

Tips for re-learning how to work at the office

Ever since businesses knocked down dividing walls in favour of "open plan collaboration", the ability to focus in the office has been that much harder. And now, after working from home for almost two years, the return can feel almost designed to undermine your productivity.



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"We have to relearn how to work in an office for eight hours," said Linda Trim, Director at Giant Leap, one of South Africa's largest workplace design consultancies.

"It brings into stark relief just how noisy and disruptive the office can be. Our remote work settings certainly weren't always havens of peace and concentration either - but many of us adjusted.

"Now, sitting near our co-workers again feels odd: there's so much movement, collaboration and talk. Background noises now seem sound louder. Co-workers have 18 months of gossip to share. There are still dozens of Zoom calls clogging your calendar and your commute now eat into the hour you once used to tame your inbox."

So how do you get work done?

Signals

Trim noted the problem is when we're just using our brains to think it looks like we're not doing anything. "You need a signal that tells your colleagues that you're working.

“Close the door if you have one, put on headphones, attach a flag to your desk and flip it up when you’re heads-down on a project,” Trim advised.

“Then, honour and reinforce the signal. If someone knocks, politely tell them you’re busy and ask them to come back when the door is open. If you’re a manager, try creating office hours, periods where your team can come to you for help.”

Trim pointed out that she is advising many companies on office redesigns to meet the now even greater need for people to have quiet spaces for work. “Before Covid, managers didn’t always see the need for quiet places for uninterrupted working but now it’s what workers expect. Many companies are putting in additional focus rooms to allow people in specific areas to work uninterrupted or to take zoom calls in the office.”

Schedule tasks

Employees who have some flexibility on their in-office days can also use hybrid schedules to their advantage.

“Save work that requires deep concentration for home. And certain tasks - editing a shared document with colleagues, tackling confidential conversations - are also better done remotely,” Trim said.

But the office is now even more essential for bonding time: there is a really pent up need now for people to reconnect with colleagues and meet new colleagues for the first time.

“There needs to be some type of outlet for workers to talk and socialise. We as humans have an evolutionary need to feel a sense of belonging. Relationships grew too transactional when everything was online,” said Trim.

“Meeting face-to-face has helped people be more honest with one another and assume good intentions when projects hit snags for instance.”

She added it was also particularly important for younger, less experienced workers to get back to the office to learn from senior colleagues while absorbing the company culture.

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