Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I'm Back in the Office and Still Doing Everything on Teams

How to Make Sense of Hybrid Work, Decide When Being in the Office **Really Helps**, and Cut Down on Days When You Commute an Hour for a Video Call



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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How to Make Sense of Hybrid Work, Decide When Being in the Office Really Helps, and Cut Down on Days When You Commute an Hour for a Video Call

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INTRO

At 9:14 on a Thursday morning, you arrive at the office carrying a laptop, a water bottle, a slightly crushed breakfast, and the quiet determination of someone who has already survived a journey involving two delayed trains and an unnecessarily enthusiastic ticket barrier. You find an available desk, connect your equipment, and open your calendar. Your first meeting is online. So is your second. At eleven, you move into a tiny meeting booth because the person beside you is conducting a sales presentation at approximately the volume of an airport announcement. By lunchtime, you have spoken to six colleagues in three different countries and precisely nobody sitting on your floor. At four, you pack everything away and begin your journey home. Congratulations. You have successfully completed another day of working remotely from the office.

The strangest part is that you might actually like the office. Perhaps you enjoy seeing colleagues, having somewhere separate from home to work, or discussing difficult problems without waiting for somebody to find the unmute button. You may even appreciate the occasional conversation that has nothing to do with quarterly targets. The frustration comes from being told that physical attendance is essential for collaboration, only to discover that the working day has been organized exactly as if everybody were still sitting in separate bedrooms, kitchens, and spare rooms. The building has changed. The calendar hasn't. Neither has the communication software. The only genuinely new feature is the amount of time you spend travelling between two perfectly functional internet connections.

Hybrid work was supposed to offer a sensible compromise. Certain activities would benefit from bringing people together, while others could be performed more conveniently elsewhere. In theory, that sounds straightforward. In practice, organizations have sometimes combined the attendance expectations of traditional office work with the meeting habits of fully remote teams. The result is a peculiar arrangement in which employees must be physically present to demonstrate commitment, yet communicate through screens because the people they actually work with are scattered across other buildings, cities, or countries. It's rather like insisting everybody visit a library to prove they enjoy reading, then requiring them to listen to the books through headphones.

Naturally, the debate has become unnecessarily dramatic. One side argues that returning to the office restores culture, creativity, accountability, and everything else supposedly endangered by comfortable clothing. The other insists that commuting is an outdated ritual maintained by executives with expensive office leases and a sentimental attachment to conference rooms. Both arguments contain concerns worth examining, but neither provides a useful answer to the question facing you on Monday morning: where should you work, with whom, and for what purpose? An office can be genuinely valuable without being essential every day. Remote work can be highly effective without being suitable for every activity. The challenge is learning to distinguish the circumstances rather than choosing a permanent winner.

Consider what happens when a new employee joins a complicated project. They may need opportunities to observe experienced colleagues, build relationships, and ask questions that would never occur to them during a formal

training session. An in-person workshop can help a team untangle competing priorities, particularly when several decisions depend on one another. A difficult conversation may also benefit from the attention and immediacy of being together. But preparing an individual analysis, updating a spreadsheet, or reviewing a detailed document does not automatically improve because the employee performs it within walking distance of a corporate reception desk. The useful distinction is not between fashionable working arrangements. It is between activities that benefit from proximity and those that simply require the right conditions.

Those conditions matter more than many official announcements acknowledge. A commute has a cost even when the company pays for your transport. There is time, energy, unpredictability, and the ordinary business of organizing a life around work. Someone living ten minutes from headquarters faces a different calculation from someone travelling across a metropolitan area. A parent arranging school collection cannot treat an unexpected late meeting as a charming opportunity for flexibility. And someone whose home is noisy or crowded may genuinely prefer the office, provided there is a quiet place to work when they arrive. There is no universal arrangement that respects everyone's circumstances simply by demanding identical attendance.

Another problem is that being somewhere is much easier to observe than achieving something meaningful. A manager can see employees occupying desks, notice people entering meeting rooms, and admire a bustling workplace. Evaluating whether decisions are being made properly, information is flowing effectively, and projects are progressing requires more thought. The temptation is to confuse visible activity

with useful work. You can fill an entire afternoon with discussions about priorities and still finish with no agreed priorities. You can also spend several uninterrupted hours working independently and produce exactly what the team needs. The second option may look less impressive to somebody walking through the office with a visitor. Unfortunately, productivity has never been particularly concerned with providing attractive scenery.

