DEMOS

THE NOWHERE OFFICE

JULIA HOBSBAWM

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"By day the skyscraper looms in the smoke and sun and
has a soul.
Prairie and valley, streets of the city, pour people into
it and they mingle among its twenty floors and are
poured out again back to the streets, prairies and
valleys.

It is the men and women, boys and girls so poured in and
out all day that give the building a soul of dreams
and thoughts and memories."

– Skyscraper, Carl Sandberg 1929

"You will never work in a place like this again. It's brilliant. Fact."

– The Office (Season 2), ©Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant 2005

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Hobsbawm is Chair of the Demos Workshift Commission. She is an entrepreneur, writer and consultant about Social Health and the future of the workplace. She founded the network and media business Editorial Intelligence and the Social Capital Network for BAME professionals. She is a founding trustee of the medical technology charity OurBrainBank and The Quality of Life Foundation. Awarded an OBE in 2015 for Services to Business, she is the author of several mainstream business books addressing modern challenges for individuals and organisations including Fully Connected: Social Health in an Age of Overload (2017) and The Simplicity Principle: Six Steps Towards Clarity in a Complex World (2020) which won two awards for best business book of the year and is a podcast and self-help brand. She is a columnist for PWC's Strategy + Business, broadcasts regularly on Sky News and addresses global business audiences about Social Health.

PREFACE

One of my favourite pastimes as a child was to read the Dan Dare comic strips in the Eagle Annuals we'd inherited from my Uncle Jeremy. Written in the 1960s, they chronicled the space adventures of a dashing Biggles-style hero, battling aliens and jetting about from planet to planet. But what I loved most was that they were set in the 1990s. From my vantage point in the real-life 1990s I could marvel at the naivety of my parents' generation, and feel a sense of smug superiority.

But everyone who's been in the business of making predictions about the future has been wrong, and probably many times over. In fact there is a huge amount to be learned from the process, at least if you are open about the basis on which you make predictions, and honest about evaluating your performance against those predictions.

So it is with no shame at all that I confess Demos has predicted the death of the office before: in 1996, in an essay on "teleworkers" by Gerard O'Neill. Though O'Neill admitted any number of scenarios were possible, and teleworking was anything but a guaranteed future, he did refer to the "office without an office" as a potential "blessing without a disguise". And yet we took only tentative steps towards the officeless future for the next quarter of a century - until we were forced out by a global pandemic.

Readers may therefore treat this paper with a good deal of scepticism. You may roll your eyes at news that Demos has set up a year long Workshift Commission to look at the future of work after the pandemic, even if it is chaired by the inestimable Julia Hobsbawm. After all, the Prime Minister himself told a business conference just last month that he didn't believe anyone who said they would change their operating model as a result of this crisis. Why should he (or you) believe me and Julia when we say differently?

First: all the modelling and data we can collect suggest that large numbers of people will not return to the office, and certainly not full time. Employers, as polled by the CBI, seem largely content with that. So it's pretty reckless to assume that our workplaces will prove as immune to change as they did in 1996.

Nevertheless, it is important to take seriously the idea that - the moment restrictions are lifted - we will all just get back to the way things were. As this paper sets out, the "Nowhere Office" creates as many practical problems for our working lives as it solves. But we've set up Workshift not just because we believe things won't go back, but because we believe they shouldn't.

There are plenty of things wrong with the modern workplace, many of which Demos has been writing and campaigning about for years. We've made the business case for more flexible working practices since we were founded in 1993. We've advocated for more creativity, disorganisation and entrepreneurship as the routes to innovation and human-centred service design. We've looked at management practice and productivity in the public and private sectors. And we've explored models of "good work", looking at pay, progression and purpose in the workplace.

The shift in where we work creates an opportunity to reexamine the vital questions of how we work. Julia's roadmap to the Nowhere Office helps get that conversation started, with fresh ideas of how and where we should work after the pandemic.

Polly Mackenzie
Chief Executive, Demos

INTRODUCTION
THE MIDDLE
OF NOWHERE

The only thing we can say with certainty about office life is that it has changed more for good in the last year than it has in the last hundred. The pandemic has pitched the world of work from one already undergoing a seismic change – what the World Economic Forum in 2016 called the fourth industrial revolution of "cyber-physical systems" - into a new revolutionary convulsion, in which as many as one third of people say they never want to go back to work full-time in an office: tumbleweed is blowing around the ankles of city skyscrapers.[1, 2, 3]

When you add in the possibility of the first double-dip recession of this century and the astonishing sums the Treasury has had to set aside to support workers and businesses through the pandemic, it is fair to say that whatever the 'new normal' is, once everyone is vaccinated and the Covid-19 Pandemic retreats into the history books, working life won't be the 'old normal'.[4]

That is just, as David Brent's compulsively grim character from the ultimate parody of office life "The Office" puts it: '*Fact*'.

When around fifteen million people in the UK stopped their commute, stopped buying their skinny latte with extra foam on top, stopped gossiping in corridors and instead pivoted to a work from home model (and this did not make productivity fall off a cliff, as had long been feared), it became obvious that this is one hell of a genie to try and put back in the bottle.[5, 6]

A broad estimate is that between one sixth and one fifth of working people in the UK fit easily into the category of office worker.[7] There are 21 different work categories listed within this by the Office for National Statistics, from manufacturing to real estate. In Spring 2020, every single office - and indeed household - experienced the same rupture to their routine at a similar time, as the pandemic led to national lockdown.[8]

Within this deep rupture, fear inevitably took hold. As the psychologist Daniel Kahneman put it:

> *"We have a population that is afraid of people and is afraid for its life to some extent. Those you pass on the street can be a threat without even talking to you. This is new. If the virus stays on for a couple of years, this is certainly going to change the way people interact. Many will go back to living as they did before; parks and*

1   Onion, A. Sullivan, M. and Mullen, M. Home Insurance Building. A&E Television Networks, 2018. Available at https://www.history.com/topics/landmarks/home-insurance-building [accessed 27/01/2021]
2   Davis, N. What is the fourth industrial revolution?. World Economic Forum, 2016. Available at https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/what-is-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/ [accessed 27/01/2021]
3   Lambert, L. Nearly a third of workers don't want to ever return to the office. Fortune, 2020. Available at https://fortune.com/2020/12/06/offices-covid-workers-returning-never-want-to-stats-data-2/ [accessed 27/01/2021]
4   HM Treasury. Spending Review 2020. 2020. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2020-documents/spending-review-2020 [accessed 27/01/2021]
5   ONS. Labour market overview, UK: December 2020. 2020. Available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/december2020 [accessed 27/01/2021]
6   OECD. Productivity gains from teleworking in the post COVID-19 era: How can public policies make it happen?. 2020. Available at https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/productivity-gains-from-teleworking-in-the-post-covid-19-era-a5d52e99/ [accessed 27/01/2021]
7   UK Government. Employment by occupation. 2020. Available at https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/employment/employment-by-occupation/latest [accessed 27/01/2021]
8   ONS. Technology intensity and homeworking in the UK. 2020. Available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/technologyintensityandhomeworkingintheuk/2020-05-01 [accessed 27/01/2021]

beaches will be full again. But there is going to be a lingering fear of people."[9]

It is difficult to imagine people pouring in and out of mass transit systems or skyscrapers any time soon. This reflects this notion of a lingering fear, but also the sheer convenience of a non-commute life: while only half of workers say they won't miss the commute and Microsoft even designed a virtual commute for those who did, 67% of professionals say they plan to work differently after the pandemic. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2020 estimated that as much as 44% of all future work will be remote.[10, 11, 12, 13]

It has also become clear that Covid-19 triggered an eruption of the pressures which had been building up deep within working life for the last fifty years - namely flexible working, remote working, automation, digitalisation, the expectations of the digitally-native Gen Zs, the whole question of productivity and the new kid on the corporate block: Purpose.[14]

The office, which has been around in a form we recognise for a couple of hundred years, symbolises everything society aspires to: mobility, status, wealth, progress, consumption.[15] But moral philosophy now stalks its boardroom corridors: three years before the pandemic in 2017, the British Academy began its Future of the Corporation project and asked: *"Is the corporation adequately equipped and structured to deal with the challenges of our future? How can it make our society better, and more prosperous for everyone?"*[16]

Indeed, just six months before Covid-19 first hit, nearly 200 major global corporations signed a commitment to corporate purpose which "*affirms the essential role corporations can play in improving our society when CEOs are truly committed to meeting the needs of all stakeholders.*"[17]

Our values are shifting rapidly, embracing not just different physical working practices but emotional ones, or what the RSA calls 'The Empathy Economy.'[18] This systemic shift, combined with the propulsive force of Covid-19, has blown our working lives apart like a tornado. 'The office' has become somewhere so alien to us, so poorly-defined, that it is now in the middle of nowhere.

Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, we have to find our way back home, knowing we will be utterly changed by the process.

Hence the title of both this paper and the wider Workshift Commission, 'The Nowhere Office'. This describes the future of work, the revolution we find ourselves in, and asks both what it means and where it is actually going to end up.

THE JOURNEY AND THE DESTINATION

I welcome with caution and caveat the Nowhere Office. This new hybrid space where 'the office' is, will be multi-site, never 9-5 and flexible in its working patterns. Our working identities, rather like the shifts happening within wider culture around gender and sex, are going to become infinitely more varied and more personalised. This is not perhaps as glamorous as how we identify who and how we love, but it will be no less significant.

Work, with a capital 'W', is going to follow cultural suit and become tailored to the people who do the work, creating a knock-on effect to the entire supply-chain of transport, location, technology and team, that all office-based endeavour involves.

There will no longer be a single one-size-fits-all 'normal' place of work, such as the skyscrapers of the 1930s onwards, which epitomises the silo, the single focus on work, on profit, on growth, and on separation of self from anything outside of 'The Corporation'.

