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OPINION | INSIDE VIEW

Back to the Office in 2022

We crave contact with co-workers, but we've lost our tolerance for life's inconveniences.



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A sign directs employees to a Covid-19 testing at the World Bank in Washington, Oct. 19.

PHOTO: JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

A Chicago Tribune headline declares: “Experts warn of brutal flu season.” Of course. With never-ending lockdowns (in California especially), working from home, and even people alone in cars wearing masks, we’ve probably lost immunity to many illnesses—and patience for many former day-to-day annoyances.

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I hate to break it to you, but with last week’s news that booster shots reduce the severity of the Omicron variant and the success of Paxlovid, [Pfizer](#)’s new antiviral pill, it’s back to the office in 2022 for most of us. But are we again vulnerable to a host of diseases, plus many inconveniences we’ve long forgotten? Life moves pretty fast. I don’t know if most folks are ready.

Let’s face it, after more than 20 months of the roll-out-of-bed commute, many have zero tolerance for traffic—remember rubbernecking delays? Or wearing pants, let alone clean

clothes. Or drinking industrial-grade office coffee mellowed by nondairy creamers. Your

body will reject that like week-old fish.

It's the broom for Zoom. Welcome back to conference rooms and crowded in-person meetings, including that marketing associate who subtly coughs while you're talking, and you always fall for it and exhibit common decency and pause only to be interrupted by the cougher and have the meeting hijacked. Yeah, bet you don't miss that.

Remember cubicles? Or open-office layouts—the vast sea of desks? There was no privacy, and employees would have to crawl under their workstation to make personal phone calls. During lockdowns, your kids might have run noisily around your apartment or house, but you could yell at them to stop, unlike annoying co-workers.

I think one of the greatest abilities the human mind has is its tolerance for small talk. What was with Pete Davidson's hot pink hoodie when Steph Curry set the record for career 3-pointers? Is that an atmospheric river moving in? Can Meghan Markle ever become queen? You've been chatting with your dog for almost two years. The real stuff is rough.

Normal life is going to take some adjustment. You've probably lost immunity to those loudmouths at gatherings who go on about themselves, their important careers, their gifted children—with the word "gifted" spoken in a slight whisper. And to that guy who replies "indeed" no matter what you say.

What else is coming back that our brains aren't prepared for? Long lines. Reservations required. Higher prices. Crowded subways. Smelly gyms. Stock-market downturns. Close talkers. Then add "no workers" and "supply-chain disruptions" to the list of excuses for bad service. Sadly, there's no vaccine for any of these problems. Hopefully just reading about them here helps your mind and body produce enough social antibodies to make re-entry easier.

We built immunity to those nasty things over decades and put up with them for a reason. We work in offices because we need to look people in the eye and gauge their sincerity or conviction. We go to meetings because body language often communicates better than words. We visit clients and build rapport to close deals—always be closing. We put up with oddball co-workers because we crave camaraderie. I'm still friends with folks I worked with decades ago, many who would beat me up in meetings, ripping apart my arguments with what seemed like an ice pick. Still, they made me better.

Working in offices enhances our ability to learn. It isn't only that serendipitous ideas spark around water coolers or chance encounters; real learning comes through osmosis. Patterns and experiences seep into our brains from working with and watching others over long stretches. Anyone who entered the working world over Zoom or Slack has been robbed of that ability to learn.

I know it doesn't feel like it, but we learn when others push back, tell us we are wrong and challenge ingrained ideas. Even political posturing at the office has value. We can watch with awe at the guy who climbs the ladder of success hand over hand with knives in peoples' backs. We learn never to turn our backs to anyone.

That pompous putz at a party reminds us how great our true friends really are. A boasting boho reminds us always to craft an exit strategy to escape the blather—be sure to locate the bar and bathroom in case of a social emergency. Time spent in the office reminds us how great our families really are, lockdowns included. A friend once noted, "Family vacations are overrated." While often true, they are still better than everything else in

this world. As Ferris Bueller observed, “If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.”

We all miss and crave human contact: in-person work, picnics, cocktail parties, concerts, bars with sticky floors, overcrowded restaurants, even rubber-chicken conference meals. Humans are social. We build up immunity to all the bad stuff so we can soak up the best of other people, even the annoying ones. Being social is what makes us who we are. It’s time to get back to it.

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