This book is about making better decisions inside that messy reality. It is not a campaign to abolish offices, replace every conversation with an email, or turn employees into perfectly optimized machines who consider a spontaneous chat an unacceptable efficiency breach. Human relationships matter. Informal conversations matter. So do clear responsibilities, dependable information, reasonable expectations, and the opportunity to concentrate without constantly defending your availability. The trick is to understand how these needs fit together, especially when the people involved have different schedules, responsibilities, and degrees of control over their working arrangements.

You will encounter situations in which the sensible answer is to organize a proper in-person meeting, and others in which the best improvement is to cancel a meeting altogether. You will see why shared office days sometimes fail, why hybrid conversations can unintentionally exclude remote participants, and why a manager's demand for visibility may be hiding a problem with unclear expectations. More importantly, you will learn how to discuss these issues without announcing that everyone above you has lost the ability to think. That approach may feel satisfying for

approximately seven seconds, but it rarely produces a better working agreement.

There will be limits. Your employer may have a mandatory attendance policy that your immediate manager cannot change. Your job may require specialist equipment, scheduled coverage, or a physical presence. Financial pressures, family responsibilities, contractual arrangements, and workplace relationships may restrict your options. Sensible advice must begin with those realities rather than pretending that sufficient confidence can persuade every executive committee to rewrite its policies. Sometimes a modest adjustment will be possible. Sometimes the best available solution is to make an unavoidable office day more useful. And sometimes you will need to assess whether your existing working conditions remain sustainable.

For now, try one small change in perspective. Think about an upcoming office day and identify what you hope to accomplish specifically because you will be there. Perhaps you need to resolve a disagreement, work closely with somebody, or use equipment unavailable elsewhere. If you cannot name anything, that does not necessarily mean you should stay home, particularly when attendance is required. It does mean you have discovered a useful question about how the day is organized. If there is a genuine purpose, make sure the necessary people and resources will actually be available. An intention to collaborate is rather less valuable when everyone required for the collaboration is attending a conference two hundred miles away.

The goal is not to win an argument about where work should happen. It is to stop allowing habit, appearances, and poorly coordinated calendars to make that decision without examination. You deserve a working arrangement that

makes sense wherever reasonable choices are available, and your colleagues deserve one that allows them to do their jobs without carrying the hidden costs of yours. Sometimes that will mean meeting in person. Sometimes it will mean working apart. On particularly successful occasions, it may even mean finishing an important task without scheduling a meeting to celebrate the fact.

And if you do have to travel an hour to sit in an office and join a video call, at least you can begin asking whether there is a better way to organize the next one. Preferably before somebody proposes a mandatory face-to-face workshop on how to improve virtual collaboration.

Chapter 1 - Welcome Back to the Office. Your Colleagues Are Still Somewhere Else

On a Tuesday morning, a project coordinator named Daniel walks into his company's newly renovated headquarters. The reception area smells of expensive furniture, the walls feature inspirational statements about human connection, and a digital screen announces that the organization is entering an exciting new era of collaboration. Daniel has an important meeting at ten. He finds his desk, opens his laptop, and connects to Teams. The product manager is joining from Manchester. The finance specialist is in Amsterdam. The technical lead is working from home because a delivery company has promised to arrive sometime between breakfast and the end of civilization. Daniel spends the next hour speaking into a headset while sitting in a building specifically designed to bring people together. The nearest colleague is twelve feet away, attending another video call. During the meeting, Daniel receives a notification reminding him that the company values face-to-face interaction. He briefly considers turning his camera toward the notification as evidence of organizational commitment.

The scene sounds ridiculous because it exposes a contradiction that often remains invisible in discussions about hybrid work. Organizations can change where employees perform their duties without changing how those duties are organized. A return-to-office policy might increase the number of people entering company buildings, yet leave the underlying collaboration patterns almost

untouched. Teams still span multiple cities, calendars remain packed with virtual meetings, and decisions continue to move through digital systems. Nobody necessarily intended to create this arrangement. It can emerge when separate decisions, each apparently reasonable, are combined without examining their consequences. Human resources establishes attendance expectations, department managers schedule projects, individual employees arrange meetings, and facilities teams prepare the workspace. Every department completes its assigned task. The overall experience, unfortunately, resembles a meal prepared by five chefs who never agreed on the recipe.