9   O'Meara, L.H. Think different. Monocle, 2020. Available at https://monocle.com/magazine/issues/134/3-think-different/ [accessed 27/01/2021]

10   World Economic Forum. The Future of Jobs Report. 2020. Available at https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020/digest [accessed 27/01/2021]

11   Barber, K. How to Create Your Own Microsoft Teams Virtual Commute, Today. System Assurance, 2020. Available at https://systemsassurance.com/2020/11/27/how-to-create-your-own-microsoft-teams-virtual-commute-today/ [accessed 27/01/2021]

12   Editorial Intelligence. Nowhere Office Survey. 2020

13   Fenton, A. London commuters could save £15,000 if COVID-19 work trends continue. Yahoo! Finance, 2020. Available at https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/london-commuters-could-save-15000-if-covid-19-work-trends-continue-140722018.html [accessed 27/01/2021]

14   Dieppe. A. and Kindberg-Hanlon, G. How to rekindle productivity growth, in five charts. World Bank Blogs, 2020. Available at https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/how-rekindle-productivity-growth-five-charts [accessed 27/01/2021]

15   Chevez, A. and Huppatz, D.J. A short history of the office, 2017. Available at https://theconversation.com/a-short-history-of-the-office-82000 [accessed 27/01/2021]

16   British Academy. About the Future of the Corporation. 2020. Available at https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/future-of-the-corporation/about/ [accessed 27/01/2021]

17   Business Roundtable. Business Roundtable Redefines the Purpose of a Corporation to Promote 'An Economy That Serves All Americans'. 2019. Available at https://www.businessroundtable.org/business-roundtable-redefines-the-purpose-of-a-corporation-to-promote-an-economy-that-serves-all-americans [accessed 27/01/2021]

18   Lockey, A. and Wallace-Stephens, F. Eight Ideas for a New Social Contract. RSA. 2020. Available at https://www.thersa.org/blog/2020/06/social-contract-good-work [accessed 27/01/2021]

We may find that while we travel less around the world – astonishingly, Britains flew abroad more than any other nation in 2020 and pre-Covid business travel accounted for more than 20% of the global hospitality sector - we undertake a different kind of journey.[19]

A journey between different modes of work, in different rhythms to the ones we jammed into office life as we knew it before. We should not be filled with regret. I'm with Edith Piaf: "*Je ne regrette rien*" – and I write as someone who has spent over thirty years pouring in and out of offices.

Because this moment, this Gladwell-esque tipping point has arrived. It should be welcomed, and it should be clarified and defined, its new contours explored so that policies can better fit with our lives.

If anything the term 'Nowhere' should be replaced by 'Liminal'. A liminal space that is the threshold between 'what was and what is next'.

That is not to say that it will be plain sailing. It is likely to be anything but. This paper looks at what the priorities should be and how to get going on this journey. But our destination is not *to* Nowhere – but *through* it, to a better way of organising our working lives.

I'm focusing here on three interconnected issues that the Nowhere Office can champion:

- **Place**. We have to start with place itself. Where we locate ourselves to earn has always been the central pillar of work and its fundamental separation from home has been a given. How will productivity, creativity and community be affected by the shift in balance between individual agency and collective endeavour? What will it mean when greater numbers of people look set to work a good proportion of their time in isolation, rather than with colleagues in the same physical space?

- **Time**. If we are nowhere some of the time or even all of the time, is this the moment to re-evaluate how time itself is allocated and measured? Does this mean we return to the 1930s and embrace the six-hour day, or do we have an opportunity to redistribute the way we value and monitor time spent doing work? Is it possible to have a better work-life balance in a meaningful way by relocating to 'Nowhere'?

- **Social Health**. In literal terms, the challenge to stay safely connected is going to stay real and present for some time, requiring very specific coping strategies to maintain trust and productivity at distance, while protecting mental health. In addition, we must use technology to enhance and create jobs, not destroy or minimise them. Then there is a wider shift around our approach to wellbeing and well-functioning working lives. Can the Nowhere Office provide something of a reset to 'the toxic workplace'?

It is worth clarifying that there are enormous questions about the future of other kinds of work that are not knowledge-based, office-based or so-called 'white collar' work. These include the future of skills, the risks of automation, and of the role of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. They are vital questions, ones which I hope we will be reflecting in the wider Workshift Commission, but I do not seek to address them in this paper.

By addressing the trio of place, time and social Health – where we work, when, and what our social selves require, I hope to edge towards understanding what kind of people will thrive in the new environment and who will be at risk? What kind of jobs will be better at WFH and what kind of jobs will we do badly?

The market will slowly find answers to these questions. The quality of our work in this new environment will, in large part, determine how much of a shift this moment becomes. As the economist Hamish McRae put it to me: "*I have yet to get a response from a service provider saying that because of WFH they are able to deal more swiftly than usual with my request, and several times have got the opposite.*"[20]

But if we let the market be the only decider, we may miss an opportunity to make work better for those who do it. Work should not be a painful experience, to be compensated for with various wellbeing initiatives but a source of connection, identity, purpose and humanity. It shouldn't matter whether the office is somewhere, anywhere, or nowhere; what matters is whether it is a place worth being.

THE SICK BUILDING: WHY WE NEED THE NOWHERE OFFICE

A health warning before we begin. Before we get too misty-eyed about all the things we miss about the office, we must also remember it suffered from a chronic, endemic condition of its own making: stress. As the Stanford academic Jeffrey Pfeffer puts it in his 2018 book Dying for a Paycheck: "*Employers can, either intentionally or through ignorance and neglect, create workplaces that literally sicken and kill people*".[21]

19   Adams, C. More Britons travelled abroad last year than any other nationality, new data reveals, The Independent, 2019. Available at https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/british-travellers-iata-world-air-transport-statistics-a9029366.html [accessed 02/03/2020]
20   Hobsbawm, J. Interview with Hamish MacRae. 2020.
21   Pfeffer, J. Dying for a Paycheck. Harper Business. 2018.

In 2019/20, the Health & Safety Executive reported 17.9 million working days lost at work due to work-related stress and anxiety, with a consistent year-on-year rise.[22] Well before Covid-19, the World Health Organisation called stress "the health epidemic of the 21st Century" and it is more than a decade since European leaders noted that up to 60% of working days lost are due to workplace stress.[23, 24]

Well-meaning employers launch wellbeing programmes and initiatives to patch up the harm they are causing with the work they demand from their staff, instead of trying to reconfigure the process, meaning and functions of work that is the source of harm. And almost no-one tries to alter the work so that, in and of itself, *work is the wellbeing programme*. This is shamefully unambitious. Work is where we locate ourselves emotionally and is, as the psychotherapist and social observer Susie Orbach puts it: "*a dramatically passionate place for many of us.*"[25] I suspect it will continue to be so. Its power to shape our emotions for good and ill cannot be overridden by even the most comprehensive wellbeing care package. Our ambition should be to make work a place (whatever its physical space) of positive meaning. Our passions need to be put to good use, however and wherever we find ourselves working when we emerge from this nowhere state.

A song is going through my head as I write this and it takes me back to being 21 in 1985 and working in my first big office job at Penguin Books in the King's Road in London.

I was surrounded by filing cabinets, desks and people. The Talking Heads song "Road To Nowhere" was high in the charts and the strange dystopian cheer of the melody and its lyrics – "*we're on a road to nowhere, come on inside, we're on a road to nowhere, we'll take that ride*" looped around my head.

This ride through 'Nowhere' should be seen as a series of stops along the way - rather like a commute itself, with people getting on and off from different destinations. Instead of people going to the same place at the same time, in the commute to 'Nowhere', people will be doing different things, doing them in their own ways and, I hope, ending up someplace new.

What is clear is that we do need to alter quite substantially the way we look at work, do work, and value work. The anthropologist James Suzman, author of Work: A History of How We Spend our Time, argues for a radical rethink away from "*the claw-like grasp that scarcity economics has held over our working lives*".[26] The recent slew of books such as Sarah Jaffe's 'Work Won't Love you Back: How Devotion to our Jobs keeps us Exploited, Exhausted and Alone' or Robert Wringham's 'I'm Out: How to Make an Exit' are testament to the fact the society is ready to look at different models of work, with a lively discussion in which I hope this paper plays its part.[27]

22   IOSH magazine. 17.9 million working days lost due to mental ill-health. 2020. Available at https://www.ioshmagazine.com/2020/11/05/179-million-working-days-lost-due-mental-ill-health [accessed 27/01/2021]
23   Business News Daily. Employees Reveal How Stress Affects Their Jobs. 2020. Available at https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/2267-work-place-stress-health-epidemic-perventable-employee-assistance-programs.html [accessed 27/01/2021]
24   European Agency for Safety and Health At Work. OSH in figures: stress at work - facts and figures. 2009. Available at https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/osh-figures-stress-work-facts-and-figures [accessed 27/01/2021]
25   Orbach, S. "Work is where we live: Emotional literacy and psychological dimensions of the various relationships there". Emotion, Space & Society, 2008. Available at https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1755458608000169 [accessed 27/01/2021]
26   Suzman, J. Work: A History of How We Spend Our Time, Bloomsbury 2020
27   Wringham, R. I'm Out: How to Make an Exit, R, Unbound, 2021; Jaffe, S. Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted and Alone, Hurst 2021.

