

To Get Ahead at Work, It Helps to Actually Be at Work

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FULL TEXT

The generational divide on returning to the office is not neatly drawn. For some young professionals, even in a pandemic, showing up is more than half the battle.

It looked like a middle-aged person's idea of what a young person would find fun. There was a dartboard on the wall, a pool table to the side and a Blue Bunny ice cream cart near the entrance, tended to by representatives from H.R.

On the Thursday after Labor Day, about 20 attorneys and staff members at the Chicago branch of the law firm Dickinson Wright gathered to commemorate their formal office return. The group bantered gamely while clutching treats, like people who were not especially concerned about the pandemic, but not not concerned about it, either. The only suspicious note was the relative lack of millennials. Near the very end, a first-year associate darted into the room, grabbed a plastic-wrapped ice cream bar and darted out again, barely exchanging more than a sentence or two with colleagues. It seemed like a rebuke to the whole affair.

Yet when I later tracked down the associate, Akshita Singh, expecting to find her disillusioned with the office return and irritated by the oldsters trying to sell it, it became clear that something else was going on: She wasn't conscientiously objecting to the office. She had actually embraced it.

"I've been coming in every day," said Ms. Singh, who turned out to be swamped that afternoon. "It's nice to leave my laptop here knowing I'll come back tomorrow."

Since the beginning of the year, as mass vaccinations loomed and "return to office" became an incantation so popular it earned its own abbreviation, workers under 40 have been notably resistant.

But what the stories of uprisings and generational conflict, even a trying-too-hard office mixer, don't entirely capture is this: Amid the ranks of 20- and 30-somethings is a large and growing group of employees who, for reasons part careerist and part emotional, increasingly crave the office as well.

In a survey by the Conference Board in June, 55 percent of millennials expressed doubts about returning to work, versus 36 percent of baby boomers. By August, with Delta raging, that figure had dropped to 48 percent of millennials. Nearly two-thirds of millennials expressed concern about a "lack of connection" with colleagues, more than any other age group.

Ms. Singh, of all people, appeared to reflect the trend. "I see value every time I come in, workwise," she told me.

A Different Tack

When I started asking Chicago-area employers about their R.T.O. plans in the spring, national infection rates were plummeting and well over a million Americans were getting vaccinated each day.

Many employers appeared to be nudging workers back to the office in a kind of soft ramp-up over the summer, while circling September as the month when they would commit to it more formally.

"We'll get going on that in July, be full tilt after Labor Day," Adam Fox, the chief executive of the Chicago Sky, the Women's National Basketball Association franchise, told me in May.

But as the Delta variant of the coronavirus surged, Mr. Fox and other executives pushed their plans off.

McDonald's, whose headquarters is in Chicago, postponed its office opening until Oct. 11.

A data management firm, Infutor, which had abandoned its downtown office during the pandemic and expanded its suburban footprint, kept a brave face for weeks. But the day before I was supposed to visit in mid-August to observe how its return plans were progressing, an executive begged off, citing the rising number of Covid-19 cases and the small number of workers who were turning up.

We tentatively postponed until mid-September before that date fell through, too. "We are not prepared to reschedule but would like to keep in touch," a spokeswoman wrote by email. (Infutor now says it won't consider a formal return until 2022.)

Dickinson Wright, a 500-lawyer firm with headquarters in Michigan and offices in 18 U.S. cities and Toronto, took a different tack.

In late July, as the curve turned upward, the firm was completing its post-Labor Day plans, having concluded that in-person interaction was important for collaboration and training. The firm encouraged all lawyers to spend at least some time in the office regularly, and required many to show up when it was necessary for client work. Younger lawyers were asked to work out a schedule with leaders of the firm if they wanted to stay partly remote. Michael Hammer, the chief executive, confessed to a "medium" level of anxiety but told me that he was heartened by the 89 percent of U.S. personnel who were fully vaccinated. Dickinson Wright was picking up a few more "persuadable people" every week, he said. We set a late-August date for me to visit the Chicago office, which has roughly 20 lawyers.