Before trying to improve that experience, we need to separate three ideas that are routinely treated as interchangeable: attendance, interaction, and useful collaboration. Attendance means being in a particular place. Interaction means exchanging information or communicating with other people. Useful collaboration occurs when that exchange contributes to something worth achieving, such as resolving uncertainty, coordinating actions, improving a decision, or completing work that requires multiple contributions. You can attend without interacting, and interact without producing anything useful. Equally, you can contribute to excellent collaboration without ever entering the same building as your colleagues. These distinctions matter because the easiest activity to observe is not necessarily the activity that creates value. An employee sitting visibly at a desk provides reassuring evidence of attendance. Whether the employee has helped remove a significant obstacle from a project requires considerably more understanding.

Physical proximity does offer real advantages, provided the work creates opportunities to use them. Imagine two designers investigating why customers struggle with a complicated product interface. They have sketches, conflicting interpretations of feedback, and several possible solutions. Working together in a room might make it easier to compare ideas quickly, draw alternatives, challenge assumptions, and recognize misunderstandings before they become expensive design decisions. Their location contributes to the work because the activity involves frequent, flexible exchanges. Now imagine one of those designers preparing detailed specifications after the major decisions have been made. That task may require sustained concentration and access to shared documents rather than continual conversation. Placing the designer in the same room as other employees does not automatically improve the specifications. It may simply add background noise to a job that was already demanding.

There is an important distinction here between being capable of completing work remotely and having no reason to meet physically. Some people hear that an activity can be performed online and conclude that gathering in person would therefore be wasteful. That is too simple. A remote meeting might accomplish its objective adequately, while a carefully designed in-person workshop could offer a meaningful improvement. The reverse is also possible. A video call might give participants in different locations equal access to shared materials, while gathering some of them around a table could unintentionally exclude the rest. The right question concerns the additional benefit of meeting in person, not whether a particular activity is theoretically possible through a screen. Almost anything can be

discussed through a screen. Whether that is the most sensible approach depends on what the discussion needs to accomplish.

The people involved matter just as much as the activity itself. Suppose a company declares Wednesday its official collaboration day. The local office becomes busy, but the software engineers who depend on the customer research team discover that the researchers attend on Thursdays. Meanwhile, their legal adviser works from another region and rarely visits headquarters. Wednesday produces a pleasing atmosphere of collective activity without bringing together the people who need to solve the same problems. This is a coordination failure rather than proof that office work is useless. Moving the engineers' collaborative sessions to a suitable day, involving the relevant specialists through an effective hybrid format, or arranging occasional purpose-built gatherings may produce more value than insisting that everyone independently satisfy an identical weekly attendance target.

Another complication is the assumption that being physically together means being available to each other. An employee may spend the entire day inside headquarters while participating in meetings with external clients, discussing confidential matters, or concentrating on an urgent deadline. Colleagues can see the employee but cannot realistically interrupt. Conversely, someone working from home might be available for a useful forty-minute discussion. Location and availability are separate facts. You need both when deciding whether an office visit will support a particular piece of work. Simply seeing that a colleague has reserved a desk does not mean the two of you have acquired an afternoon for collaborative problem-solving. A

building cannot manufacture free time, although certain property brochures appear remarkably optimistic about its capabilities.

This becomes especially clear in organizations with flexible seating. Employees may arrive expecting spontaneous collaboration, only to discover that relevant colleagues are scattered across different floors, meeting rooms, and temporary desks. One person spends the morning looking for another, eventually sending a Teams message to locate them. They discover that they are in the same building and arrange a video call because neither can find an available meeting space. The situation is funny until it becomes a recurring feature of the working week. The lesson is not that flexible seating must be abandoned. It is that a workspace intended to support collaboration needs arrangements that make the relevant people and resources accessible. Without those arrangements, proximity exists mainly as a geographic technicality.

