



WELLBEING CONSULTING

Connection, Flexibility, and Autonomy

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Employers are still navigating the complexities of bringing their people back to the office as well as grappling with how to address employee loneliness, burnout, chronic disease, and disengagement. Modern workforces are more diverse, composed of five different generations, each with myriad preferences for working styles and wellbeing needs.

While there is still a lot of debate on what's most effective and best for the future of work, I think that if we all zoom out and consider some human-centered fundamentals we may make some real progress. I encourage employers to keep the following values in mind – connection, flexibility, and autonomy – as they redesign and reevaluate their organizational policies for 2024.

Connection

What is a powerful antidote to isolation, depression, stress, and worry? *Connection.*

There are several factors in today's world impacting our rising rates of physical and mental health conditions, but one major influence is our lack of meaningful connection. Technology is causing our world to become *less human*. We have a universal need for interaction, and we are not meant to go through it alone. The surgeon general reports that lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.¹

It is essential to highlight that we all have different social thresholds and may not need the same amount of connectedness to thrive. However, the workplace can serve as a place for people to build meaningful daily connections, which can create more collaboration, creativity, and innovation. We cannot underscore the impact of a team on one's wellbeing.

I have heard several people talk about their employers return-to-office mandates and say, "None of my team is even in the office, so there is no point in going." This is an opportunity for people to be collaborative outside of their teams. You can still build meaningful relationships with people at work even if you aren't doing the same exact type of work. I have also heard lately that "there is no point to go to the office if everyone is just on virtual calls all day." We need to be intentional about our meeting cadence and create opportunities for organic relationship-building. Technology can hinder this.

What if we reframed "return to office: and considered "return to connection?" When you talk to your people about returning to the office, explore ways they feel connected at work, be intentional about meeting structure, ask questions to make sure people feel they belong, and do your best to keep things flexible.

Flexibility

Humans are complex, and we all interface with the world differently. Some working individuals prefer to work outside of a conventional 40-hour work week, have aging parents, or are raising children or teenagers.

Having a flexible work environment is all about empowering employees to start and end their day when they want, as long as they remain productive and deliver quality work. Flexibility at work does not mean that your entire workforce needs to be remote or hybrid. It means finding a way to allow people to work in a way that *serves them*.

Research shows that flexibility at work drives retention, satisfaction, improved performance, and worker wellbeing. We know that at least 80% of employees prefer a flexible work arrangement. When designing work policies and producing, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Here are some considerations to promote a successful flexible environment:

- A foundation of trust must be established.
- Managers need to be trained on what productivity is in a flexible workplace – task output, not hours worked.
- Flexible work principles must be easy to understand and consistent whenever possible.
- Connection needs to be considered at every level, even in a flexible environment – what are the opportunities for people to connect in a meaningful way? It cannot just be through technology.

Autonomy

Encouraging autonomy at work is not only business critical, but it reinforces a core psychological need. Simply put, autonomy is being in control, having choice, and having a voice. If people feel autonomous at work, they are more motivated, collaborative, and agile.

Autonomy is a key factor in driving motivation. Data suggests that employees are actively disengaging from their work, as we discussed in our employee engagement post. Cultivating autonomy among your workers supports intrinsic motivation, which is a key component of self-determination theory.²

We want to empower people to work in a way that serves them and that is built upon trust.

Research shows that if employees feel autonomous and can work from their desired locations, they are more likely to be engaged at work, experience lower levels of burnout, and want to stay at the company.³

Here are some considerations to promote autonomy at work:

- Working collaboratively alongside your employees
- Giving employees a voice on deadlines
- Establishing goals and objectives with teams
- Asking the right questions of employees to guide how they want to complete tasks and projects
- Creating space for people to grow – don't just put them in a box.

For inquiries about how PartnerWell can assist you and your team, contact us at partnerwell@tpgrp.com.

Citations:

1. Vivek H. Murthy, U.S.S.G. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
2. Center For Self-Determination Theory. (2023.). <https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>
3. Ben Wigert, J. H. and S. A. (2023). *The future of the office has arrived: It's hybrid*. Gallup.com. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/511994/future-office-arrived-hybrid.aspx>