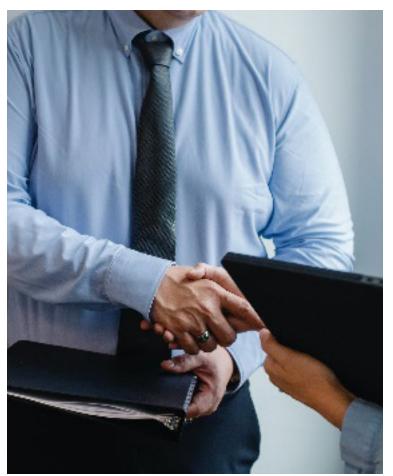# INTELLIGENCE

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Build a Better Post-COVID Pool Workspace

By Art Markman, PhD
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In March 2020, the pandemic changed the professional world in a hurry. Many workers who had spent their entire careers organizing their lives around the office and work-related travel—including pool employees—suddenly found themselves working from home and engaging solely via email and video conferencing platforms like Teams and Zoom.

A little over a year later, the national situation has begun to change. Vaccines have rolled out, and over 40 percent of U.S. adults have already been fully vaccinated. People are starting to talk about a "new normal."

That inevitably leads to the question: "Now what?" What does work look like in the post-COVID era? As you think about your pool workspace in the new normal, consider input from your team by asking these three questions: **What do you miss? What do you want to keep? And how do we get there?**

What do you miss?

Early rapid deployment of technology to meet remote work mandates increased productivity for many people, at least in the short term. Still, there is a lot about pre-pandemic work that many of us would like to have back—mostly relating to the value of social interaction.

One of the biggest things missing from most people's pandemic work is serendipity—the chance meetings between people that help maintain a sense of community and spark creativity. Even for those still working in the office, social distancing measures keep them from seeing a lot of their colleagues in this way.

The random encounters we have with others at work help generate creative solutions to problems. When you're dealing with a tricky work issue, you are motivated to use everything in your environment to help you address it. In the work-from-home era, that means you ponder things as an individual. You may set up a meeting with someone or search the internet for ideas. But your meetings tend to be with the usual suspects.

When you're physically present at work, though, you may bump into a colleague in the midst of your struggle and discuss the matter. Or you may be onsite with a member and raise a new issue that has you puzzled. That person with whom you are sharing thoughts may not be someone you would ordinarily think of going to for help—but, because they were there, you have the discussion. Often, that conversation leads you to approach the problem in a different way.

Even for those physically present in an office, things aren't quite the same. Masks do a great job of preventing the spread of COVID, but they make it hard to have real conversations with other people. You have to shout to be heard, and nobody can see your facial expressions, which makes it difficult to feel socially close to the people around you. This compounds the sense of distance and disconnect.

For people working remotely, the difficulties continue. Video conferencing tools have made it possible to meet with others, but these meetings are often devoid of much social interaction. When you walk into a meeting at work, you can have a nice social conversation with the people sitting next to you. If there are 10 people in the room, there might be three or four conversations going on. But, with a video conference, everyone is part of the same dialogue. So (at most) there is one conversation happening before the meeting starts. And that conversation is likely to be dominated by the most extroverted people in the group.

These factors can make it harder to feel a bond with your pool colleagues and members. The human brain is wired for social interaction. We have special areas of the brain devoted to recognizing faces and to processing emotions. We are set up to want to cooperate with the people that we engage with frequently. When we don't see other people, we feel less connected.

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In addition, requests you make of colleagues sound harsher by email than they do in person. When you ask for a favor in person, your tone of voice and facial expression affect the way that others respond to you. When you make that same request through text (via email or another platform), it sounds more like a direct order—even if you use exactly the same words. That can also lead to more disconnect in the office environment.

These feelings also extend beyond your coworkers—pool members also need face-to-face engagement. The pandemic has made it hard to travel, which has made it more difficult to maintain good relationships with member entity leaders and staff. Because those areas of the brain devoted to social interaction also help us feel trust for the people we see most often, it means the pandemic has robbed pools of the chance to strengthen these very important bonds.

Of course, these are just a few of the things members of pool teams are likely to miss about work life pre-pandemic. Take some time to **list some of the aspects of work that your pool's team would like to make sure return over the next several months.** It is important to be explicit about what your pool wants and expects to bring back as we enter the new normal.

What do you want to keep?