A useful way to understand your own circumstances is to examine the work that actually fills your days. Avoid beginning with the question of whether you prefer home or office working. Preferences are legitimate, but they cannot explain every operational requirement. Instead, look at the activities you perform and identify what each requires from your surroundings and other people. A customer presentation might need dependable technology and privacy. A complicated negotiation could benefit from a carefully arranged meeting with the decision-makers present. Writing a technical report might require reliable access to information and a relatively quiet environment. Certain equipment inspections necessarily involve physical presence. You are not trying to attach a permanent location

to every task. You are learning to recognize which conditions make successful completion more likely.

Consider a fictional operations specialist named Maya, whose responsibilities include reviewing delivery performance and resolving recurring problems with suppliers. She initially assumes that all her team meetings should happen on office days because that is what the organization encourages. After examining the actual work, she notices that some conversations involve straightforward updates that could be shared in advance. Others require representatives from purchasing, logistics, and customer service to agree on corrective actions. Those discussions benefit from focused collaboration, but only when participants have the required information and authority. Maya begins distinguishing the two types instead of treating every calendar invitation as another justification for travelling. Her week does not suddenly become perfect. It becomes easier to understand, and that understanding gives her a more useful basis for planning.

There is also value in informal contact, which cannot always be traced directly to a completed task. An unexpected conversation can reveal that another department is experiencing the same problem or that a colleague needs help but has been reluctant to ask. Relationships built through ordinary contact may make future disagreements easier to navigate. It would be foolish to dismiss these benefits simply because they resist convenient measurement. Yet informal contact should not become an all-purpose explanation for every attendance requirement. If employees spend the entire day isolated behind headphones, the potential for spontaneous interaction may remain unrealized. The fact that something

beneficial could happen is not the same as demonstrating that the working arrangement regularly creates reasonable opportunities for it.

You can begin investigating the difference without collecting intrusive information or creating a miniature management consultancy in your spare time. After several office days, reflect briefly on the activities that genuinely benefited from your location. Identify what was easier because you were there, what would probably have worked just as well elsewhere, and whether any planned collaboration failed because the necessary conditions were missing. Be specific. "The office was pointless" tells you less than "The workshop was cancelled because the decision-maker was unavailable, and the remaining tasks required individual analysis." The second observation identifies a problem you may be able to address. It also distinguishes an unfortunate day from a structural weakness in the way attendance and collaboration are organized.

Be careful, however, not to evaluate every office visit solely by counting completed decisions. Some valuable work unfolds gradually. Getting to know a new colleague, building trust after a difficult project, or understanding how another department operates can matter without producing an immediate deliverable. A reasonable assessment should acknowledge those benefits while remaining alert to vague explanations that cannot be connected to actual opportunities for interaction. You do not need to attach a financial value to every conversation beside the kitchen counter. Equally, you should not assume that walking past strangers carrying branded coffee cups automatically strengthens organizational culture. The important distinction is between plausible benefits supported by real experiences

and benefits invoked only because they sound attractive in a leadership presentation.

The costs deserve similar care. Commuting time, transport expenses, preparation, fatigue, and the disruption of other responsibilities may all influence whether an additional visit is worthwhile. Those costs differ between people and circumstances. Someone might welcome a commute because it provides a useful transition between work and home. Another person might face complicated childcare arrangements or an exhausting journey. Neither perspective makes the other invalid. A sensible arrangement considers what the organization needs and what employees can realistically provide. Where attendance is mandatory, that calculation may not determine whether you travel, but it can still help identify which activities should make better use of the journey.

For managers, the same distinctions raise a different question: are employees being brought together in ways that support the work, or are they merely satisfying an administrative requirement? A manager cannot always change company policy, but may still influence the timing and design of team activities. Instead of arranging collaborative sessions whenever a meeting room happens to be free, it may be possible to coordinate them with the presence of people who need to participate. Instead of packing shared days with routine updates, the team might reserve meaningful time for work that genuinely benefits from interaction. These changes need not involve a company-wide transformation. Sometimes the difference between a useful office day and a frustrating one is simply confirming that the relevant colleague will actually be available.

There are limits to what this analysis can achieve. Some employers specify attendance days or locations for reasons beyond an individual employee's control. Certain tasks require physical presence regardless of personal preference. Your manager may lack authority to approve exceptions, and colleagues may have competing responsibilities that prevent ideal coordination. Recognizing these limits is part of planning intelligently. If you must attend on a particular day, ask how to use that day effectively within the rules. If you can choose, consider the nature of your work and the availability of relevant people. If a recurring problem creates significant disruption, raise it through an appropriate channel with specific examples rather than treating every disappointing visit as evidence of deliberate organizational stupidity.

