

Hello. This is Wayne Rivers at The Family Business Institute. Thank you for tuning in as always. Click on our social media icons, don't forget your comments. And best of all, sign up for our upcoming Boot Camp class, or sign up your high potential rising leaders anyway.

This week I want to talk about returning to the office and obviously 2020 has been filled with surprises. And one of the surprises is that we all are participating in the world's biggest work from home experiment. It was March 15th, everything went virtual and some of us are still coping with the ramifications of not being able to get in very easily to our offices. So, some of this information comes from an article from the Harvard Business Review, July 15th of this year. And it kind of explores the positives of this working from home experiment, the negatives, and then where to go next. And so those are the three things that I really want to talk about today.

So, let's talk about positives. Well, productivity was expected to fall down considerably. That's normally what happens in work from home situations, lots of companies have tried it. And actually, the trend was going away from virtual or working from home situations in favor of people coming back into the office. Even the big IT companies out West that started that progressive movement realized that they got more productivity from their employees when people were together in the office. Now, why is productivity up this time? I don't know and the Harvard people didn't know either, but I do have a theory.

It's kind of like that old, maybe a parable I'm not sure, about a king lands his troops on a foreign beach in an attempt to invade that land and he burned his ships behind him, giving them no possibility of retreating back and going home again. They had to win, or they'd be slaughtered. And this is kind of the same thing, we didn't have any choice. We had to figure it out, all of us had to figure out new things. I'd never used Zoom before and probably none of you had either. But we learn all these new things and the learning curve was pretty steep, but we managed to overcome it. So, productivity is high, that's the first positive.

Job satisfaction was reported to go down for most people the first few weeks of the pandemic, but it's now come back to a normal level. So, that's a positive. People seem to be better balanced in their work life combination now. Obviously if you're at home, you have more access to family and children than you did before when you were in the workplace all the time. So, work life balance, people may be working at night now after their children have gone to bed, but they're still getting their work done, which is the important thing.

A real positive, no commuting and no travel. So, we're not getting on airplanes to fly across the country for a two- or three-hour meeting and then flying back again. So, that's quite a time savings that's benefited everyone. I keep reading about the people who have gained weight during the pandemic because they're home and they're able to eat more. But in my neighborhood, it looks like people are fitter than they were before. People are out exercising. You've cut out all of that commuting and all that travel. Meetings are shorter than they used to be. So live, face to face meetings, there tends to be a lot of conversation versus productive communication and so meetings have become a little bit shorter.

Now negatives and these negatives to me are significant. The lack of unplanned interactions. I can't tell you how many of our members in our peer groups have talked about the informal communication that they have when they're together. They get value out of the formal part of our meetings too, but the informal communication and the informal communications that we have in the hallways here at The Family Business Institute, we're surrounded by super talented people. And having that many smart people in one place that you can just feel the ideas bouncing around, it's like

electrons. It's just energizing and that's something that is missed. Employees reported to the Harvard researchers that they'd increase their communications with their closest associates by about 40%, but at the expense of their more distant associations, those were actually down quite a bit. So, the lack of that interaction, that live face to face interaction, is problematic. Onboarding new people is problematic when you can't see them and train them and that's just filled with problems.

Harvard talked about the weak ties that people have together, this relates to the first point. But they said that organizational performance and attaining milestones is directly correlated with what they call weak ties. And we don't have those weak ties when we're not together face to face and in-person.

Zoom fatigue, this virtual meeting stuff, it was so necessary at first, but now people are really excited about the prospect of getting back together live and in person this fall in our peer group meetings. So, Zoom fatigue is a very real thing and that's a negative.

And then the lack of being able to just provide pointers. When you're in the office and you walk down the hallway and you see a colleague sort of scratching his or her head wondering, how do I do this or how do I solve this problem? The inability to offer those pointers and that guidance and the benefit of experience in all those things is missing.

Okay, now what do we do next? What do we do next? We can't put the toothpaste back into the tube. So virtual meetings and working from home are going to be a part of the equation going forward, so five quick pointers there. Number one, be flexible. Some people really enjoy working from home and find it really, really works for them. I don't care for it personally, but some people do. So, we're going to have to be flexible in our requirements to be in the office live and in person versus virtual.

Second thing, you've got to be crystal clear. For people who aren't around and are missing those weak ties and those unplanned interactions, you've got to be crystal clear, your vision, your mission, your priorities. If you can't be crystal clear in your priorities as the leader, then you're going to have a really hard time holding people accountable for their own priority. So, you have to be crystal clear, plans, priorities, milestones, vision, mission, all those things.

The third thing is avoid creating two classes or two tiers of employees. It's natural because we're humans. It's natural to be closer to people that we see live and in person versus people that just sort of report in virtually. So, you really need to be careful that the people who elect to work from home and that you allow to work from home, that you're including them in meaningful ways so they don't feel like they're left out of company activities and interaction.

The fourth thing, you've got to have a working from home policy. You're going to have to formalize it. There are going to be people who try to take advantage, and there are going to be employees who perceive that other people are trying to take advantage. So be crystal clear and have a formal written working from home policy as we go forward.

And then finally, number five, establish your communications rhythms. We have an all hands once a week meeting, some virtually now, right? But that is very important to us just to remain cohesive as a group, because we've got people flying all around the country and people doing work in far flung locations. And so, having that touch point, that every single week meeting that people can count on, where we do get to cut up and share some soft things, as well as the agenda items that we have, is super important to us.

So, I'd like to hear what you're doing to normalize things as we cope with this virtual world that we live in now and I'd like to hear your philosophy on returning to the office. This is Wayne Rivers at Yhe Family Business Institute. Thank you.