A lot of our daily life is path-dependent. Decisions made in the past affect how we do things in the present—even though there may be better ways to do them. For example, computers running Microsoft Windows have dominated the business environment for decades. That is not because the Windows environment is the best operating system, but rather because many companies invested in IBM-compatible computers in the 1970s and 1980s. Those decisions affect the computers people are most likely to use today.

Many aspects of the standard workday are similarly path-dependent. Prior to the pandemic, most people worked from 9-ish to 5-ish, commuting to the workplace in the morning and returning in the evening. This structure reflected the fact that, when the world economy was primarily rooted in manufacturing, shifts needed to start and end in unison. Factory managers needed to be onsite to supervise those shifts. Because that was the way things were always done, workplaces in the knowledge economy continued the same practices without figuring out what was necessary for people to be productive.

The pandemic threw workplaces into chaos, which allowed pools to explore new modes of work. Over the past year, we have learned that people need to have some overlapping work time, but they don't all need to be in the office (or online) for exactly the same hours. We also discovered how much more we can get done if we don't spend a few hours in a car, bus or train each day commuting.

The need to social distance has also increased people's familiarity with a lot of tools that might have otherwise taken longer to adopt. Video conferencing has gone from an occasional option for holding meetings to something used routinely. There has been an uptick in the use of other connectivity tools such as Slack and Teams. We've learned that not every meeting needs to be held face-to-face—and that there is something nice about not having to leave a lot of time in your day for travel from one meeting location to another.

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The pandemic has also had benefits for those who are socially anxious and for people who are easily distracted. Workplaces can be difficult for people who dread spontaneous conversations and worry that they may say the wrong thing. In addition, there has been a trend over the past few decades toward open office plans in which few people have their own private workspace. If you're the sort of person who is distracted by a cricket chirping in the next county, these chaotic spaces are tough. Having more control over the work environment by working from home has allowed people like this to be a lot more productive.

While you're listing those aspects of pre-pandemic life you hope will return to pool operations, **add a list of those routines and tools that your pool hopes will remain as we exit the pandemic.** The ideal pool workplace will preserve a lot of what we have learned over the past year—while supporting the return of key routines we have lost.

How do we get there?

Pool leaders will have to make some difficult decisions about what the new normal looks like. A key reason for everyone to list both what they miss and what they want to preserve is to ensure executives and department heads have a complete picture of the aspects of work that are important to everyone on their pooling team.

Initiating the return to work, though, will require thinking both generally about the principles for what work should look like in the future as well as specifically about how to plan to get there. In my book, *Smart Change*, I talk about how easy it is to commit to some abstract goal (whether it is creating a flexible work environment or trying to lose weight) but how hard it is to actually achieve these goals. A key barrier to success is that people often don't generate specific plans that work through exactly what needs to happen and that grapple with the obstacles to success.

For example, if a pool workplace wants to be more flexible, it is still important for there to be structure. Are there going to be some hours of the day when everyone is expected to be available? Are there some days of the week when everyone who isn't traveling is expected to be in the office? What about computers and other devices? Is the organization going to provide people with devices for the office and home—or require that people use portable computers? If some people are working from home and others from an office, will there be technology to support hybrid meetings?

Not only is it important to be specific, but it is critical to recognize that any plan that gets put in place is a work in progress—and that this needs to be communicated to the whole team. Think of any plan you implement like it is a piece of software: You expect that there will be regular updates to software and even new versions that improve functionality over time. Similarly, your pool's return-to-work strategy will also have updates and versions. It is not a sign of a catastrophic mistake that a policy you put in place in September needs to be changed in December. As long as everyone expects that the plan will evolve, it is just a natural evolution of the new normal.

Over the next year, pools have the opportunity to build the workplace of the future. You can find ways to be good colleagues and to provide excellent service to members. You can be productive and flexible. You can promote focus, creativity and work–life balance.

The road to this more ideal workplace will require remembering the successes of the past, learning the lessons of the pandemic, and being specific about mapping the road back.

About the Author

ART MARKMAN, PHD, is the Annabel Irion Worsham Centennial Professor of Psychology and Marketing at the University of Texas at Austin and executive director of the IC2 Institute. He has written over 150 papers on topics including reasoning, decision-making and motivation. Art brings insights from cognitive science to a broader audience through his blogs at *Psychology Today* **and** *Fast Company* as well as his radio show/podcast, "Two Guys on Your Head." He is the author of several books including *Smart Thinking*, *Smart Change*, *Brain Briefs* and *Bring Your Brain to Work*.

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