As the visit got close, daily infection rates swelled to around 150,000 nationally. I braced for another cancellation. If I'm being honest, I was secretly rooting for one.

But the email never came. Mr. Hammer, who had since mandated vaccinations for all workers and visitors, was convinced that science had spoken. And though the din of the Delta variant might have momentarily drowned it out, he believed the bottom line was still clear: Returning to work was eminently safe for the vaccinated.

I told him I'd be sure to bring my vaccination card. "Lol. Thank you," he responded.

Beyond Social Benefits

When I turned up at the firm in August, the people who seemed most committed to being back were a handful of partners. Trent Cornell, a litigator who had spent years at the firm that Dickinson Wright acquired to create its Chicago office, and who returned this March after working elsewhere, told me that he had started coming in when he rejoined the firm.

"I had so much paper I was taking with me, it was easier to bring it into an office," he said.

Mr. Cornell stuck with it even as the office stayed largely vacant, and felt something had been lost during the months of isolation.

"It's nice to bounce ideas off people," he said. "If I had a question for you, would I pick up the phone and call?" Not necessarily, he worried.

Ms. Singh, the most junior lawyer in the office, was less convinced. Though she acknowledged the benefits of collaborating in person, she seemed more excited about the idea of working from home.

"I can sleep longer, work out more, even if the day sometimes doesn't end at 5," she told me. "If you come in five days, your weekends are really hectic." She said she hoped to come in two or three days each week after Labor Day.

Yet over time, it became clear that the more tenure and experience a lawyer had -- the farther you moved up the organizational chart from Ms. Singh to Mr. Cornell -- the less urgent it was for the lawyer to be in the office. The partners who came in frequently all had vaguely plausible rationales for why a centralized work space was preferable, but were often at a loss to identify something they could not accomplish without one. Even the casual office drop-by seemed overrated. At a national firm like Dickinson Wright, many co-workers are at other locations whether or not there's a pandemic.

For the firm's middle ranks, the brass-tacks calculus tilted somewhat more in favor of office time. Jim Boland, a fifth-year associate who joined the firm during the pandemic, complained that remote work was not especially

conducive to assimilating.

"For the first couple of months, I was like, 'I don't know if anyone knows I work here,'" he said.

Nicole Sappingfield, a fourth-year associate, shares a two-bedroom apartment with her husband, who recently left a job in sales. She said there were times during the pandemic when both were on calls and her work space at home felt small.

Still, she considered the benefits of the office to be largely social. While interviewing for a summer job at the firm, Ms. Sappingfield said, "I loved the fact that everyone had their door open, everyone was popping in and out."

Partners and more senior associates seemed to regard personal interaction as a kind of workplace luxury good that the firm had purchased for them through its safety policies. At one point I asked Ms. Sappingfield about a serial cougher and sniffer we heard in the middle distance.

"It's one of these things when you're like, 'What?' Then you're like, 'Oh, it's fine. Someone could be choking on water,'" she said. "I feel an extra level of security given that the firm has been so good about vaccinations."

There was, however, one group for whom the benefits of face time were not merely social but exceedingly concrete – the first- and second-year associates. This prompted Mr. Hammer to ask them to spend more time in the office than senior lawyers.

As it happens, the most valuable currency for any associate are hours spent working on client business, which are both a measure of productivity and a way for young lawyers to learn their trade.

At most large firms, associates have formal quotas for billable hours, typically 1,800 to 2,000 per year. Those who want to be promoted tend to focus on accumulating these hours, which they track with time-keeping software, sometimes monomaniacally. (At Dickinson Wright, the required minimum is 1,850 hours for the first few years.) The catch is that few first-year associates enter a firm with work awaiting them. For this, they are largely at the mercy of the senior associates and partners who dispense it.

And how, exactly, does one land assignments from these colleagues? It turns out there is no more reliable way than, well, showing up.

"People give work to people they think of," said Amanda Newman, a senior associate in Dickinson Wright's Phoenix office, who serves as a liaison between associates and management. "If they're seeing you every day, they think of you."

Or as Ms. Singh, the first-year associate, put it, alluding to a recent assignment: "It was 9 a.m., I was here. Jim's like, 'Are you doing anything?'"

