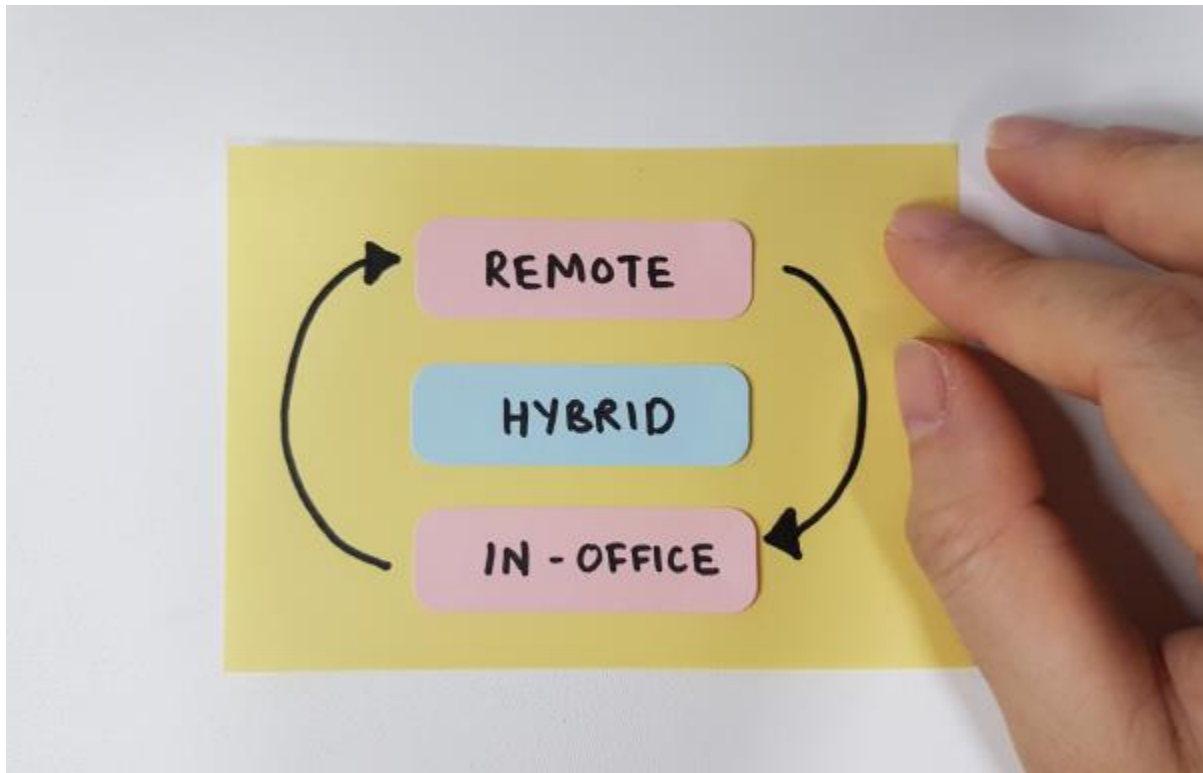


## Episode #148: Is the Return to Office War Over?



**Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host  
Dr. Janel Anderson**

## *Episode 148: Is the Return to Office War Over?*

Hello and welcome to another episode of the Working Conversations podcast, where we discuss all things leadership, business communication, and trends in organizational life. I'm your host, Dr. Janel Anderson.

A recent headline declared that the "return to office" wars are over. I say, not so fast. As you may recall, one of my predictions for 2024 is that hybrid work models will become the norm. 2023 was a battleground year for work from home, largely led by employees, and the "return to office" imperative, largely led by senior leaders. And for reasons I'm about to explain, I don't think that we are close to this battle being over, but I do think we're on our way. There is much more work to be done on both sides of the equation in order to reach a new equilibrium in which hybrid work is the norm for knowledge workers. In this episode of the podcast, I unlock all of that and more.

The article with the headline "The return to office wars are over," published by Axios, cited a number of different studies showing that the same executives who are insisting on bringing people back to the office full time after the pandemic have started to throw in the towel and are consenting to hybrid work arrangements as the norm for knowledge workers. Now, this is consistent, of course, with my prediction for 2024 that hybrid work models become the norm and that senior leaders acquiesce to a blended work environment between home and office for those whose jobs are amenable to it. But I don't think the struggle is over yet. In this episode, we will explore why the efforts in 2023 to get people back into the office didn't take hold and what's happening instead. We'll also look at the current data and go deeper into my prediction that the era of remote work isn't a passing phase and that it is a fundamental shift in how we approach work.

