Out of Office

What's in it for me? Discover why working from home could be just the start of a new era of work.

It's safe to say that a lot of people have a love-hate relationship with the office. Offices are crowded, loud, and because there are people around you constantly, it's almost impossible to concentrate. And when you're on a deadline, every little distraction just increases your stress. Plus, it's an hour-long commute to even get there in the first place. It can be exhausting. And because of all this, the idea of remote work seemed like a dream to many office workers. You mean, I can just get out of bed, open my laptop, and . . . start? From my couch? I'm in. Little did we know, in 2020, we'd get our wish. Millions of us were suddenly working from home. And we may have thought that remote work would usher in this new sense of freedom and flexibility. But, as we soon found out, it wasn't really all it was cracked up to be. Work, instead, just slowly crept into every part of life. The authors know this as well as anyone. Journalists Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen left New York City for Montana in 2017 – well before the pandemic. They hoped to escape the nonstop grind of a New York commute and replace it with the simple joys of a remote lifestyle. Anne, an introvert, at first loved the flexibility it gave her. For Charlie, though, it was tougher. As someone who needed to interact with other people throughout the day, he found himself investing way too much energy in messaging and Zoom calls, to the point where he never really could switch it all off. And although they kept waiting for all this extra personal time to appear, it never really came. Sure, they'd gained some time by not having to commute anymore – but were they using that time to go hiking every day? Not a chance. Work always found a way in. Which raises a bigger question. Why do we prioritize work so much? And do we really have to change our lives to be better at work? Or is it work that should be changing for us? These are the questions we'll be covering in these Blinks to Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen's Out of Office. So, whether you're in the office, at your living room table, or on a "workcation" (whatever that is), let's take a few minutes to dive into the increasingly complicated world of work-life balance. In these blinks, you'll learn

why being flexible is better for your employer than for you; why companies shouldn't describe themselves as being like a family; and what asynchronous working looks like.

When your flexibility benefits the company – not you.

Let's make one thing clear from the start: these blinks aren't anti-working-from-home. Far from it. In fact, the authors argue that remote work can be truly liberating, even life-changing! But it has to be done right. Because far too often, working from home just ends up meaning working all the time, with no separation between our work life and our private life. So, to address this, we need to start off with a concept that runs deep in today's work culture: flexibility. Have you ever called the customer service line at Amazon or Apple? Or really any number of other large companies. If so, you likely spoke with a "service partner" from a totally different company – a company called Arise. Oddly enough, though, that person on the phone won't actually be an Arise employee;

they'll be an independently contracted gig worker. No health insurance, leave, or benefits. And no call center – just their living room. The upside? According to Arise, it's flexibility. Arise claims that working with them puts you in control – you can be your own boss, with your own schedule, working from your own home. But . . . is that the sort of flexibility you really want? The sort where you don't even have a paid lunch break? Flexibility like that is great for the company, sure: it's cheaper. Less overhead, no paid office space. But for the worker, flexibility seldom means freedom. Far from it. So how can workers actually get more freedom? There are some interesting ideas around this. One is the four-day workweek. A New Zealand trust-management company, Perpetual Guardian, has actually had a 20-percent rise in productivity since it switched to a four-day week – and a 12.5 percent rise in profitability. But what they didn't do was just send everyone home one extra day. They thought about how the change could work with schedules and deadlines. As a result, they made some smaller modifications around the office to increase efficiency – including setting up red, yellow, and green flags at workspaces so that workers could show their availability and distribute the workload. Here's another tip: put up guardrails – not boundaries, which tend to get crossed, but rules that are much firmer. Take emails, for example. If you're heading on vacation, you'll likely set up an auto reply. But let's face it. You'll probably still check your inbox from time to time. Front, a tech company, provides a guardrail. It diverts emails out of your inbox altogether, forwarding them on to someone who's actually working. You never even receive the message, so you don't have to agonize over whether or not you need to get back to it. Won't your emails just end up going to an equally stressed colleague, though – making their life that much worse? Well, yeah, quite possibly. And that's why, for true workplace flexibility, companies need to do something simpler still: pay for it. Most companies demand flexibility from workers for a simple reason: they don't have enough staff. But if they hire slightly more than they strictly need, others can pick up the slack and ensure that everyone gets along much better. Yes, it will cost a bit more. But in the end, the results will pay off for everyone. Employees will be able to unplug, and you'll reduce a whole lot of stress for everyone else.