THE NOWHERE ZONE
PLACE IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

"A word on the humble desk. To date it has resisted all claims to its demise, and all attempts to force the pace of evolutionary obsolescence, principally because, in its simplicity, it works"

– Neil Usher, The Elemental Workplace[28]

Shortly after the financial crash of 2008, the legendary British architect Frank Duffy, pioneer of thinking and design around the workplace, gave an interview to the Architectural League of New York. He noted presciently that: "*The building isn't a useful unit of analysis anymore, because organizations are always bigger or smaller and constantly changing. At least half of them operate in a virtual world, in a placeless world.*"[29]

That's quite a shift – officially. Harvard Business Review recently gave a cover story to "The Work from Anywhere Future: Lessons from Organisations that Have Made the Transition and Flourished" – citing a slew of businesses which are actively embracing hybrid models of remote working for the foreseeable future. These are brand names: Tata Consultancy Services, Gitlab, Twitter, Shopify, Siemens. The author, Prithwiraj Choudhary, Associate Professor of Harvard Business School, cites productivity gains of over 4.4% in "WFH organisations" and significant sustainability savings on lowered commutes.[30]

As a recent article in the New Yorker put it: "*It turns out that work, which is what the office was supposed to be for, is possible to do from somewhere else*"[31]

Certainly the impact on city centres is unsustainable if anything like the current shutdown remains AC ("After Covid"). The loss of all the bars, restaurants, coffee shops, transport systems in city centres is substantial. Though they may migrate to former commuter towns and recycle the jobs back into suburbia, it's more likely that only a fraction of revenue will be replicated in the suburbs. To give a scale of the loss, the City of Westminster in London lost 63% of its gross added value in 2020, representing £48 billion of economic activity.[32]

ABH (ANYWHERE BUT HOME): THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING FROM HOME

So is this 'placeless world', The Nowhere Office, something to be entirely welcomed? Is it the only future? Are we all going to float off into what one executive told Professor Choudhary was 'talent in

25   Usher, N. The Elemental Workplace. LID Publishing. 2018.
29   Genevro, R. A Walk with Frank Duffy. Urban Omnibus, 2009. Available at https://urbanomnibus.net/2009/07/a-walk-with-frank-duffy/ [accessed 27/01/2021]
30   Choudhury, P.R. HOur Work-from-Anywhere Future. Harvard Business Review. 2020. Available at https://hbr.org/2020/11/our-work-from-any-where-future [accessed 27/01/2021]
31   Seabrook, J. Has the Pandemic Transformed the Office Forever?, The New Yorker, 2021. Available at https://www.newyorker.com/maga-zine/2021/02/01/has-the-pandemic-transformed-the-office-forever [accessed 15/01/2021]
32   Giles, C. and Thomas, D. Cities Count Cost of Lasting Exodus from Office. Financial Times, 2020. Available at https://www.ft.com/con-tent/203cc83c-72b0-49c9-bea5-6fb38735a8fc [accessed 27/01/2021]

the cloud' and live (and work) happily ever after? Not necessarily. Or rather, not completely.

Firstly, WFH is much less of a universal winner than you might imagine. The pros and cons differ substantially according to personal circumstance, socio-economic class, age and - in particular - gender. Inequality is an enormous factor in determining who benefits and who suffers. The poorer you are, the harder it is to access the basics like a decent desk, a quiet place to work and a reliable internet connection, let alone a ring light, an ergonomic chair and airpod earphones to give you a reliable but discreet audio connection during your calls.

No, not everyone's home is a castle. Or a fit-for-purpose workspace. Christina Lamb reported on the privations of families in Tower Hamlets for The Sunday Times, quoting one exhausted resident saying: "*We're all feeling suffocated, both physically but also mentally.*"[33]

Secondly, there is presenteeism and surveillance. For many on a purely practical level, the ideal place to work is ABH (Anywhere But Home) not least because of presenteeism that is ever-present even in cyberspace. Microsoft was rightly criticised for introducing surveillance software on its Office365 suite of products.[34] Anecdotally, a friend with a particularly control-freak boss remarked that she had to find a way to pee while staying on a zoom call on mute so she would not be accused of not working while at home.

An extreme case, possibly, but Professor André Spicer, head of the faculty of management at City's Business School (formerly Cass Business School) told me that:

> "*We are seeing the rise of digital presenteeism now - this is people engaged in all sorts of symbolic activities to show that they are there and they are important. The danger is this kind of online impression management could take up the space of actual work.*"

It is well-known that the always-on, digitally pervasive nature of modern life is playing havoc with our mental health - not to mention public trust in truth or the general time-suck of it all. But there are added difficulties when instilling boundaries between who you are privately and professionally if the pinging of an incoming email or Zoom call happens in your home – even if you can press mute or not show your background. It is an invasion of privacy and people don't yet have the skills to manage boundaries.

One of the good things about going to work is just that: the beginning, middle and end of it. The Nowhere Office presents a future where these boundaries have dissolved and this needs careful management. Before Covid-19, our smartphones and laptops were already bringing our emails and notifications into our homes and even our bedrooms, but now the whole office is there.

HOME ASSEMBLY: MANAGEMENT IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

Working from home will not be the same as being freelance or self-employed. The Nowhere Office will have employees not on furlough but on call. This will require management to go beyond watchful presentee-monitoring. Managers are going to have to get an awful lot better and more agile at managing distributed workforces.

I spent a couple of years on the European Workforce Institute Board watching the way software capital management works. I saw the success of the 'work your way' approach of its sponsor, Kronos. Essentially, companies like Kronos combine extremely cutting-edge software around the absolutely simple principle of time management and combine it with a high prioritisation on choice and worker motivation. Their model does not impose schedules so much as consult around them and designs systems to reflect individual requirements. It's complex but also impressive.

Most offices are not scheduled as precisely as the kind of organisations which capital management software is designed for, i.e. factories and shop floors. But this is one of the big shifts to Nowhere working: a new hybrid which utilises the best technology can offer, while returning to a pre-industrial model of small groups of workers who often live where they work.

Expect a new raft of software and HR systems designed to map where people are and when. The Nowhere Office becomes a place which is both virtual – the cloud will remain paramount to enabling us to work – and physical in terms of the zig-zagging between different places of work including the home, the cafe and the co-working space.

So in practice, this new model should either be rooted at a specific place for work, where one can be paid enough to travel and have childcare costs factored in, or we should be able to design a schedule which assembles a personal set of work

33   Lamb, C. 'I come home and want to scream . . . everything's much harder this time'. The Sunday Times, 2021. Available at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-come-home-and-want-to-scream-everythings-much-harder-this-time-6dxv35nph [accessed 27/01/2021]
34   Ingram, M. Microsoft's new "Productivity Score" helps employers spy on workers. World Socialist Web Site, 2020. Available at https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2020/11/30/micr-n30.html [accessed 27/01/2021]

shifts. A schedule where we can be at home but not working, or agree with colleagues when and where to meet in order to do something which, by mutual agreement, would be better done in-person.

In other words, presenteeism as we know it should be replaced by prioritisation. If you have to be somewhere, in place, there will have to be a far better reason for it than just 'because everyone else is'.

For now, I'm going to look at the key uses of still having a place we go to, sometime and with some regularity, which we still call 'the office' – and why.

LEARNING AND LEAVING: TRAINING IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

While physical and financial specifics determine an individual's preferred location for work, I've identified two types of people who will have very different preferences: I call them Learners and Leavers. They tend to be split evenly across age demographics of under 35 (Learners) and over 35 (Leavers).

These types are both going to have the 100-year life identified by Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott, where re-skilling is continuous and "multi-stage" episodic approaches to lifetime careers makes more sense.[35]

The Learner is new to work and will need in-person training. This isn't simply a question of community for the sake of fun: interaction is a source of learning, too, especially for more junior colleagues. Missing the office is especially hard for the young. A survey showed that the under 35 cohort missed the office the most — 59% reported they had trouble staying motivated outside the office, and 44% said they were lonely.[36] As Martin Wolf, Chief Economic Commentator and columnist of The Financial Times told me "*the ones who are going to be most adversely affected by the closure of the office are young people for pretty obvious reasons: they want to be in the city and meeting people*". Learning is self-evidently done at an intergenerational level and on the job. It's why the government created the apprenticeship scheme.[37] It benefits the young more than the old. Martin observed that:

> "*If I work at home for the FT it doesn't really matter, I've been there for thirty three years, I know exactly what I'm doing, I'm not going*

> *to acquire something completely new from colleagues. I know what they think, alas. But somebody just joining the FT or in the first few years, trying to work out what this craft is about - and this applies elsewhere too – an organisation has to train young people to do the things that older people do and the way they do that is work side-by-side.*"[38]

This point was echoed by Rose Eccleshare, a millennial advertising executive, exploring the benefits of peer-to-peer interaction for personal development:

> "*The actual work itself is probably easier to get done on your own. I'm much more efficient. But for me, it's that ten minutes after a meeting where if you've had a good meeting, or if you've had a bad meeting, if you're in the same room you can all have this sort of shared sense of what needs to get done, how it went, and… Essentially all of your anxiety dissipates because it's part of someone else's problem as well. Whereas if you have a bad meeting on Zoom, or a good meeting, you just hang up, and you're like, oh my gosh, okay, what just happened? What do I need to do? What were the outtakes? How did thingy find that that went? Like did I say something weird in that meeting? There's no feedback*".

The Learner does not of course have to be age-specific. The more the skills agenda – seen as the salvation of jobs in an era of automation and de rigueur for any large organisation - matches the 100-year life, the more we can imagine drop-in academy classrooms in offices where you come not to work but to learn in order to work.[39]

The Leaver is different. The Leaver can't really wait to get home to everything else going on there, both in order to cater for caring responsibilities, the cost of which remains financially and emotionally high, but also for control and balance. When you know your craft and technology frees you to do your job remotely, counting the hours until you leave the office becomes *de facto* a countdown itself.

The Leaver lives what I have called 'the blended self' life and others have called "the work-life merge" – less of a binary choice between presenteeism and absenteeism - but something which reflects the priorities we tend to place on the life part of 'work-

35   Gratton, L. and Scott, A. The Shift towards the 100-Year Life. Fujitsu, 2020. Available at https://www.fujitsu.com/global/vision/in-sights/201712event2/ [accessed 27/01/2021]
36   Dodd, V. Working from Home Survey Key Findings. Skillcast, 2020. Available at https://www.skillcast.com/blog/working-from-home-survey-findings [accessed 27/01/2021]
37   HM Government. Find an apprenticeship, 2021. https://www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship [accessed 27/01/2021]
38   Hobsbawm, J. Interview with Martin Wolf. 2020.
39   Manpower Group. Digital Workforce Transformation: Skills Revolution. 2020. Available at https://www.manpowergroup.com/digital-work-force-transformation/skills-revolution [accessed 27/01/2021]

life' as we get older, get hitched, get houseproud, get kids.[40, 41]

The Nowhere Office is much more of a friendly place for Leavers than it is for Learners. For the young and those new to working life, the office should feel like a university, a place to learn and hone social skills.

