

RETURNING TO THE OFFICE

SOME BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE
BEHIND THE RESISTANCE

Human behavior is deeply rooted in social and organizational contexts. When these contexts change, as they have done in spectacular fashion since the beginning of the pandemic, new behaviors emerge, and many of these will stick.

What will this mean for your company?



Workers are Resisting a Return to the Office

As the pandemic continues to upend the norms of office work, leaders and workers are frustrated. The future is far from certain and, as months of remote work have turned into years, behaviors that were once considered temporary are looking more permanent. In poll after poll, workers have demonstrated a desire to keep some – or all – of their work week remote.

The Question is: WHY?

Department26 spent the last six months conducting depth interviews with U.S. employees of large corporations who experienced dramatic changes in their work process due to the turmoil of the pandemic.

These workers were experiencing what behavioral science calls situational uncertainty: a characteristic of complex situations that are not fully definable, interpretable, or predictable, with many possible outcomes and consequences.

Within an organization, when existing cultural assumptions and beliefs are no longer perceived as valid, individuals create their own narratives to make sense of what they're experiencing. Our goal was to understand their experiences and new narratives on work process in this state of flux. We also wanted to gain insights into the unconscious motivations behind the resistance to going back to the office.

In this brief summary of the research, you'll gain a broader understanding of how workers perceive the situation and how that has affected their outlook on "going back to work." You will also find some suggestions on how to move forward in these chaotic times.



When Environments Change, Behaviors Change

The pandemic was an external disruption that rapidly affected two environments at once: work and home. Almost without warning, office workers were tasked with figuring out how to continue their workday from their dining room tables. Meanwhile, meals had to be cooked, laundry had to be washed and, for many, children typically in school or daycare suddenly required our attention. Workers became their own IT department, cafeteria worker, housekeeper, school teacher. Their behaviors changed because everything changed. They had little choice.

Novel changes in our environments produce uncertainty, creating feelings of fear and anxiety. That's because our evolutionary brain sees uncertainty as a threat to our survival. Once upon a time, not knowing what to expect could mean death. To survive, our behavior had to rapidly respond and adapt to perceived changes in our environment – this is natural selection* at work – a superpower that has helped our species endure for millions of years.

“I remember being in denial, sitting on my couch talking to coworkers on the phone and asking what Zoom was. Plus, we were dealing with layoffs almost immediately. It was pretty traumatic.”

“This is a very stable company, and I felt like all that stability was gone in a blink.”

* When the environment of a species undergoes a novel change, natural selection, you may recall, leads to the evolution of strategies that are most efficient competitors within a species, but not necessarily for the species as a whole. In a social context - your organization - decisions that are mutually favorable for all parties (co-operation) will often not evolve since they can be exploited by alternative individual self-optimizing stratagems. So behavioral evolution leads not to a strategy that maximizes mutual payoffs, but to evolutionary strategies that can not be outsmarted by alternatives.

THE WORLD IS TEMPORARILY CLOSED

Adapting During the Pandemic

Many workers admitted feeling overwhelmed and insecure during those first chaotic weeks away from the office. They worried about losing family members to an unknown disease or losing their livelihood because their company wouldn't weather the economic turmoil. Given the level of stress in those early weeks, it's amazing to consider how quickly people rose to the challenge.

Soon enough, workers found a space at home for a makeshift office. They figured out how to get almost anything ordered and delivered online, conducted video meetings and created new schedules that kept work and home moving forward. They did something many established companies said they could never do: work remotely.

And, they did it well. For some organizations, the unified efforts of employees, cost cutting and price increases led to record productivity and results. According to *Bloomberg Businessweek*, U.S. corporations generated more profit in July, August, and September, 2021 than ever before.

As the results came in, employees felt a sense of pride. Not only had they adapted to extreme circumstances, they felt like they were thriving in their new environment.

“I remember being outside with the kids those first two weeks before we were fully functional, wondering what the pandemic would mean for me and my family. What it would mean for the world.”

“I was surprised how well we transitioned.”

“I was busier than I've ever been in my life. I could have worked 24 hours a day if I wanted.”