Remote work isn't easy to get right, but it could help workers get their priorities in order.

The pandemic was tough for everyone, but for the generation that graduated college and started work, it was . . . weird. Take Kiersten, who lucked out by getting a job with a government contractor amid the chaos of COVID. Months into her career, she'd still never even been to her office, didn't really know her team, and had started to think of her job as an abstraction. Working from home doesn't just mean missing out on idle water-cooler chat. So much of our learning and professional development takes place from just being around the right people. The solution to this isn't simply that everyone should come back to the office. But we do need to find ways to make remote working work better for our next key concept – work culture. One solution is Kona, a software platform that adds a human element to working remotely. Every morning, it asks employees to evaluate their mood – green means good, yellow OK, and red . . . less good. You can even write in more detail if you want to. This allows managers to get a feel for how their team is doing on a daily basis. Fully factor in the different schedules of your team, and you might even end up with something that looks like Art + Logic, another software company. Its 65 employees can set their own schedules however they

want, so they can go for hikes in the mountains, pick up the kids at the right time, or even just play golf during the week. Sure, that sounds a little crazy. But does it sound as crazy as it would have before the pandemic? The shift to widespread remote work could – and we're emphasizing could here – be the chance for us to rethink some of our most basic assumptions about priorities. Because what really comes first, when you think about it – work, or your family? You might wonder, because it's common for companies today to brag about having a family-like atmosphere. But is that really such a good thing? Obviously, families are wonderful – but they're a lot of emotional work. And the thing about families is – well, family comes first. So for a workplace to claim to be like your family is disingenuous. Shouldn't we be putting our real families first?

Innovations in office design haven't always had workers' interests at heart.

Here's the big question, then: How can you prioritize your family – your whole nonwork life, in fact – in the same space that you're supposed to be getting your job done? Maybe we can innovate our way out of the problem, by rethinking what the office looks like. Which brings us to our third point – office innovation. People have been innovating with modern modes of working for as long as the idea has been around. One big shift came in 1958, when the German Schnelle brothers, Eberhard and Wolfgang, devised the Bürolandschaft, or office landscape. The innovation was that, instead of rows of individual offices, it was an open plan: partitions were movable, and workers were arranged within the landscape of one room according to the tasks they had. It was designed to increase efficiency. Guess what? Workers hated this. People were so unhappy in their newly interchangeable and public workspaces that their performance levels dropped; it didn't end up increasing efficiency at all. And yet, for whatever reason, the open office eventually became the norm. More recent innovations have claimed to put worker happiness first – just think of today's legendary tech offices like Google's Googleplex, with its free food, volleyball courts, and massage rooms. The idea is that such a space will meet everyone's work and life needs together, in order to foster creativity and community. But these days, even the designer of the Googleplex, Clive Wilkinson, isn't so sure about blurring the distinction between home and office. If people end up staying at work longer and living their lives there, where does that leave their actual families? What sorts of lives are they really living? Ultimately, that sort of office space is a manifestation of the ever-presence of work in our lives. So, in contrast, here's a completely opposite way of doing things: GitLab, a software platform. GitLab is fully remote, and based all over the world – it's asynchronous, which means that people work at all sorts of different hours. How does it cope with that? It's actually pretty simple. Employees document all their work very carefully, and also create "README" pages about themselves and their work. On one of those pages, you can expect to read exactly what someone does, when they like to work, and how they'd like people to communicate with them. It's a guide to knowing how to work with someone. You might be wondering what the connection is between a work setup like GitLab's and a meticulously designed tech campus like Google's. It's a good question, because they are indeed very different. They prioritize different things. While one aims to turn the workplace into a kind of family, the other lets people work on their own terms – so, if they want, they can make more time for their actual family.

Remote working doesn't have to mean

isolation – in fact, it could mean reengaging with the community.

