

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/working-at-home-remote-work-office-anxiety-depression-drinking-alcohol-covid-mental-illness-11646426004>

OPINION | COMMENTARY

What We've Missed by Working From Home

Employees may need those face-to-face meetings more than their employers do.

By Paula Marantz Cohen

March 4, 2022 6:41 pm ET



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

The number of suicides and overdoses continues to rise, and the market for counseling services and therapists keeps growing. This legacy of the pandemic, which seems to be ending after two years, is deeply disturbing. What are the existential reasons for these trends? By existential, I mean the way we see ourselves as humans and find meaning in our lives.

Before the Enlightenment, religion imposed meaning on the lives of most people. They went to a church, synagogue or mosque, and this, along with related rituals and events—baptisms and weddings, choir practices and socials—structured how people related to one another and found meaning.

As belief in God ebbed, work-related structures replaced religious ones. People battled for fewer hours on the job and more free time until many had a 9-to-5 five-day workweek, with weekends off and annual vacations. A regular work schedule gave people something to count on and plan around. When Calvin Coolidge declared in 1925 that “the business of

America is business,” he was lauding the importance of productive work in American society but also, indirectly, how work gave structure and meaning to life.

For knowledge workers in particular, the pandemic called this idea into question. What is the existential result of being confined at home working on a computer? What does it mean to live in a world where workers can move back and forth between studying a spreadsheet and doing laundry or emailing a supervisor and watching an episode of “Curb Your Enthusiasm”?

Before the pandemic, the internet already had made the lives of many workers more fluid, but the virus brought this to another level. It has made people more responsible for the structure—or lack of structure—in their work. This is empowering in some ways, but it also can cause confusion and anomie. Many workers no longer have a clear demarcation between work and leisure and have lost the accidental elements that connected them to one another. Too much control over when and how we work isolates and limits opportunities for relaxation and creativity.

For many white-collar workers, the pandemic has raised the question of what is essential in the work they do and what is merely done for the sake of appearance. For some, the entire reason for having a job has crumbled, causing the so-called great resignation. But most workers simply have reassessed the value of the workplace. How much travel is really necessary to serve a client? How many staff meetings can happen online? How many days, if any, do we actually need to be in the office? In a society increasingly dominated by data, face-to-face interaction seems too negligible a variable to factor in. Yet the alcohol consumption, short tempers, and general malaise of many Americans suggest that something is deeply wrong. The World Health Organization has reported a 25% increase in anxiety and depression world-wide, and a 2021 Census Bureau survey found that 30% of American adults suffered from anxiety or depression symptoms.

The in-person meetings may not matter, but the chitchat, lunches and happy hours do. Even the commute that we griped about had the value of keeping us in touch with our cities. We need to figure out how to maintain these structures before we throw out all our pre-pandemic work habits and hunker down in our home offices.

Meeting with other people, seeing their facial expressions and gestures, noticing what they eat for lunch, confiding our frustrations and celebrating our triumphs, taking in the familiar sights of our cities and towns—all this helps to clarify our position in the world. Covid has isolated us from this world, but it also has slowed us down and forced us to

evaluate what is important. This should keep us from losing sight of what propels us to get up in the morning and makes life worth living.

Ms. Cohen is dean of the Honors College at Drexel University and author of “Of Human Kindness: What Shakespeare Teaches Us About Empathy.”

Copyright © 2022 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.