

Sorry, Bosses: Workers Are Just Not That Into You

Callum Borchers

John Rowady has done everything he can think of to make his company's Chicago office a place where workers want to be.

As president of rEvolution, a sports marketing firm, he's installed a scoreboard, bleachers and a tunnel between the elevator and lobby to make his 100 employees feel like athletes emerging from a locker room into an arena. To further entice his staff to come back, after many got comfortable doing their jobs from home during the pandemic, Mr. Rowady stocked an office bar with free beer and bourbon for on-site happy hours. Then there's the full-size race car in the lobby.

Nevertheless, much of the team prefers to work remotely most days, Mr. Rowady says, even if it means gazing at the family minivan in the driveway instead of a Formula One speed machine.

"It can be frustrating to really do everything that you could possibly do, try not to be overbearing, engage with your employees—and then have to deal with situations where people still aren't comfortable coming back," he says.



Emerson Fittipaldi's race car graces rEvolution's Chicago lobby, but that hasn't been enough to drive many employees back to the office.

Photo: Tom Harris

What is holding up the return to the office right now? Plenty of workers simply don't feel like it. They're dining at restaurants, going to movies and taking trips, but offices aren't on their itinerary. That is delivering a reality check for bosses, who've been hoping the plunge in Covid-19 cases meant workers would finally—finally!—come back.

Big banks like [Goldman Sachs Group Inc.](#) and Jefferies Group LLC recently recalled much of their staffs, and tech giants like [Microsoft Corp.](#) and [Meta Platforms Inc.](#), the parent company of Facebook, are planning March returns for some employees. There are people eager to resurrect their office lives, just as many business leaders have let go of the notion that face-time five days a week is the optimal way to work. Nationwide, however, office occupancy rates are hovering around one-third, according to an estimate by Kastle Systems, which tracks building-access-card swipes.

Sure, employees like catered lunches, lounges filled with beanbag chairs and the masseuse who sets up in the conference room every other Friday. But they aren't ready to recommit to a five-days-a-week relationship—or even a three-day one.

“You're not going to get me on the train for two hours for free bagels,” says Jason Alvarez Schorr, a 36-year-old software engineer who quit his job in New York in January, when his former employer signaled an office return was imminent.



Jason Alvarez Schorr's new backyard in Puerto Rico.
Photo: Jason Alvarez Schorr

It isn't that Mr. Schorr disliked his old boss or workplace. The father of two young children says he simply found something better—a remote job that allowed him to move his family to Puerto Rico, where they plan to live for at least two years.

Call it the professional version of “It's not you; it's me.”

That can be a tough message to accept. Aaron Johnson, president of Automatic Payroll Systems in Shreveport, La., maintains people work best together, and for the past six months he has

expected most of his 165 employees to report to the office at least a few days a week. Last year 30% of his staff turned over—twice the typical rate. Many job-hopped to firms based in California, Texas and New York, collecting hefty raises while staying in lower-cost Louisiana and working from home.

What stings, Mr. Johnson says, is that his company trained a lot of those workers and retained them when the economy was at its worst, in 2020. Yet the investment in his people didn't seem to matter when it was time to reopen the office.

“The amount of effort and energy that was put into ensuring nobody lost their job—that we made the proper adjustments to weather the storm—people just don't remember those things,” he says. “You have that lack of loyalty.”

Bosses are surveying seas of empty seats and quietly noting employees who are going to packed sporting events, posting sun-drenched photos on Instagram and helping the latest Spider-Man movie [set box-office records](#)—basically, going about every facet of their daily lives from the Before Times, except coming in to work.

Not all workers are back to their old routines. The U.S. is [still in a pandemic](#), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and many working adults care for small children who can't be vaccinated or elderly or immunocompromised parents.

Yet new research shows the office reluctance is less about Covid-19 and more about convenience. As of this month, 61% of U.S. workers who telecommute most of the time are doing so by choice, according to a recent [Pew Research Center poll](#). Among this group, more than three-quarters simply said they prefer working from home.

Pat Donaldson, a 63-year-old biophysicist, retired early last year rather than heed a call back to her office in Rochester, N.Y. While working from home during the pandemic, she'd gotten a puppy and thrown herself into gardening, cross-country skiing and English folk dancing with her husband.



Pat Donaldson's dog named Cooper.
Photo: Pat Donaldson

“Once you go remote full time, you fill up all the hours,” she says.

Though Ms. Donaldson enjoyed the office, she wasn’t willing to compromise her new lifestyle—especially since she felt she’d proven her productivity.

“I phoned up my manager and said, ‘This is stupid,’” Ms. Donaldson recalls.

She says she’s now considering part-time, remote gigs but won’t go back to bricks and mortar.

Managers are doing their best to remain Zen. Months before the pandemic, Kyle Porter bought a sprawling home—complete with an outdoor, wood-fired pizza oven—a mile from the Atlanta headquarters of Salesloft, the software company he leads.

“The No. 1 objective of the house was enough space to host Salesloft events,” he says.

Mr. Porter’s mansion hasn’t gone unused, but his company gatherings have been smaller than he envisioned—only a dozen colleagues or so—in part because the office head count remains low. Mr. Porter instituted quarterly “sync” weeks to convene roughly 400 workers for face-to-face meetings, but most other days the office is optional.

On those occasions, maybe 15% of the staff shows up.

“You kind of have to keep feelings out of it when the world is rocked by external circumstances,” he says.

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