But of course we are all part Learner and part Leaver. And often something in between (back to 'liminal').

GENERATION NOWHERE: PLACE AND COLLABORATION IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

Let's shift to the bricks and mortar of place. It's more than a decade since WeWork blew apart the model of fixed skyscrapers. The co-working space came of age for those who took entirely for granted working in the "Triple Revolution" of the internet, social media and mobile.[42]

By the time Gen Y's 'digitally native' successors Gen Z were working they had become a new demographic entirely, with its own hashtag: #GenMobile.[43] For them, one thing ranks at the top of the list other than pay itself: mobility.[44] Partly as a result of these innovations, we've lived for some time already with a shift from a fixed physical workplace to something more placeless. This can now be seen as an early stepping stone to The Nowhere Office.

A couple of years before WeWork began, Tim Ferris burst onto the scene with his book the 4-Hour Work Week in 2007 - the year that saw the launch of the iPhone, Facebook, Twitter and Airbnb.[45] As Ferris put it: "*Working every hour from 9-5 isn't the goal: it's simply the structure most people use, whether it's necessary or not*".[46] The book title is not a misprint - he really did mean you can work four hours a week, not a day. And he made it seem possible and more than this: desirable. The book not only hit the zeitgeist spot but the jackpot too: it shot to the top of the bestseller lists and stayed there for seven years.

I'm reminded of another bestseller about work. My favourite children's book is Richard Scarry's What Do People Do All Day? The American author sold 100 million books in the twentieth century telling

illustrated stories of human working life through funny, poignant, wacky creatures (Lowly Worm and Sally Cat) who are always busy, and always working. One character, Able Baker, is a mouse who is always dwarfed by a series of gigantic ovens and loaves. Another, Mr Fixit, is a fox who repairs things like cars (which are really pickles or pencils).

These gorgeous characters don't work from a fixed place but from Busytown where they spend a lot of time scooting around between one place and another. I can't think of a better fictional location for the new Generation Nowhere worker. Connected, busy, with personality and personal lives, but active, doing, building and creating.

If the literary ancestor of The Nowhere Office is Busytown, then the physical prototype may be co-working spaces. For this generation, there will be three kinds of places to work from outside of the home: repurposed offices, coffeeshops, and co-working spaces will, no pun intended, get a new lease of life.

All will reflect this fundamental shift: work is where you drop in and out of, not where you spend large fixed amounts of time. Even after its financial meltdown in 2019, WeWork remains huge and, interestingly, over half its revenues come from businesses with over 500 employees.[47] In other words, even big organisations wanted to create spaces which reflect an intimacy, a scaled-down approach to working which was becoming fashionable, even before our fear of physical contact with other workers could be imagined.

Why? Culture and collaboration. I'll address this more shortly in the section on Social Health, but a word about one thing which works best with others, in a room, for work: the Brainstorm. The Brainstorm has become popularised on screen: the cops throwing around theories as they watch the grisly photo board of victims and try to deduce who and where the killer could be; the creatives in the TV production company (see Nisha Ganatra's 2019 film Late Night for some great scenes).

The brainstorm is where the point of an office really comes in, as anyone who's tried to conduct one online will tell you. The internet isn't a substitute for the post-it note or the whiteboard marker,

40   Hobsbawm, J. Fully Connected: Surviving and Thriving in an Age of Overload. Bloomsbury Business, 2017
41   Hinsliff, G. The merge: how our work-life balance is changing. Guardian, 2013. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/money/2013/jan/01/merge-work-life-balance [accessed 28/01/2021]
42   Rainie, L. and Wellman, B. Networked: The New Social Operating System. The MIT Press. 2012.
43   Bean, S. Digital mobility to work anytime, anywhere is key to job satisfaction. Workplace Insight, 2016. Available at https://workplaceinsight.net/ability-work-anytime-anywhere-now-key-job-satisfaction/ [accessed 28/01/2021]
44   Ibid.
45   Currie, T.C. 2007: The Year We Reinvented Everything. The Newstack, 2017. Available at https://thenewstack.io/world-changed-2007/ [accessed 28/01/2021]
46   Ferris, T. The 4-Hour Work Week. Crown Publishers, 2007.
47   Huet, E. WeWork Sees More than $1 Billion in Revenue, But Growth Tumbles. Bloomberg, 2020. Available at https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-15/wework-sees-more-than-1-billion-in-revenue-but-growth-tumbles [accessed 28/01/2021]

however much the tech companies pretend there is. And as Thomas Roulet wrote in Forbes, in January 2021: "*The energy and enthusiasm triggered by brainstorming and meeting in person will be essential in pushing forward the ideas we need for the recovery.*"[48]

The great management thinker Charles Handy memorably said that: "*in a knowledge economy, a good business is a community with a purpose, not a piece of property*".[49] Writing recently, he envisaged the office of the future where you can escape from "the drudgeries of home" while benefiting from a space designed "like a first class lounge at an airport terminal", where the comforts of companionship are managed alongside top tech support, bookable meeting spaces and good food.[50]

As Chief Financial Officers realise they can legitimately limit ballooning executive travel costs and ground business travel on health or cost grounds, there will be much more mingling between different class layers at work, rather than the rarified silos of the actual first class airport lounge – or at least there could be.[51]

HOT PROPERTY: OFFICE SPACE IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

All of which makes the politics of property very hot indeed.[52] How can you meaningfully invest in office space that hardly anyone will be in for any length of time, but that has to function as a space for collaboration and creativity? Will we need offices at all, or just hotels and venues for breakouts, brainstorms and socialising?

To see just how quickly old assumptions have been usurped by events, take a look at a beautifully detailed and technical document called HM Government's Government Workplace Design Guide.[53] It was published in August 2020 by a subset of The Cabinet Office called The Government Property Agency which is tasked with "delivering great workplaces and ways of working for civil servants".

Reading it is like stepping through a looking glass into a different version of reality where Covid-19 never happened. It covers everything from where WiFi points should go in a building to its loading bays, here in 150 beautifully laid out pages of 'Version 1.1'. It outlines a central vision of becoming "the minimum standard for the entire central government office estate" but there's a big problem: it is predicated on the last twenty years of trends in working life, and not the next twenty.

Suddenly, we seem light years away from the moment as recently as 2017, when Bloomberg opened its new European HQ in London over 3.2 acres, in order to house 4,000 workers. Bloomberg has always invested in building as symbols and citadels of capitalism. I vividly recall visiting the first London HQ of Bloomberg in the early 2000s. Mike Bloomberg, one of the early tech titans, made a point of prioritising presenteeism with his workforce by installing gigantic all-you-can-eat sweetie bars and kitchens which were the first thing any visitor to the building saw.

Bloomberg's approach to the office epitomises a twenty-year love affair Big Money and Big Tech has had with big buildings. Historic England published a paper entitled 'The Late Twentieth Century Commercial Office' which noted "the return of the tall building to the urban skyline" – a reference to the exponential city-funded growth of commercial property which by 2016 represented over 10% of the UK's net wealth.[54, 55]

It's worth remembering that the trend to make offices as lavishly and achingly hip as possible was to attract and retain workers in both a competitive market but was also seen as a cost-saving in the long-term. Glamorous offices were to be investments in the future of workers who began to be called 'Talent' around the turn of the century. It's hard to beat Google's Silicon Valley Googleplex in its heyday for this symbolism: all 26 acres of land including swimming pools, eighteen cafeterias and the bean bag culture which was like catnip to the digitally-native millennials.

48   Roulet, T. 2021: Another Year of Remote Work During which we will Need the Office More than Ever. Forbes, 2021. Available at https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasroulet/2021/01/05/2021-another-year-of-remote-work-during-which-we-will-need-the-office-more-than-ever/?sh=2d7bfd215f4b [accessed 28/01/2021]
49   Handy, C. Charles Handy: My Fantasy Office. The Idler, 2020. Available at https://www.idler.co.uk/article/charles-handy-club-culture/ [accessed 28/01/2021]
50   Ibid.
51   Skapinker, M. Even post-Covid, frequent flyers face more time on the ground. The Financial Times, 2021. Available at https://www.ft.com/content/8e878c58-f2d8-4ab7-8be6-23207e491aae [accessed 28/01/2021]
52   Kane, C. Where is My Office: Reimagining the Workplace for the 21st Century", Bloomsbury, 2020
53   Government Property Agency. Government Workplace Design Guide. HM Government, 2020. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-government-workplace-design-guide [accessed 28/01/2021]
54   Historic England. The Late 20th-Century Commercial Office. 2013. Available at https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/iha-late-20th-century-commercial-office/heag131-commercial-offices-iha/ [accessed 28/01/2021]
55   Property Industry Alliance. Property Data Report Newsflash 2019. 2019. Available at https://propertyindustryalliance.org/property-data-report/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

I'm grateful to New York architect David Katz for pointing out to me that the history of the office has always reflected the zeitgeist and that, arguably, the modern office as we knew it pre-Covid may owe much to the desires for sparse hygienic spaces after the Spanish Flu.[56, 57]

While sunk costs in fixed office space are likely to take at least five years to recover, according to commercial real estate giant Cushman & Wakefield we can expect a mushrooming of small and agile hybrid workspace developers, rapidly re-designing what David Katz calls 'the live-work-space'.[58] He predicts a shift back to mixed-use buildings which are partly residential, with a far greater use in cities of the sidewalk. A big winner will be urban campaigners for serious street-life and a clear loser (again) will be the car.

No-one thinks office occupancy will do anything other than decline significantly over the next few years or that there will be significant migration of working space from cities to towns. Nor does anyone think that the new fashion for fitting out homes as offices will be as marked as the flip from high heels to trainers is proving in fashion itself.[59, 60, 61] He

Suddenly, the boardroom and the rest of the workforce are sharing the same concern at the same time: survival. This makes progress much more possible. It ought to be the case that buildings become designed around creativity, collaboration and personalised productivity. Successful organisations serve their customers and clients and adapt their products and services.