'It's Good to Have Face Time'

By late September, attendance was ticking up, and I began to make out a core group of officegoers. One pillar of the group was Mr. Cornell, who was braving a commute that ranged from 30 minutes to over two hours through morning traffic and had spent weeks mulling a return to public transit.

"My parking pass for the train station starts on Oct. 1," he told me, trying to commit himself to the change.

He was trying to get back to other parts of his routine, too, with mixed results. He ventured to a Mexican restaurant called Dos Toros for lunch – "not bad" – but mourned the loss of a beloved Mediterranean place that had opened shortly before the pandemic.

Ms. Sappingfield, who lived only a mile from the office, often walked. But some days she opted for the L, the elevated-train and subway system, working through calculations about which car seemed least crowded as a train pulled into the station.

She spent one Thursday fielding increasingly frantic calls from a junior associate in another office who had been summoned to help close a transaction. They would not have been face to face even without a pandemic, but I couldn't help feeling that the young associate could have benefited from some in-person reassurance.

"He'll say, 'I know you're holding my hand, but tell me again what you told me on the walk to work?'" Ms. Sappingfield said.

Things seemed briefly under control until the associate learned that the client's middle initial had appeared incorrectly on a document. "No, you're OK," Ms. Sappingfield told the associate when he called for at least the third

time in three hours. "We had no way of knowing his middle initial was L rather than a D."

Ms. Singh, too, appeared to be under more stress. "I came in every day this week," she said, estimating that she was arriving at work between 8:30 and 9 and staying until 6 or 7. "The hours have been a little longer than I expected."

But she seemed increasingly committed to the office. "It's good to have face time, even if it's with one person," she told me.

The day before, she had turned in a due-diligence memo to Ms. Sappingfield – an assignment she earned through her tried-and-true method of "being there" – and had to turn around a draft of another, similar memo, which kept her working late into the evening.

The second memo was for a senior associate in Columbus, Ohio, but there was a benefit to working on it from the office, too – call it the seamless availability of help. When she got stuck, she simply went down the hall and asked Ms. Sappingfield to unstick her. Though Ms. Singh could have called the associate she was working with, she was reluctant to play phone tag on a question she needed answered quickly.

In the Chicago office, she could exploit the tiniest opening in a co-worker's schedule. "I had a call in two minutes," Ms. Sappingfield said. "If she were to call me rather than walk into my office two minutes before a call, I probably wouldn't have answered."

The next week, Ms. Singh showed up all five days. A team including Mr. Boland, who had been brought to the firm to help clients win licenses to produce or dispense cannabis products, asked her to write a memo for a client on marijuana regulations in Illinois. She figured she would get it done from the office, even though it meant trooping in on a Friday, a day most of her colleagues work from home.

"I came in because I knew I had something due," she said. "Almost no one was here."

By the next Tuesday, she was finally getting caught up on her memos when another assignment landed on her desk – more research on cannabis regulations.

I asked if that was how she planned to spend her afternoon. Ms. Singh seemed slightly harried: "That, and an application that's in the queue for Michigan." (She wouldn't get to it until the next week.)

I began to wonder if there might be a more relaxed way to train young lawyers – one that didn't require the same accumulation of office hours, the same anxious petitioning for work and for help. By the standards of Big Law, an industry known for workaholicism and burnout, Dickinson Wright seemed humane. On the other hand, it was only six weeks earlier that Ms. Singh had been optimistic about spending a large chunk of her work life at home. Now she was in the office even on a Friday, when it was mostly empty.

She did not seem especially troubled by the turnabout, pointing out that the overall volume of work was still manageable even if it did require the occasional late shift or weekend.

"I might be jinxing it," she said, "but I really thought I'd be pulling all-nighters all the time."

Photograph

Top right, Akshita Singh, who joined Dickinson Wright in Chicago over the summer. Above, masks are a common desk accessory, and the firm requires that its employees and visitors to the premises be vaccinated. Bottom, lawyers there held an ice cream social after Labor Day to celebrate their formal return to the office, at least part time. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID KASNIC FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (BU10)

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