Now let's, for a minute, take a step back to a time when work and home were one and the same for many people, all the way back prior to the Industrial Revolution. People most often made their living by working the land in the way of farming and agricultural occupations or keeping shop in a town or city. Obviously, those who worked the land and lived in the same place that they worked had a farmhouse situated on that same land that they tended. Those who worked in a shop often lived above or beside the shop in the same building. And if not in the actual same building, then quite physically close by. Work and home life were very integrated, that we know to be true. In the day-to-day operations of either the agricultural occupations or the shopkeeper occupations, there

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were interactions with other humans occupying the same space and time. The farmer likely had a large family to help with the operation and interacted with family members regularly throughout the day. The shopkeeper may have had an employee or two and interacted with their customers throughout the day. The shoemaker or the watchmaker took orders in real time, worked on their product in isolation probably for some portion of the day, and then delivered the final product to their customers during the course of a typical workday or work week. Large shopkeepers, like store owners, interacted with their suppliers and their customers pretty much all day long. Communication was not mediated by technology but rather consisted of human beings talking to human beings and sometimes writing to other human beings with paper and pen being the most sophisticated technology that was in use on a given day.

In that time, the blending of work and home was very natural. After the Industrial Revolution, however, things changed dramatically. The nature of the work was something that needed to be done in the factory or the facility where the products were made, whether it was milk and cheese being made ready for customers in a creamery or pieces of clothing being sewn in a factory. The work did not happen at home, nor was there the proper equipment at home to do the work as it evolved during the Industrial Revolution. Human interaction in the face-to-face workplace was still critical to getting the work done.

Along the way, constructs like organizational culture evolved. Organizational culture, of course, existed prior to the Industrial Revolution. But for the most part, it was highly driven and influenced by the business owner, say the shoemaker or the farmer, and how he, and it almost always was a he back then, interacted with his suppliers, customers, and family members or other employees is what created the culture. Along comes the Industrial Revolution, and large numbers of people start working together in the same facility. Managers who are overseeing their work and the owners of the businesses together shaped the culture of the organization in a way that we hadn't seen before. Now, I think it is this cultural piece that has executives wanting people back in the building, but I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

Now, not to get too technical, but here is a quick history lesson. The Industrial Revolution is thought to have started in 1765 when mechanisms came along and impacted the agricultural community and made things like mining far more efficient. Steam power and the machines that were developed to use steam power, such as the steamship, fundamentally changed how work was starting to get done, using less

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human power and more machine power. Now, the second Industrial Revolution, which is what many of us often think of as the actual Industrial Revolution, came along almost a century later, starting around 1870. Massive technological enhancements happened with the aid of new sources of energy, like electricity, gas, and oil. The internal combustion engine basically changed everything. It gave rise to things like the invention of the automobile and the airplane, and it, of course, dramatically increased the output of factories. What's also interesting to note about this, especially as it relates to communication at work, is that during this era, new methods of communication, such as the telegraph and the telephone, also came along. These communication technologies were slow to catch on as useful tools in the workplace compared to other technologies like the assembly line that had a clear impact immediately on output.

Now, this is a phase of mass production and rapid scientific discovery and increased industrialization, with faster and cheaper ways to make things, all while employees still by and large worked together in the factories and facilities. Even agricultural and farming operations benefited from the rapid industrialization, and they were able to do more of what they were doing through the use of more advanced machinery and often hiring additional people with the farm and agricultural work. Now, this is an era when people really started working together in large numbers in factories and other facilities.

So after the Industrial Revolution comes the technological revolution, or what is sometimes referred to as the third Industrial Revolution. Now we're talking the mid to late 20th century, when electronics, telecommunications, computers, and of course, the internet, come on the scene in a big way. Now, of course, the internet doesn't come on the scene in a really big way related to business until the late 20th century, but it was in the works in the mid and later parts of the 20th century, largely in government use. This era gave rise to the tools and technologies that we now have at our disposal that make working from home a viable option. We use those communication technologies and the internet to connect with and market to new sets of clients and customers. It expanded reach and gave rise to global markets at scale. But still, for the most part, we worked together in the same buildings with lots of face-to-face meetings and interactions. And in that face-to-face work environment, culture existed and evolved through the decisions, the communication style, physical artifacts, and the physical artifacts of the organization. Much of what was dictated by senior leaders and carried out by mid-level managers resulted in the organizational culture.