So, let's imagine for a moment that we've managed to create a world where work doesn't constantly encroach on our personal lives. What would it look like? How would we spend our time? And with whom? This brings us to our fourth point: community. Since the pandemic struck, so-called "Zoom towns" are springing up around the United States, as newly remote workers pour into midsize cities like Madison, Wisconsin; Sacramento, California; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa is a particularly interesting example because it's been thinking about its population of remote workers for ages. Since 2018, the city has run a program, Tulsa Remote, which gives specially selected remote workers $10,000 to help with their move. How does the program choose whom to reward? They carefully select applicants who truly want to be part of the community being built – people who want to be a part of life in Tulsa. People like Obum Ukabam, who moved to Tulsa thanks to the program and swiftly started working with the community theater, took on loads of volunteering work, and soon won some investment to run his own social programs as well. He's become a model citizen. Ukabam knows he's not alone in switching things up like this. He compares moving to places like Tulsa to the gold rush – but instead of chasing gold, people today want quality of life. And get this – that was before the pandemic. Just think about how important initiatives like Tulsa Remote might be in the future, as the pandemic continues to reconfigure the entire working landscape. Because the pandemic has done a lot more than that. It's reminded us all of the true value of spending time with other people – time apart has made us reflect on what it means to be together. That's not an argument for everyone rushing back into the office, to be with fellow workers. It's just a reminder that this is the perfect moment in time to reconsider the bonds between us – to think again about community. It wasn't so long ago that almost everyone in the United States was in some social organization or other, whether it was based around their religion, profession, or whatever else – groups like Elks, Daughters of the American Revolution, or B'nai B'rith. These groups are standing proof that there are all sorts of ways for communities to form outside of a work context. So, who has the time for a community like that these days? Well, if work took up less space in your life, maybe you would.

We need to shift our mindsets so that our lives are more important than our work.

Here's a question for all of you workers out there. What are you actually working for? Sure, you're earning money to feed yourself and your family and to put a roof over your heads. But if that's what you're in it for . . . why do you so often end up prioritizing it over your family? Is it the dream of retirement? Then what do you envision your perfect post-retirement day looking like? What do you actually dream of doing with your time? The authors asked themselves what they really wanted out of their free time, and made an effort to follow their hearts. Anne took up skiing again, for the first time since her childhood, and Charlie picked up his old guitar, embracing his own mediocrity and just enjoying the experience itself. It felt freeing: it had nothing to do with his work. In Anne's case, her new hobby meant her taking advantage of their new home in Montana

– making the most of remote working. Charlie's lower-maintenance hobby wasn't so dependent on remote work, though. Because the shift people need to make isn't entirely about whether you're working in the office or remotely. It's a mindset shift that runs far deeper than that. We need to remind ourselves that our lives are more important than our work. Here's a word for the bosses, too, as you consider how to set up your own office in this strange new era of remote and hybrid working. It's simple advice: look to the long term. Switching your mode of working isn't likely to result in immediate savings or cuts – maybe your building is on a ten-year lease, for example, so at first it might seem like a waste to have so many empty desks. But the changes that need to happen are so fundamental that the benefits may come way down the line. And nobody's suggesting that all work should be fully remote, either: that's much too simplistic a solution. Really, the change is about how you think of your team. The best setup isn't necessarily the one that maximizes productivity or efficiency: it's the one where staff truly feel heard and understood. Everyone's priorities have changed during the pandemic. We're all looking at the world in a slightly different way now. So it's the perfect time to reevaluate what really matters to us: in our offices, and – more importantly – in the rest of our lives.

Final summary

You've just listened to our blinks to Out of Office, by Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen. The key message in these blinks is that: Working from home can be an amazing opportunity to rethink both the way we approach our work – and our lives in general. For far too long, workers and companies everywhere have been so focused on productivity and efficiency that they've lost sight of what really matters in life. But the seismic shift in working habits that the COVID-19 pandemic caused, could be our chance to fundamentally reshape our relationship to concepts like flexibility, workplace culture, office innovation, and community. To start, here's a quick piece of actionable advice: Audit your own working habits. That's right – it's really as simple as it sounds – but it could actually produce some surprising results. Literally count up the hours you spend doing everything each day – how long are you spending on emails? How long on Slack? What about meetings? Getting these details on paper can be a great way to see where your time is really going, and to compare it to what you want to be doing. Hopefully, it'll help you focus your days, and, as a result, allow you to finally make some time for yourself.