So it will be with the office of the future. Where it is won't matter. What happens to workers and what the result is, will. Of course you have to want this change and shift. You have to be energised by the purpose agenda, or sufficiently worried about attracting Gen Z, or just to have woken up and smelled the wind of change blowing towards the Nowhere Office - whether you like it or not.

There is a risk, of course, that the scale of the challenge will be ignored because we have become accustomed to a debate about the "future of work": years of constant anxiety about job security in anticipation of automation, which the workplace was only just adjusting to, with a considerable emphasis on new skills.[62]

There is a risk that, in the end, the endless variety will be too complex or confusing to implement (even if it delivers the simplicity of engagement, productivity and purpose). But someone very wise once said this to me in business and I have never forgotten it: "*What does it cost you not to do it?*".

This is a very good question indeed. Doing nothing won't avoid the Nowhere Office or prevent it happening, but doing something, and opening our arms to the changes it represents will, I believe, contribute favourably to a shift in working life and what it can achieve.

More than this, if we can change not only where we work but when, and combine this with improving the social connectedness of working life then we can really move the needle on a lot which has felt stuck and stagnant.

The next two sections set out some ideas for how to start that journey.

56   Hobsbawm, J. Interview with David Katz. 2020.
57   Philcox, T. Corbusier on my mind: Design thinking and post-covid living. Open University, 2020. Available at http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/design/corbusier-on-my-mind-design-thinking-and-post-covid-living/ [accessed 28/01/2021]
58   Thorpe, K. Global Office Impact Study & Recovery Timing Report. Cushman & Wakefield, 2020. Available at https://www.cushman-wakefield.com/en/insights/covid-19/global-office-impact-study-and-recovery-timing-report [accessed 28/01/2021]
59   Ibid.
60   Jenkins, S. The age of the office is over – the future lies in Britain's commuter towns. The Guardian, 2020. Available at https://www.the-guardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/13/office-future-britain-commuter-towns-home-working [accessed 28/01/2021]
61   Eccles, L. High Heels Laid Low by Lockdown Run on Trainers. The Times, 2020. Available at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/high-heels-laid-low-by-lockdown-run-on-trainers-3gwv9j0q7 [accessed 28/01/2021]
62   Bughin, J. et al.. Skill shift: Automation and the future of the workforce. McKinsey Global Institute, 2018. Available at https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/skill-shift-automation-and-the-future-of-the-workforce [accessed 28/01/2021]

LATERAL SHIFT
TIME IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

"Buildings aren't made out of glass, concrete and stone: they're made out of time, layers of time"

– Frank Duffy[63]

No matter how seismic the shifts we are experiencing in our lives – think of the babies who never see a visitor in their home, or the cleaners, doctors, front line workers whose urban city lives have exposed them to the greatest risks of the pandemic on a daily basis – one thing does not change. The measurement of time.

There remains 168 hours in the week, one third of which we sleep. The distractions and options for how we spend our time (picking up our smartphones every twelve minutes, for instance) cannot shift this immutable element.[64] Time is finite.

The end of the commute and the shift to working from home was first seen as a great boon to those wanting to reclaim time. "Basically I'm getting three hours of my life back when I'm not commuting," an equities trader from the Home Counties, who before Covid-19 would catch a train at 5.40am every weekday, told The Times.[65]

Although the right to request flexible work has been in law since 2003, it is only when every gender has been forced to work from home that the stigma has disappeared.[66] New norms have arisen in weeks, which were in the works (no pun intended) for decades before.

THE P-WORD: PRODUCTIVITY IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

Time-saving quickly became associated with productivity gains, and let's face it, the world of work has needed some of that.

Productivity, which in technical terms is the rate of output relative to a unit of input, has stagnated for years and years. Well before Covid, the OECD was estimating the lowest growth in productivity since 2008-9, with the UK staying stubbornly at 2% growth per year ever since the financial crisis.[67, 68] The UK is not alone in having 'a productivity puzzle' and failing to solve the question of why, if everyone has been working so hard from such lovely shiny buildings, has it not improved?

59   Genevro, R. A Walk with Frank Duffy. Urban Omnibus, 2009. Available at https://urbanomnibus.net/2009/07/a-walk-with-frank-duffy/ [accessed 27/01/2021]

64   Ofcom. A Decade of Digital Dependency. 2018. Available at https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2018/decade-of-digital-dependency [accessed 28/01/2021]

65   Martin, B. Hosking, P. Clarence-Smith, L. Why Remote Control is the Future of the Workplace. The Times, 2020. Available at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/why-remote-control-is-the-future-of-the-workplace-w2xb8hc25 [accessed 28/01/2021]

66   O'Connor, E. Will lockdown see the end of presenteeism and finally give working mums career equality? We are the City, 2020. Available at https://wearethecity.com/will-lockdown-see-the-end-of-presenteeism-and-finally-give-working-mums-career-equality/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

67   Reuters. Productivity stagnant despite global stimulus: WEF. 2019. Available at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-economy-competitiveness-idUSKBN1WN2IN [accessed 28/01/2021]

68   ONS. Labour productivity, UK: July to September 2019. 2019. Available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/bulletins/labourproductivity/julytoseptember2019#labour-productivity-growth-compared-with-the-same-quarter-a-year-ago [accessed 28/01/2021]

Zoom zoomed to the top of the teleconferencing world like a pop band surging to number 1, growing 169% year-on-year.[69] *"I'm able to get everything accomplished just like before, and I think everyone else is finding they can too"*, one of 600 white-collar workers from across the U.S told researchers in an article for the Harvard Business Review in July 2020.[70]

But productivity is a slippery fish to measure against time spent, especially when some of the productivity tech designed to save time turns out to be something of a time-suck.[71] Ashley Freidlin, founder of Guild, a new professional social network, summarised all the different possible platforms and permutations for managing projects and productivity: the array was dizzying.[72] Is the net effect meaningful connection or a blizzard of endlessly layered choices, leaving people spending time playing catch-up as much as actual catching up?

GLIDING TIME: WHY THE NOWHERE OFFICE SHOULD GO BEYOND WORKING HOURS

BC (Before Covid) how we spent time at work was often geared around presenteeism and a set number of hours worked in a sequence, not reflective of the nuance of any type of work. Time was regarded as one-size-fits all. So it makes sense that when we settle back into work we should use our time differently. I look at it like this: at the moment we measure time like an egg-timer or a credit card, we watch ourselves spend it until it runs out. Burnout is the crisis of not being able to stop. Overspending time (and underspending on sleep) is almost always associated with burnout.

You might think that this is the moment to embrace the campaign for simply working fewer hours. A brief flashback: the prototype movement for modern flexible attitudes to work began on the factory floor in the 1930s, when Kellogg's famous six-hour day was introduced to create more jobs with shorter

shifts. This model is actually pretty similar to the 4 Day Week campaign, more of which in a moment.[73]

Of course, our attitude to time at work has changed frequently throughout history. In the 1960s, flexible working became "Gleizeit" or "gliding time" in Germany, as an impetus to stagger factory shifts and avoid traffic bottlenecks on the way in to work.[74] Fast-forward to the 1980s, and the white collar worker was as interested in working schedules as those who literally punched the clock. This time their interest had a different name: work-life balance. By this point, the number of women in the workplace here in the UK had increased to 29%.[75] While 87% of all those working part-time were women, it was no picnic – more like '*barely getting by with all taking and no givin*', as Dolly Parton sang in her classic 1980 song "9-5".

Google has now enshrined a 3-day weekend for the duration of the pandemic and so the momentum would appear to be on carving up time in a linear way, reducing quite simply the days and hours worked.[76]

I have to say: I don't think this is going to work. It looks on paper more simple – and to customise working schedules is clearly considerably more complicated – but if we want to close the productivity gap, address the question of Purpose, and keep our wellbeing, then a simple 'work less in fixed hours' approach may add, not decrease, complexity.

Because just as you can divide workers into, "*Learners and Leavers*" as I did earlier, both requiring different kinds of office space, so too will their use of time will be different. A Leaver may wish for a four-day week, and embrace time when they are fully disconnected, but a Learner might like to dribble their hours around constant connectivity.

Do I want my GP to work a four day week when I want to see her on what would be the fifth? I'm afraid I do not. I'm happy, by the way, for people whose jobs have less flexibility to earn a premium for

69   Sherman, N. Zoom sees sales boom amid pandemic. BBC News, 2020. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52884782 [accessed 28/01/2021]

70   Bernstein, E. et al. The Implications of Working Without an Office. Harvard Business Review, 2020. Available at https://hbr.org/2020/07/the-implications-of-working-without-an-office [accessed 28/01/2021]

71   Vozza, S. Meetings aren't the biggest time waster at work. This thing is. Fast Company, 2019. Available at https://www.fastcompany.com/90411686/meetings-arent-the-biggest-time-waster-at-work-this-thing-is [accessed 28/01/2021]

72   Friedlin, A. Platforms for building professional communities - on mobile and web. Guild, 2021. Available at https://guild.co/blog/platforms-for-building-professional-communities-on-mobile-and-web/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

73   Four-Day Week Campaign. 2020. Available at https://www.4dayweek.co.uk/?fbclid=IwAR2MkWEN24VU-qabJ30BVxwzfy_qPuM6ssmoagf-MT7ppsnvJY2cXFlb-cD0 [accessed 28/01/2021]

74   Zentura. Understanding: Flexible Working. 2020. Available at https://zentura-eu.com/blog/understanding-flexible-working [accessed 28/01/2021]

75   ONS. Long-term trends in UK Employment: 1861 to 2018. 2019. Available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/april2019/longtermtrendsinukemployment1861to2018 [accessed 28/01/2021]

76   Times of India. Google officially declares three-day weekend for employees to ensure 'Collective Wellbeing' during this pandemic. 2020. Available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/work/google-officially-declares-three-day-weekend-for-employees-to-ensure-collective-wellbeing-during-this-pandemic/articleshow/77975075.cms [accessed 28/01/2021]

the lack of it – but that's an economic argument for another time and place.