It is equally important to resist becoming obsessed with the idea that every minute of office attendance must produce measurable collaborative value. An employee might reasonably complete individual work between worthwhile meetings. People need breaks, and teams benefit from the ordinary presence of colleagues even when they are not engaged in constant conversation. The goal is not to transform every desk into a billable collaboration station. It is to prevent arrangements in which the expected advantages of physical presence are routinely unavailable while its costs remain unavoidable. A healthy workplace allows different kinds of work to coexist without pretending that everyone must perform the same activity merely because they occupy the same building.

Once you start looking at work through these distinctions, the familiar argument about remote versus office working becomes less interesting. You may discover that some tasks

deserve more time together, while others are being made unnecessarily difficult by the requirement to travel. You may find that coordination is the real problem, rather than location. Or you may realize that your current arrangements work reasonably well and need only minor adjustments. Each conclusion is useful because it emerges from the work itself. You no longer have to defend an entire philosophy of employment every time somebody asks where you intend to sit next Wednesday.

There is nothing inherently impressive about gathering a large number of employees under one roof. Nor is there anything automatically enlightened about keeping them apart. What matters is whether the arrangement helps people use their knowledge, time, and relationships to accomplish something worthwhile. The office can make an excellent contribution to that process, but it cannot substitute for the process itself. When Daniel next enters his beautifully renovated headquarters, the most useful question will not be whether the building looks busy. It will be whether his presence creates an opportunity that would otherwise be missing. If the answer is yes, the journey may be worthwhile. If the answer is no, somebody should probably explain why the company's grand strategy for human connection currently consists of handing everyone a headset.

Chapter 2 - Why Companies Count Chairs Instead of Results

There is a peculiar comfort in numbers that are easy to obtain. A company can discover how many employees entered its offices last Wednesday, how many desks were occupied, and whether attendance increased after a policy announcement. The figures can be converted into percentages, presented on attractive charts, and discussed in executive meetings. Everyone leaves with the reassuring sense that something important has been measured. But consider what those figures cannot tell us. They do not reveal whether a difficult project moved forward, whether customers received better service, or whether employees found the information needed to complete their work. The numbers establish that people entered buildings. This is useful if the question concerns building occupancy. It becomes considerably less useful when somebody presents it as conclusive evidence of stronger teamwork. A chair, however faithfully occupied, has remarkably limited expertise in organizational performance.

Why, then, do attendance figures become so prominent? One reason is that managing work requires dealing with uncertainty, and uncertainty makes people uncomfortable. When employees are distributed across homes, offices, and other locations, managers cannot casually observe as much of their daily activity. The visible movement of a traditional workplace disappears. Discussions take place in digital channels, individual work produces results at different intervals, and a quiet afternoon may indicate either excellent concentration or a serious obstacle that nobody has

reported. For a manager accustomed to understanding progress through frequent personal contact, this can feel like losing access to important information. Requiring everyone to return may seem like a practical response. It restores familiar surroundings, even if it does not necessarily restore the understanding that the manager expects those surroundings to provide.

Physical visibility is particularly seductive because it offers immediate reassurance. A busy office looks productive. Employees walk purposefully, meeting rooms fill up, and people carry laptops between locations with the determined expressions of professionals responsible for matters of international significance. Some of them may indeed be accomplishing valuable work. Others might be attending discussions that could have been handled in a short message. The observer cannot reliably distinguish the two merely by watching. Yet visible activity can easily become a substitute for evidence of progress. This is not necessarily the result of bad intentions. It may reflect an old management habit that survived the transition to digital work. Unfortunately, carrying a laptop down a corridor creates a stronger visual impression than quietly completing a complicated analysis.

Another explanation concerns the difficulty of defining results. In some jobs, useful outcomes are relatively straightforward to observe: an order is processed accurately, a product is delivered, or a customer problem is resolved. In others, employees contribute to long projects, provide advice, prevent mistakes, or coordinate work whose results depend on several people. Performance cannot always be reduced to a neat individual number. A legal specialist who identifies a serious problem before a contract