“It was exciting to figure out how we needed to operate.”

Of course there are many complex reasons for the positive financial results seen during the pandemic, and employee performance is just one of the variables. Proving or disproving the correlation isn't important - it is perceptions that matter.

Behavioral science has demonstrated in study after study that when we feel ownership over something, we place more value on it. This forced experiment of working remotely has been perceived as an enormous success by the individuals who make up the workforce. They created a new way of working – an accomplishment that they emotionally own - and few are willing to give it up entirely.

“ We developed a new way of working together. We excelled. It's been an incredible year and a half.”

Fundamental Implications

As our conversations focused on the current situation, we heard an undercurrent of resentment. People continued to work longer hours, having adapted to a staggering number of changes in their lives. They'd made huge sacrifices, and employers seemed unappreciative. Instead, communication focused on returning to the office, new technology to surveil productivity and vaccine mandates. Seen solely through the lens of workers, this feels punitive.

Moving Forward

How might leaders acknowledge the collective efforts and sacrifices of the workforce in a way that connects with them emotionally? Are there specific divisions, projects, teams or individuals that demonstrated outstanding achievements despite the obstacles? Is there a new way to recognize behavior that exemplifies the organization's values now, in this new work environment?



The Great Reassessment

There is a lot of talk about the Great Resignation, but we discovered something much larger driving the unexpected actions of the workforce.

The massive disruption in our work environment led to two critical behavioral shifts: values changed and psychological bonds were altered. These factors deeply affected personal identity and workers began to question whether they were still in sync with the values of the organization. Reassessments of identity, values and psychological bonds are the motivations beneath the surface of what some have called the Great Resignation.

As workers shifted their time from the office to the home, their values shifted as new things gained emotional importance. Perhaps it was shared meals at home or time spent with children. Without the commute, there was suddenly time for that morning walk or quick jog to shake off the afternoon slump. Arranging to be home for a service call on the refrigerator was far less disruptive, and taking the dog to the vet was a quick errand instead of a request for a half-day away from the office. Fusing the physical environments of work and home created productivity for many workers, and the elusive work-life balance was closer than ever. Work had simply become part of this new life, not a separate part of the day.

“Everything was so uncertain and a little scary. I really leaned in on my spiritual life.”

“This whole experience made me realize how much I value family. I’m not as willing to make sacrifices in this part of my life anymore.”

“This is the first time in my career I’ve been able to pick up my kids from school. I used to hire someone to do that.”

When our values change, so does our identity. Before the pandemic, an executive might have derived identity from a number of things related to their organization – their job title, the industry they worked in, the reputation of their firm, the size and location of their office, even the type of attire they wore. Now that everyone was working from hastily-converted guest bedrooms dressed in leisure wear, these signals of identity lost importance. In this new environment, what we were capable of and what we believed in became a more important part of our identity.

The new work environment also affected our psychological bonds. We spent more time with the people with whom we share a home. These bonds grew stronger. In addition, video meetings gave us a peak into the home lives of co-workers. We met pets and children as they wandered in and out of the frame. For teams frequently meeting on video platforms, emotional bonds strengthened as co-workers shared their humanity and personal environments. All the while, our emotional bond with the organization grew weaker: absence did not make the heart grow fonder when it comes to the organization as a whole.

This fracture between the worker and the entity appears to be a product of the psychological and physical distance imposed by remote work and internal communications that failed to resonate with the situation. There was a lot of communication about getting back to the office and little about the heroic efforts of the workforce to meet deadlines and objectives.

“ I really questioned my priorities. That’s been a positive.”

“ It became clear pretty quickly that the company only cares about profit, and I feel naïve admitting that was a shock to me.”

“ In some ways, we’ve become more human. We’ve been through some trauma together. But the divisions that existed before are worse – between the front line and office workers, between the office workers and C-suite.”

“ I suppose I thought our sacrifices during this time would be repaid. That’s not playing out, though.”