But the way one worker measures the value of their own time has to be set against its impact on others. We cannot keep working in silos. When we are not working, because we are resting, or doing other work, we have to acknowledge the loss to someone – a patient, a colleague, a project – that this absence of time brings, or we cannot truly value it.

This conversation needs to come into the room as it were. To look not just at blocks of time as something to reduce, but perhaps as resources to be redistributed or used more wisely and made more productive.

For this reason, much as I would like to say I support the idea of a four-day week in principle, I think we now know that a fixed and inflexible argument for shorter shifts or shorter hours is not keeping pace with The Nowhere Office. Not only do those dishing out work need as much flexibility as possible, but those doing it need more of an agile approach to time than simply lopping off one-fifth of the working week. While I agree completely that there is more to life than just work, and that working less but more effectively is critical, until we tear down the walls of our attitude to the length of time and the width of it, we will be stuck in an unproductive rut, wherever our walls of work happen to be.

TIME ZONES: LATERAL TIME MANAGEMENT IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

There is precedence somewhere else entirely for how a standardised approach is less effective than a customised one: diet and nutrition. For years we all ate in ignorance of our metabolic rate and the reality that one person's 500 calories weighs more heavily on them than another, but now we know different. [77] The one-size-fits-all office is, no pun intended, no more relevant than the one-size-fits all diet. Whether one person spends 80% of their time in an office and another 20% will matter because someone has to schedule the moment that they coincide, both in terms of office space and in terms of workflow.

Here is where new technology could and almost certainly will come into play. Already people are dreaming up new algorithms and ways of scheduling hours, managing hybrid meetings, and facilitating asynchronous discussions. But we cannot simply rely on someone else to invent something to solve the

challenges. We need to think differently about time itself. I think we should move from thinking of time as linear to lateral. To see time as in blocks or zones, side-by-side, in which we do different things in different ways. We will still have the same amount of time of course, but we will use it very differently.

In other words, we should see time not as a credit card with a limit, where we just spend until we're maxed out, but perhaps as a set of different money boxes, each with their own capacity and purpose. At the very least we should reframe time away from being rigidly linear to a far more fluid lateral flow. A river and not a stagnant pond.

The bestselling productivity author Cal Newport recently wrote:

> *"Imagine if, through some combination of new management thinking and technology, we could introduce processes that minimize the time required to talk about work or fight off random tasks flung our way by equally harried co-workers, and instead let us organize our days around a small number of discrete objectives. Productivity, we must recognize, can never be entirely personal. It must be connected to a system that we can study, analyze, and improve."* [78]

Someone else echoing this new approach is Professor Lynda Gratton, Chair of the World Economic Forum's Council on the New Agenda for Work, Wages and Jobs Creation who talks of "asynchronous schedules", advocating a separation of tasks relative to the type of time they take (Cal Newport coined the phrase 'Deep Work' to reflect this too). She points out that: "*while some tasks are best fulfilled when people can focus and work on their own, others require co-ordinating in real time on projects with in-the-moment dialogue and feedback. Technological advances have enabled the design of synchronised time that is place-agnostic and where it is possible to create opportunities for fruitful, real-time virtual interactions.*" [79]

It's also a matter of how you spend the minutes and hours of the day. For some, it has been invaluable to plough through emails while pretending to pay attention to a boring online meeting. For others, the working day has collapsed into an endless soup of undifferentiated time that eats productivity as fast as it consumes wellbeing.

77   Lawton, G. Why there is no such thing as a healthy diet that works for everyone. New Scientist, 2020. Available at https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24732990-600-why-there-is-no-such-thing-as-a-healthy-diet-that-works-for-everyone/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

78   Newport, C. The Rise and Fall of Getting Things Done. The New Yorker, 2020. Available at https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-rise-and-fall-of-getting-things-done [accessed 28/01/2021]

79   Gratton. L. Four Principles to Ensure Hybrid Work is Productive Work. MIT Sloan Management Review, 2020. Available at https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/four-principles-to-ensure-hybrid-work-is-productive-work/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

HABIT: PERSONAL TIME MANAGEMENT IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

The Nowhere Office will need not exactly rules about time, but a far more sophisticated understanding of how it shifts – across our day, across our work and across our lives. The writer Andrew St George has pointed out to me that our lives are generally one thousand months long. Let's start to measure what we want to do with all of our lives, not just the here and now.

It takes 66 days to start and keep a habit but the value of a habit is that it cuts down on decision fatigue and the feelings of a lack of control, which for many epitomises working life.[80]

We need to start to develop some simple habits around what we do with our time, and when in the day. To make time by acknowledging where we spend it and acting accordingly – with purpose, with selection.

The single biggest piece of advice I can give you is to treat your diary like your body: to only put something in it, whether at home or work, that you actually believe is a good way to spend your time. If we could marry a new rhythm of work, not just to when we individually feel most productive (yes, I'm a 'Morning Person') but to the different kinds of time we spend – sitting and emailing being different to walking and talking for instance – and if we combine that with place, in order to be most productive, most engaged, then we could begin to develop the best habit of all: working well.

80   UCL. Science of Habits, 2020. Available at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-care/research/behavioural-science-and-health/research/energy-balance-cancer/healthy-habits/science-habits [accessed 28/01/2021]

MEETING PLACE
SOCIAL HEALTH IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

"We need social connection. The social relationships at work are also part of meaning"

– Hilary Cottam[81]

I confess that whilst writing this from my front room I felt I missed something. Not an office exactly, but the buzz of…noise. Luckily, help was at hand, a gloriously simple website called The Sound of Colleagues which plays a cheery low-key mix of ringing phones and coffee machines.[82] But sadly, none of these ghostly sounds were able to actually make me a coffee or ask how my day was going.

One huge drawback of WFH and the end of a structured office is that there are no water cooler moments, no chance encounters, no gossipy margins after meetings or before an event, to shoot the breeze with a colleague.

Humans are social beings, first and foremost. Neuroscience shows that the default position of a humming brain at rest runs a constant motor asking pretty much one question: who do we love, and who loves us?[83] We want to be connected.

In a digital age, this connection to others for friendship, relationships and networks, in order to exchange information, ideas and passions is a form of health and I call it Social Health.[84] Well before Covid-19, our working lives were curiously devoid of strategies for social health as separate from mental health.

Social Health specifically addresses how we use all forms of connection and communication to look after our individual and organisational health. In order to achieve it, we should apply similar models to those which we already apply to mental and physical health - of avoidance of harmful behaviour, uptake of helpful behaviours and above all, measurement. At the heart of Social Health is the relationship between, and reliance on, technology by humans.

Just as the health we know how to monitor relies on core ingredients (diet, nutrition, sleep) the essence of good Social Health relies on two simple things at its core: Knowledge and Networks

On knowledge, it's quite simple. There is so much of it that not only can we not keep up with it, but we cannot trust it either. The collapse in trust and the debate about truth correlates very precisely with the rise of the 'always on' digital era: social media is the epicentre, of course, but even the god of Wikipedia underscores that you can drown in the sheer availability of information.

We probably never could keep up with all the information – but now we know exactly how on the back foot we are. The term Information Overload is returning more forcefully than at any time since the 1970s.

77   Hobsbawm, J. Interview with Hilary Cottam. 2021.
82   Sound of Colleagues. 2020. Available at https://soundofcolleagues.com/ [accessed 28/01/2021]
83   Wolpert, S. UCLA neuroscientist's book explains why social connection is as important as food and shelter. UCLA Newsroom, 2013. Available at https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/we-are-hard-wired-to-be-social-248746 [accessed 28/01/2021]
84   Strachan, M. Julia Hobsbawm on social health and the 'Age of Overload'. Guild, 2019. Available at https://guild.co/blog/julia-hobsbawm-on-social-health-and-the-age-of-overload/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

All of which makes trust and curation around knowledge highly valuable and the centre of Social Health. Sharing is not just the fulcrum of social media economies, it mirrors the human being's essential nature, to be pro-social.

When we mindlessly 'reply all' to a group email, or zone out on a Zoom - that's not being pro-social. But when we act as our own internal organisational newsletter, recommending, curating, directing people to links, ideas and people they would not otherwise know of, that's invaluable. It saves time, mental energy, and secures knowledge flows which otherwise can be very costly indeed.

The famous 'Death by Powerpoint' example of NASA is an object lesson in how knowledge and the way in which it is exchanged can be life-or-death.[85]

What of networks? The underlying scientific behaviour of all networks, from trees to viruses to humans is the same: connection. As the famous network science physicist Albert-László Barabási put it: "*networks are everywhere, you just have to look for them*".[86]

In one of the most important papers on networks and networking at work ever published, Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter identified operational, personal and strategic networking as vital for leaders to move on in their careers. They demonstrated how there was infinite subtlety and sophistication in so doing – a far cry from the prevailing narrative of the time that all of networking is basically icky.[87]

In practice, networks work best when they are diverse. Would the sub-prime mortgage crisis have happened if there had been a stronger voice of dissent from within the financial community? Possibly not. Social Health is literally the healthy flow of ideas and that, crucially, includes disagreement or points of difference.

One of the best ways to ensure diversity of networks is to increase diversity itself. McKinsey have been way ahead of the corporate pack in articulating this and, since the Black Lives Matter movement

of Summer 2020, have refocused attention on this question. Broader networks through wider recruitment and promotion will make a positive development: we can look forward to seeing more of this in the workplace.[88]

Someone who put networks at work very well was the HR leader Catherine Lynch who I interviewed in 2019 for a paper I wrote for the European Workforce Institute called the APPlied Human at Work.[89] Catherine refers to a shift from a "Corporation is King" culture to what she calls "Network of Teams".

Put simply, if you create teams of people not divided by siloed special interests or identity groups but by focusing on productivity and the ability to shape and mould a project around the individuals in a network – working to a higher 'Purpose' to use that P-Word again – you get some very impressive results.

