it easier for working moms to, well, work, by letting them work from home. The tide of opinion, so far, seems to be that Mayer's new policy is at least strange, and likely a mistake.

As a telecommuter myself at various points in my career, including to some extent now, my take is rather more nuanced. Telecommuting is, I think, a great option for some employees at most businesses – even, I suspect, at Yahoo! But for most businesses and most employees, working in a communal environment offers important advantages that can make or break a business. As I see it, done right the office environment offers two key competitive advantages over the dispersed (i.e. home) working environment: it fosters collaborative thinking; and it promotes esprit de corps.

As for facilitating collaboration, as society becomes more complex and interconnected, innovation – the lifeblood of a thriving business – becomes more and more a collaborative process. And it is just plain easier to collaborate with people face to face than smartphone to smartphone. As for esprit de corps, the importance is too often overlooked, I think, in a culture that more often promotes the individual than the team. But whether we are talking about sports or business, whether it involves teammates or workmates, other things being equal, more esprit de corps is going to result in more success. Just ask the folks at Google. Or Apple. Or, in my own experience in and around the high-impact entrepreneurial and investing space, the folks at just about any young, high-risk/high-reward startup out to change the world.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that telecommuting is always a bad idea. There are jobs – as there are sports – that are basically individual activities; say, for example the proverbial bond trader who plies his trade from his home office in Vermont. There are people that work better without the distractions of a busy workplace: say, for example, some journalists I've met. And there are situations where the fit/synergies between the business and the employee are greater than the real costs of working remotely; say, for example, some entrepreneurial lawyers I know. But at the end of the day, I still think the best question for Marissa Mayer is “what took you so long.”

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Reading over my 2013 thoughts on telecommuting, I feel more like doubling-down than folding. Yes, there will be more remote work in the future than there was pre-pandemic, but I don't see any pandemic-driven tidal wave coming on that score. First, because the technology is not there; and second, because the factors cited in my 2013 piece are still compelling (at least to me).

As to the technology, I've been impressed over the course of “safer-at-home” life with the quality and ubiquity of today's videoconferencing technology. But the more I live with it, the clearer it becomes that even a glitch-free videoconferencing session is less effective than the real thing. Particularly when the occasion is an interactive working session rather than a simple communication of information.

As good as today's videoconferencing is, it still falls well short of actually “being there.” Speech is a big part of human communication, but doesn't define it. There are all sorts of other clues to meaning in body language and such. And speech and those other things all reflect the environment they are delivered – and received – in. There just isn't anything as powerful as just “being there.” Who knows ... maybe holography someday...

Second, I remain convinced that effective collaboration is best achieved in live, personal interaction, all the more so when the communication is not only omnidirectional but in pursuit of creative ends. Likewise, esprit de corps is fostered in environments that encourage spontaneity and include the “vibes” that only

come with physical proximity. Both are critical parts of building and sustaining excellence in any organization. Maybe the technology will get there someday, but we're talking, I think, about Dr. Picard-level holograms, and those are still pretty far out there.

Will there be more remote work in the future? Yep. Will it become the SOP for all – even the most consequential – work-related personal communication? Not in my lifetime. Which, I suppose, is a bit of a hedge.

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