Workers also suffered disconfirmation as stated corporate values like trust and respect didn't hold up well under the harsh light of the pandemic, raising serious questions: If companies trusted their employees, why did they need to monitor productivity? If we respect each other, why does leadership discount my desire to continue working remotely? And most significantly, do I really matter to this organization – and does the organization still matter to me?

One fascinating insight was hearing workers describe working physically in the office – something we did fairly recently – as old fashioned. We heard this across geographies and industries. The majority of people who used this type of language, unaided, were not in their twenties. They were in the height of their career. Remote workers believe they have found a new and better way to work, and organizations that don't embrace this are stuck in the past.

This narrative, branding physical offices as something from the past, represents the cognitive distance workers have with messages about discontinuing remote work. Even the term “back to work” is laden with associations of the past, backward movement and stagnation. People want to move forward, feel empowered and regain a sense of control during this unprecedented volatility.

“I feel like I'm on a journey. I used to have a strong connection to my company, but I don't think they care about us.”

“Leadership is clueless, and people are left wondering if they can live their values in a place like this.”

“I think they're going to make everyone come back. Our leadership is a bunch of old white men. It's old school versus new school.”

“Covid was kind of a relief, really. I've always thought that whole in-office stuff was out of date.”

“This is like the industrial revolution – all these archaic systems will be dismantled.”

Fundamental Implications

The pandemic has changed everything. Your employees are not the same, therefore, neither is your company. Now is a good time to look at your values and evaluate them in the context of the last two years. What new values have emerged? Are there any that should be replaced? This is another way to recognize the experiences of your workforce and validate their reality.

Moving Forward

Culture can be described as “the way we do things around here” – but these “things” and “here” have changed dramatically. What is the culture you need now to meet your strategic objectives for the future? How can you articulate this for the workforce in ways that close the psychological distance that has emerged?



We're Going to Mars

In the middle of the pandemic, Elon Musk restated SpaceX's mission to get to Mars, accelerating deadlines and raising stakes. You'll note that he did not issue a mandate about SpaceX employees coming back to the office. It was genius, really. Declare a destination that speaks directly to their ambitions, and let the workforce figure out how to get it done.

Like him or not, Musk focused on what's important and highly relevant to his workforce: why he believes SpaceX exists in the world. Many organizations have missed this point in the shadow of the pandemic.

The majority of employee communications in the past two years have dealt with smaller and smaller tactics. Rolling target dates to get back in the office, new technologies to manage work flow and vaccine mandates. These are important, but not more important than why the organization exists or what it hopes to accomplish.

Leaders want the workforce to "get back to work," and the workforce bristles at the implication that what they've been doing for the last year and half is anything but work. Both parties would benefit from a reminder of why the organization exists and what it plans to accomplish together in this unpredictable world.

“You no longer know what the collective is feeling or doing. What am I really working on here?”

“Communication across the company suffered. We felt in the dark about things that would have been more clearly communicated before.”

“The pandemic shifted the focus and shifted the culture. The focus on business strategy waned significantly.”

“This is now a ship without a rudder.”

Fundamental Implications

Start with why, and quit worrying about how the work gets done. Your workforce is highly adaptive and confident that they can achieve anything after the last couple of years. Give them something to work towards. Going “back” wipes out their feelings of accomplishment for overcoming extreme circumstances. Working toward a singular goal provides coherence and reduces uncertainty.

Moving Forward

Can you find a powerful way to move your message from “where are you working today” to why your organization exists? None of us can control the next wave of the virus, but we like to think that we can control our destiny. Mars, anyone?

SO WHAT'S NEXT?

Once an infrequent event in the life of an organization, the need for transformation has become a constant in today's somewhat bewildering environment. These are human events and momentum is often lost or completely disrupted by very human reasons. There is a process for change in human systems, and we believe that once an organization has the knowledge and the data to apply it, they can build a capability to change faster and with less friction than their competitors.

Department26 has deep expertise in influencing behavior change and have helped respected organizations successfully apply behavioral science to solve wicked problems in a wide range of operating environments.

If you would like to go deeper and discover insights and applications of behavioral science that can be applied to your organization's unique situation, it would be our pleasure to speak with you or arrange a video call with your team.

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