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Return to Office: The Missing Link

As a longtime science journalist at the *New York Times*, I worked mainly from home for years, coming into the office for just a couple days every week or so. It was an early experiment in hybrid work. And having worked this way for more than a decade, I believe the debate about how much time someone should spend in the office misses the point. We can be more intelligent about the emotions aroused by our time in the office.
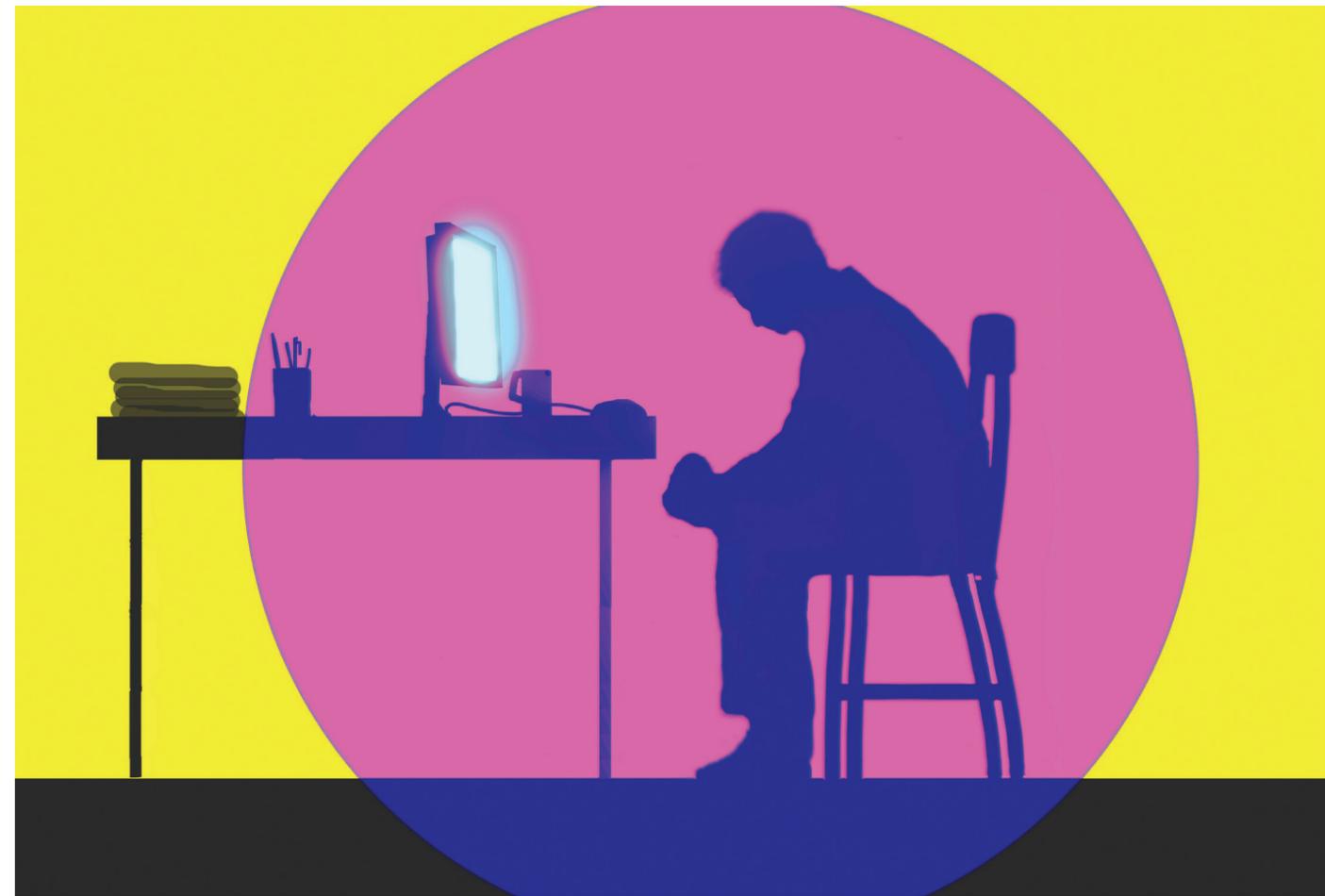
Not long ago I was on a panel about "The Great Return" in which I discussed pros and cons with the head of human resources at UPS and two professors from Wharton. This topic is of real concern: the best stats suggest that office occupancy is at just 30 to 40 percent of its pre-COVID levels (though trending slightly upward), meaning many companies are footing the bill for empty space.

What's more, a significant portion of those who have worked well from home are quite resistant to returning to the office. These feelings are particularly strong, for instance, among women and ethnic and racial minorities, who have felt they were being evaluated for the quality of their work while working remotely—not through the lens of some stereotype.

Companies typically deal with bringing people back by focusing on how many days per week a body needs to occupy a chair in the office. But the panel pointed to two dimensions that this way of thinking about the return misses.

First, there's the emotional reality. When Google assessed its top-performing teams, the company found that psychological safety was key. Vanessa Druskat, a professor at the University of New Hampshire who has studied high-performing teams for decades, calls this a "sense of belonging." This feeling, which characterizes the members of top teams, allows for the emergence of productive norms like candor about strengths and limitations, ease in settling differences, and greater agility.

When I was at the *Times* I had several different bosses. One made me feel I did not belong, even when I was in the office. Another gave me a sense of belonging even when I was working remotely. The first boss made my work a struggle; the second made it easy. In other words, there's an emotional dimension that matters greatly in how well people can work, regardless of how many days they do or don't spend in the office.

Second, there's another crucial element missing from the days-in-the-office debate: how well someone actually performs. Instead of fixating on a particular number of days folks should come to the office to work, the focus could be on how effectively a person gets work done—in other words, their performance, not their attendance.

There are three simple principles for managing someone in a way that brings out their best efforts, whether they are in the office or working from home:

BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR EXPECTATIONS. Clarity gives the person a goal and metrics for the task at hand.

LET THE PERSON ACHIEVE THAT GOAL IN THEIR OWN WAY. Giving a person this sense of control over their work, many studies show, creates strong and positive motivation.

OFFER IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK ON HOW WELL THE PERSON PERFORMS. This allows for midcourse corrections as well as a learning curve that lets the person experiment to find the best way to get the job done.

And in the end, whether from home or at the office, getting the job done well is what matters. ◢

Goleman is the author of the international best seller *Emotional Intelligence*. See keystepmedia.com for his series of primers.