

Back-to-office movement is picking up with the surging vaccination rate. I believe that here, in addition to the location of employees, we should also focus on the Synchronous vs. Asynchronous working model.

I am a very passionate believer in the in-office, hands-on work environment. However, the more I think about our current synchronous working model (Meetings, calls, chats, etc.), the more I am reminded of the benefits of our current pandemic-influenced, remote way of working.

There are multiple examples for it, such as :

- **Freedom from commute:** Daily commute is scarier with all the infrastructure work happening across Indian cities. Just being on the road brings back those awful and bone-chilling memories of sitting helplessly in traffic snarls.
- **Additional bandwidth:** Remote work has given me time to focus on stuff that matters, such as: Giving much-needed attention to my health and fitness, reading books with my son, deep(er) conversations with my better half, and relaxing with a game or two on PlayStation to name a few. I know that I would lose out on most of them on the days I would go to the office.
- **Flexibility:** I can't even imagine now being a prisoner of my work schedule ever again. Today I work when I want to, from where I want to, without compromising on either my work ethic or my responsibility. This flexibility, which most of the world is enjoying at present, is not easy to replace!

## Back to work, is it really?

This new normal of the hybrid working model is gaining traction across the corporate industry. The way it is planned currently, It will draw in a blend of people - Some folks will be more in office, some less, and some will never be in office? At present, we are worried about so many transactional zoom meetings? Just imagine, in this near future, we might have even more transactional and dysfunctional zoom meetings with some folks in the office and some from wherever the wind took them that day.

This ensuing chaos should not be that difficult to imagine. Folks working from home might miss half of the conversation due to non-verbal queues being exchanged directly between the folks in the office. This will, in turn, need the folks in the office to be more intentional and inclusive in verbal communications. That will be doubly hard, by the way, when you have some of the participants sitting next to you and are rolling eyeballs at your not so honest attempt.

Additionally, this hybrid work model will also bring challenges of different relationship barometers and pay parity across folks choosing to come to the office vs. folks who are not.

## Does the problem lie in our synchronous working model?

So should we decide not to return to the office at all or only to return fully? Thus either alienating folks like me who still want to get back to the office or disappointing folks who are perfectly content sitting in their shorts and pajamas and rolling on with the current remote work culture?

As per me, forcing people towards either way might not be the answer. Additionally, as discussed above, that just by giving total free will, we might not solve the problem either. Instead, we should take a step back and take a long hard look at our current synchronous way of working.

Our current synchronous way of working includes:

- Using calls and meetings as a placeholder for discussion, decision making, and procrastination.
- Using IMs and chats for clarifications and follow-ups.
- Using Emails for documentation, confirmations, and advertising information hierarchy. Since most likely nothing gets resolved or finalized anyways, in this old school, one-way communication method.

## Asynchronous working model for the rescue?

Hence there is nothing more exciting right now than the Asynchronous working model in this distributed working environment. We collectively as enterprises need to invest more in tools and frameworks for Asynchronous working where-in:

- **Offline Threads:** We create offline threads on communication platforms with audit trails for decision making. These threads should have some fixed duration to arrive at a decision and a moderator who can summarize the outcome. It will reduce the dependency on meetings, and hence it should matter even less where you currently are.
- **Documentation:** We enable these threads to be searchable and referencable in the future and thus building on the foundations of async work without re-inventing the wheel every time.
- **Real synchronous work:** We identify the areas in our work environment that made for in-person synchronous conversations. Then allocate dedicated days in a week/month

for it. It should bring consistency and better outcomes as the participants are more prepared.

- **Focused participation in synchronous work:** We create a culture of mandatory live notes from every participant of any such synchronous meetings or sessions. It will enforce rigor on the organizer's part to identify the right participants and also on the participant's part to think before accepting every invitation coming their way.

## A match made in heaven? - Distributed working model and Asynchronous workflow

These ideas are not new and are successfully pioneered by the likes of Matt Mullenweg at Automattic (<https://fs.blog/knowledge-project/matt-mullenweg/>) and by Jason Fried of Basecamp. The conversation and thoughts of these brilliant folks are the inspiration behind this article anyways. I sincerely believe that by doing some of these, we would free up a significant amount of the currently blocked calendars for all of us.

- Hence giving us more time to have un-planned conversations, both virtual and in-person, where-in we get to invest more time in knowing others.
- It also takes away the transactional nature of these meetings/catch-ups and brings in the much-needed - **get to know the place and people** vibe for the new joiners to any organization.
- It also gives the freedom back to people to decide their own works schedules to fit in some of the activities that they would love to do (mini exercises, playing sports, etc.) irrespective of where they are.

## There is still a long way to go.

I know that there are still many oversimplifications and omissions in the thoughts outlined above, such as:

- How would we collaborate across different time zones in today's even more globally diversified workforce?
- How will we implement feedback loops and measurement of success across sync and async work?
- How to prioritize and identify what still qualifies for synchronous work?

Therefore I think the need of the hour is to shift focus a bit from a hybrid work environment to an asynchronous way of working, to experiment with a few options and working models. It should give us a good preview of what works and what doesn't while still keeping in sight the most important thing for any organization, i.e. its people.

#blog

#published