It is worth remembering that the World Health Organisation has defined health as "a *state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.*"[90] In the 65 years since that definition, we have paid a lot of attention to physical and mental health and we have a high degree of literacy around it. At a purely individual level, we have moved in a couple of generations from counting calories to knowing the difference between carbs and protein, between good fat and bad fat; from thinking you have to run a marathon to knowing that some people's bodies prefer shorter bursts of high intensity; others still need a Pilates-type stretch to heal and improve their physical resilience. And we know that severe mental distress is often combined with lack of sleep and so we can take steps to combat this, or at least we know what the steps should be.

The wellness industry of gyms and fitness equipment is now over $4 billion, which dwarfs the (published) size of the global arms trade, standing at $95 billion.[91, 92] Wellbeing has entered the boardroom and we all know about the value of Mindfulness. Sir Richard Layard has made enormous contributions to the debate around "Happiness".[93]

85   Hobsbawm, J. Death by PowerPoint: why simplicity is essential in dealing with a pandemic. GQ, 2020. Available at https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/politics/article/julia-hobsbawm-simplicity-principle [accessed 28/01/2021]

86   Barbabasi, A.L. Linked: The Science of Networks. Perseus Books, 2003.

87   Ibarra. H. Hunter, M.L. How Leaders Create and Use Networks. Harvard Business Review, 2007. Available at https://hbr.org/2007/01/how-leaders-create-and-use-networks [accessed 28/01/2021]

88   Dixon-Fyle, S. Dolan, K. Hunt, V. Prince, S. Diversity wins: How inclusion matters. McKinsey, 2020. Available at https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters [accessed 28/01/2021]

89   Hobsbawm, J. Workplace Productivity and the APPlied Human at Work Report. Workforce Institute. 2019. Available at: http://www.julia-hobsbawm.com/docs/kronos-whitepaper.pdf [accessed 28/01/2021]

90   World Health Organisation. Frequently Asked Questions. 2021. Available at https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/frequently-asked-questions [accessed 28/01/2021]

91   Global Wellness institute. Wellness Industry Statistics & Facts. 2021. Available at https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/press-room/statistics-and-facts/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

92   Amnesty International. Killer facts 2019: The scale of the global arms trade. 2019. Available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/killer-facts-2019-the-scale-of-the-global-arms-trade/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

93   Layard, R. Profile: Professor Richard Layard, Centre for Economic Performance. 2021. Available at https://cep.lse.ac.uk/_new/people/person.asp?id=970 [accessed 28/01/2021]

But is it enough? The OECD has come closest to putting the issue on the global map with its Better Life Initiative. And it is over a decade since economists like Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi kicked off a very useful discussion which is still ongoing about a 'Beyond GDP' measurement, to include broad wellbeing metrics.[94, 95]

There is an unofficial movement of those of us who write and consult and teach about identity and meaning and who see this moment in particular as one for change. These are strategists, professional coaches, psychotherapists, organisational behaviour experts, academics and policy wonks who see true wellbeing as intrinsically about the social self.

Perhaps the disconnected approach to Social Health lies partly in those three small words 'social well-being', tucked inside the original pre-digital, 1946 WHO definition. Back then, 'social' essentially meant social class. It did not mean what we feel, it did not mean emotional literacy, and it most certainly did not mean how humans can successfully navigate and negotiate through an age of overload.

After the war against Covid-19 is over, it will be time for the WHO to update its definition of health for the 21st century, in particular to redefine social well-being as Social Health.

THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER: LONELINESS IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

I re-read one of my favourite novels over lockdown, the Heart is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers, in which a deaf mute becomes the emotional lynchpin for a group of lonely and poor Southerners in a tiny rural community. His ability to connect them with their feelings constantly takes them by surprise. Reading the novel is like standing at the bar to the side of an Edward Hopper painting: The lonely ache for connection, the glimpse of what could be if only we could reach out across our own interior divides.

Work in theory provides this companionship. People really miss the simple chat which can be emotionally valuable but which often also offers hidden intelligence with 86% of working professionals saying that the lack of spontaneous social serendipity was a "drawback".[96]

As we look to the future, we will need to find ways to recreate the randomness of human interaction that prompts so much innovation. That creates networks of teams, even in far-flung places.

We know about the epidemic of loneliness but in her book The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World That's Pulling Apart by Noreena Hertz.[97] It highlights just how atomised and isolated modern working life has become. The culprit is often the open-plan office itself, a hallmark of workplace design which lead to "a lack of expressive conversations and a sort of uncomfortable uneasiness"

We know that our devices - which it seems society can't function without - have given rise to a huge sense of connected isolation. "*Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We'd rather text than talk.*" wrote MIT Professor Sherry Turkle in 2011.[98]

What happened in the decade between Turkle and Hertz? Not much. Paying attention to the social self in a Nowhere Office era is going to be as crucial as paying attention to our physical and mental health.

Yet we know exactly what Social Health is in practice: It is connection, often face-to-face. William Eccleshare, Worldwide CEO of Clear Channel Holdings made clear to me that between the first Lockdown and the partial re-opening of offices in the Autumn he felt something I can only interpret as longing:

> "*I can do a lot of my international meetings on a Zoom call. But the reality is I am not building the relationships, and I am not building the trust in the same way that I was before. All of the social fuel that I put in the tank had run dry with my senior colleagues, my direct reports. Over the years you build trust, you build a connection, you build that sense of professional friendship, is probably how I would describe it. And after six months, it's kind of seemed to have all been used up. And I needed to replenish it, and fill the tank up again, and refresh it by having a lunch, having a drink, or just sitting in a room with somebody in a way which you just can't do on a call.*"

94   OECD Better Life Index. 2021. Available at http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/ [accessed 28/01/2021]
95   Stiglitz, J.E.Sen, A. Fitoussi, J.P. Report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP). Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, Paris, 2009. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258260767_Report_of_the_Commission_on_the_Measurement_of_Economic_Performance_and_Social_Progress_CMEPSP [accessed 28/01/2021]
96   Editorial Intelligence. 'Nowhere Office' Survey. 2020
97   Hertz, N. The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World That's Pulling Apart. Sceptre. 2020
98   Turkle, S. Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other. Basic Books. 2017

As Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn, that citadel of online connection put it himself in his 2012 career manual The Start-up of You "*one lunch is worth dozens of emails. When you can, meet in-person*". The balance of remote-to-in-person is going to be key.[99]

The elephant in the room for many office workers is that taking time to go out and network is often seen as a waste of time rather than an investment. While executives would spend an awful lot of time in the air, in conferences and at working lunches, anyone below expense-account level might find themselves judged quite harshly if they said they were going to spend half a day or a day a week just meeting people and forging relationships.

But this is exactly what they should be doing. Time cannot be spent in a way which is measured by the ink on paper or the time connected to a device. The Nowhere Office gives us a perfect opportunity to reset what success looks like in Social Health terms, especially if people have the freedom to fit in coffees and lunches less around a lunch hour and more around a breathable, workable chunk of time of their own choosing.

One more thing will have to give for this to happen, however. It will have to involve less of the kind of meeting we can do without: the Meeting itself. I'm not talking about the brainstorm, or the all-important Team Meeting, but the meeting for its' own sake which is a weakness of all organisations with top-down management.

Time has not just got to be spent differently, but wasted less in this new era. Once again, this will require discipline, willpower and training. Habits will need to be un-learned. But the gains will be considerable.

THE NURSE NAVIGATOR: INTEGRATING SOCIAL HEALTH IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

What of Social Health itself as a management function? Well, it means a lot more than wellbeing programmes with their focus on negatives: anxiety, stress - as if accepting that working life comes with a kind of in-built loss. I'm not trying to be a Pollyanna and play some kind of naïve 'glad game' that all work is enjoyable and meaningful, but I am suggesting that when it is, people perform better.

That in order to do so we should connect more and not less to what makes us human: our social self. The psychotherapist and public commentator Susie Orbach identified the need to look at "t*he emotional factors at work and the importance of paying attention to them. We must accept the significance of work which can be boring and deadening but also emotionally, intellectually and economically sustaining*".[100] I wrote in my book Fully Connected: Social Health in an Age of Overload that "social connectedness is a form of social capital."[101]

Social Health should be integrated with a measurement of productivity we can all see but also feel. It cannot be about connecting people in a series of conveyor-belt processes which automate human interaction. For me, it means more of initiatives such as Ireland's Healthy Place to Work certification system, where founder John Ryan focuses less on the negatives of poor mental health and on tech providing more answers than humans and more on the possibilities of good Social Health. He told the Irish Times in January 2021: "Organisations need to create workplaces where people enjoy coming and doing their best work. Leaders need to create healthy cultures that lead to high performance."[102]

This is an important distinction. It means always asking whether using the voice or face is better than the keyboard, without assuming that there is a one-size-fits-all for every workplace occasion.

And it means more of a new kind of social network at work, which rely less on linear time in project management and more on lateral time – time to converse and chat and create and collaborate, but also to see each other, dipping in and out in virtual time rather like an old office: instead of being at your desk and getting up to get coffee and to chat, something else is designed to mimic that, virtually.

Perhaps above all, it means being joined-up. In the time-poor, overloaded, and now physically fragmented workspace, we need coordination. I'm not convinced that it can all be outsourced to algorithms, tempting though that may be.

In oncology, the Nurse Navigator is someone who joins up a patient's progression through treatment which is often multi-layered and across multiple locations: scans, consultations, surgeries. This role is a very good model for Social Health. Someone whose entire job is to notice and to connect, to

99   Hoffman, R. Casnocha, B. The Start-Up of You: Adapt to the Future, Invest in Yourself and transform Your Career. Random House Business. 2013.
100   Orbach, S. "Work is where we live: Emotional literacy and psychological dimensions of the various relationships there". Emotion, Space & Society, 2008. Available at https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1755458608000169 [accessed 27/01/2021]
101   Hobsbawm, J. Fully Connected: Social Health in an Age of Overload. Bloomsbury, 2018
102   McDonald, G. New 'Healthy Place to Work' certification 'will help economy recover from Covid'. The Irish News, 2021. Available at https://www.irishnews.com/business/2021/01/12/news/new-healthy-place-to-work-certification-will-help-economy-recover-from-covid--2183633/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

keep track of what is being said and done – and to recognise what is getting missed, because of deadlines or miscommunication or both.[103]

Social Health is about recognising and naming dysfunction, rather than focusing on the idea that if we all just say we're committed to wellbeing then somehow we are going to get it. We need very specific new roles for these times, and the interface for that must be a human.

It used to be that the Chief People Officer was that person, previously known as HR or Human Resources which, even further back,was called Personnel. But HR departments today are drowning in the technology used to manage schedules and tech and skills and recruitment, retention or its opposite: 'letting go'.

What would the Nurse Navigator be called at Work? Chief Social Health Officer, of course.

ZOOM BOOM: TECHNOLOGY AND NETWORKING IN THE NOWHERE OFFICE

Finally, what of the technology itself? We need it and it can help. It's here to stay whether we like it or not. Pre- pandemic, I was a loud "techlash" critic. I wrote about how I favour the intuition, emotion and learned direct experience of humans over machines. But this year has shown something beneficial about technology which surprised me: in a world dominated more and more as it will be by teleworking and intermittent physical presence, technology is definitely shifting from just being productivity-focused to collaboration-focused.

This is an important and significant change. Instead of the dominance of Slack, Dropbox or email we are likely to see the rise of new generation work-social networks like Discord, Lunchclub, Guild and Josh Greene's 'Groove'.[104]

Greene was part of the team which built WeWork and remembers that in its heyday it was more than just an atomised set of flexible working spaces for entrepreneurs and corporate departments. It was a community. He is encouraged by the technology now which will make distributed work (which I call The Nowhere Office) "*collaboration centers… WeWorkLabs was specifically for entrepreneurs but it had a really great community. We launched a pilot of our product which was very bare-bones virtual*

co-working, it's just... As simple as you can imagine, no UX, no design just got matched with three other people, a little pilot group. When you want it to work it pinged a message in Slack, people jumped onto the app, they chatted, met each other for five minutes, they said this is what I want to achieve in the next hour then they jumped... Then it was like go, we'll meet again in an hour's time."

It is of course fashionable to moan about Zoom but in truth it has proved something of a social equalizer during this pandemic. We have seen into people's homes and met their cats, children and ornaments. People can watch and mute their image and picture or they can pop up on screen and have their say. And the ability to network without travel has enabled connections which would never have happened in an offline world.

We convened a Zoom discussion to kick off the Workshift Commission at Demos and the tech entrepreneur Tom Adeyoola said this:

"I've met more people in Covid than I would have done in the physical world. Attended startup pitches in Northern Ireland, Cardiff, North of England. Mentored founders in Jamaica, South Africa, the Commonwealth and all around the country. Would never have been able to do that before the pandemic unlocked the visual medium as a norm. This should be a fantastic moment to pro-actively break people out of non-diverse 'mirrortocracy' networks by reducing the friction to meeting people in other communities to improve diversity and inclusion and spread social capital."

In the same discussion the management commentator Andrew Hill of The Financial Times noted that "*all sorts of new networks and subcultures are forming virtually. Of course, that's frightening for top-down managers because it's not under their control.*"[105]

He raises the elephant in the digital room: Managers. So far I have only mentioned them in the context of policing presenteeism. There is a whole separate challenge for the 'distributed leader' and oddly some of the best examples of this are coming from the medical community and the lessons learned during the pandemic.[106]

For now, the digital workplace is revealing who can hack being hands off with their teams and allow

103   Rogers, B. The Role of the Oncology Nurse Navigator in Improving Supportive Care. The Oncology Nurse, 2020. Available at http://www.theoncologynurse.com/ton-supplements/best-practices-in-patient-navigation/second-issue-supportive-care-edition/16500-the-role-of-the-oncology-nurse-navigator-in-improving-supportive-care [accessed 28/01/2021]
104   Discord. 2021. Available at: https://discord.com/ [accessed 28/01/2021]
105   Demos. Workshift Commission: Discussion 1. 2020.
106   Molloy, A. Embracing distributed leadership during a pandemic by Lauren Hookham, Agalya Ramanathan, Joel Schamroth, and Chantal Rees. British Medical Journal. 2020. Available at: https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjleader/2020/09/09/embracing-distributed-leadership-during-a-pandemic-by-lauren-hookham-agalya-ramanathan-joel-schamroth-and-chantal-rees/ [accessed 28/01/2021]

networks of teams to develop, and how clever curation of information can be exchanged in a way which is generous and helpful and productive rather than exhausting and overwhelming.

And we are beginning to realise that our social selves matter more than anything else. What we create, what we build, what we do all day, on our own 'Busytown' is all down to the connections we make and keep. And they, like the place we work in and the time we take, will become hybrid, blended, merged.

A new language of Social Health is emerging and I for one welcome it.

CONCLUSION

Work is always changing. But it has always resembled something of a snowglobe, full of flurries of changes which end up settling in the same old landscape, encased by the same structure. Not any more.

The Nowhere Office is already here and I welcome it. What it represents - a need to change our unproductive and harmful ways of working - must be recognised, valued, and experimented with. Trial-and-error is key. The great trends in management and leadership are all around small teams, pilot projects and iterating. Read Gary Hammel, Lynda Gratton, Herminia Ibarra, Frederick Laloux, Hilary Cottam or Charles Handy. All are part of a growing group of us thinking about experimentation and diversification of norms in how the next generation of workplaces can do better.

I'm going to make a handful of predictions and recommendations, all of which need wider testing and discussion. Doing nothing, I would suggest, is not an option.

In terms of **PLACE**, what is probable – although the earliest we will have a real sense of the next phase of working office life is likely to be the very end of 2021 and not the beginning as hoped - is that the balance of time spent in the office will be something like 20%. I am a fan of The Pareto Principle (or the 80/20 Rule) which, loosely defined (and it's a principle, not a law), argues that you get the biggest impact on the smallest segment relative to effort.[107] Covid-19 has proved that no-one needs to go back full time to an office ever again.

This will have huge consequences, many of which we will explore as part of the Workshift Commission. As economist Hamish McRae points out, we don't yet know how big the structural costs of adapting homes will be, or the cost of repurposing corporate offices or the impact on travel networks. Nor do we know who is paying for any - or all - of it.

The urgency is around policies which are tailored to The Nowhere Office: travel, energy and building subsidies. Policymakers need to rethink the tax structures around home-based energy bills, travel and commute pricing.

For **TIME**, the shift is already happening, with flexibility happening thanks to WFH. A lot will depend on leadership and management culture embracing a complete end to presenteeism (for its own sake) and a redrawing of what success looks like: based less on time spent in a linear way and more in a lateral, flowing model instead.

Not a four-day week or a four-hour week, but something in between which is aligned to individual organisations and their workflow and workers.

Regarding **SOCIAL HEALTH**, it would help to recognise that the social self at work and home is now fully-connected and fully-merged. Far wider conversations than wellbeing need to take place, linked not just to productivity and growth, but to the meaning and belonging we derive from what we do and why.

Should we have a new Government Department which replaces BEIS, the Government's messily named Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy? I'm afraid so, yes.

Moreover, the lessons learned (and 'lessons learned' is the political mea culpa of our time) from the joined-up thinking and doing of the pandemic should inform an entirely new way to approach work, workplace, working life and productivity.

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107   Brock. T. Pareto Principle. Investopedia, 2020. Available at https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/paretoprinciple.asp [accessed 28/01/2021]

We should be campaigning for a new way to pay for time spent working, based perhaps loosely around set hours, but much more firmly around set outcomes, with flexibility and autonomy and, yes, experimentation priced in.

There should be no anxiety about failing to spot shoddy work or the workshy – any losses from anyone gaming a system with looser surveillance will surely be offset by gains from soaring productivity, and less stress-related absence.

This should become an experiment, measured and monitored by the great academic institutions. Britain should become the home of Social Health and the champion of it.

Should we therefore ask parliamentarians to set up a Commission on Social Health to examine what the modern metrics should be, picking up the baton where Sen, Fitoussi and Stiglitz left off in 2009 when they started to talk about moving 'Beyond GDP'? Yes, of course.

Ultimately it is a combination of culture and evolution which propels both policy change, and change in practice. As the anthropologist James Suzman points out in his book Work, A History of How We Spend Our Time, "*from a physicist's perspective all living organisms do work and our planet's biosphere was constructed over millions of generations as a result of the work done by their various evolutionary ancestors*".[108]

After a year of such riotous upheaval, it is vital we think calmly and with clarity about the problems that we had long before we got to know SARS-COV-2, as well as the problems it caused or exacerbated. Our productivity was stagnant, our workplace wellbeing at crisis levels, costing us both happiness and raw output, and our Social Health was both poorly articulated and practised. A Workshift was already needed, even if the pandemic had never crossed our minds.

My great hope is that this crisis, for all its misery, might just be the opportunity we needed to make that happen. Let's look at how we worked during the series of lockdowns, and what that has taught us about the risks and opportunities of doing things differently.

Having spent the lockdowns of the last year with our three young adult children, all of whose lives have been upended and partially suspended, there have been plenty of times when I have had to reassure them that nowhere eventually leads to somewhere. It will, I tell them, evolve.

I'm an optimistic pessimist with pragmatic inclinations. I do think it can be all right. In fact, I feel very energised by some of the fresh, emerging possibilities which could be a distinct improvement on working life as we knew it.

Amidst all of the disruption (and indeed because of it), we have an opportunity to reset knowledge worker life/office life – to address some of the fundamentally irksome and inadequate ways of working we have all put up with for too long. But it is going to take more than rearranging the chairs of a virtual office to make change happen. I think many of us are ready to make that change and it does have to be 'us' and not 'them'.

How about you?

108   Suzman, J. Work: A History of How We Spend Our Time. Bloomsbury Circus, 2020.

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