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After the technological revolution and with the tools that it brought us, many white-collar jobs could easily be performed from anywhere, not necessarily in the same corporate office where the manager and the coworkers sat for most of the day. However, that was not the norm by any means. Prior to the pandemic, even though much of the white-collar work could be performed from home for at least part of the time, only 3% of that white-collar work was getting done at home. And usually, that was once in a while as opposed to every day. So even though we had the tools to work from home, it just wasn't very common.

So let's jump to 2023. The major threat of the pandemic is behind us, and corporate executives want people back in the building. Why? I think the answer to this is relatively straightforward when you take into account not only the organizational culture that we were just talking about but also that, according to research from Gallup, human capital is far and away the most valuable asset that an organization has. Eighty-four percent of the value of an S&P 500 company is made up from the talent, skills, knowledge, work ethic, and well-being of its employees. Yes, 84%. According to Gallup's research, during the pandemic, the business strategy toward that human capital meant sending people home to work to keep them safe, because this was a huge safety response. It was not a human capital strategy. Now, it might seem antiquated for senior leaders to want that human capital to be visible again, to be back in the office where they can see and feel the energy of their people hard at work, collaborating, solving problems together, and so on. But when you consider that the people who work in the organization make up 84% of the value of the organization, I can fully understand why senior leaders want to see those assets and, of course, see them hard at work.

Let's not be so naive, though, that we think of those senior leaders as not having object permanence. You know, when you take away a baby's toy and put it under a blanket, the baby thinks the toy doesn't exist anymore. It's not that, although we did experience that prior to the pandemic when people were working from regional offices or perhaps from home. You probably remember this. You'd have half a dozen people around a conference room table, and three people dialed in on a conference call. That good old black Polycom conference call phone was right there in the center of the table, very visible. But the people who were dialed in on it weren't. The six people sitting around the table totally forgot about the other people and that they were in the meeting altogether. The six people around the table did not have object permanence as it related to their three colleagues who were dialed in from regional offices or at home. You know that that happened. All right. And so your senior leaders know you exist when you're working from home. It's not a matter of object permanence, per se. But you are their most

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valuable asset, and they'd like to see you from time to time. And let's tie that back to organizational culture as we bring this to some conclusions.

So organizational culture is real, and it is definitely more challenging to intentionally cultivate when people are working remotely. An organization's culture is comprised of values and belief systems, rules, and attitudes that influence employees' behavior inside an organization. One of my favorite quotes from the academic literature about organizational culture comes from Nick Trujillo and Michael Packin-Ski from an article way back in 1982 when they were making the case that an organization's culture is made up of all of those things and more. And they wrote, and I quote, "More things are going on inside an organization than getting the job done. People in organizations also gossip, joke, knife one another, initiate romantic involvements, talk sports, and arrange picnics." I just love that quote so much because it really sums up what organizational culture is all about and how organizational culture gets shared through communication interactions.

So true, so true. The authors' perspective asserts that these everyday informal communication practices are what make up not only organizational culture but really the organization itself. Now, all of these things are much more challenging to do when we're not co-located, whether that's organizing picnics or talking sports or joking. And it's definitely more challenging to have the nuanced communication when it is mediated through technology. It's also harder to remember to give positive feedback, and it's certainly more challenging to have critical or constructive feedback land as you intend when you're working in a remote environment. And when it comes to things like communicating the shared values and beliefs, these are core constructs of organizational culture. Well, these again are more easily accomplished when co-located because so much gets communicated in subtle and nuanced ways that the communication technology just does not easily carry. This is especially true when using text-only communication channels like email; they simply don't carry the subtle cues that the values and beliefs and attitudes rely on. So for organizational culture and for reasons of employees accounting for 84% of an organization's value, I fully understand why senior leaders would want you back in the office more often than not, so as to bring the full picture into focus.

We also, though, have to take into account that many employees are enjoying not commuting. They are enjoying blending their home and work life. They are enjoying using the saved time for leisure and other personal activities. So, of course, that's just

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the tip of the iceberg for all the reasons that people enjoy remote work. Now, that's my prediction that hybrid work models will become the norm and that the rift between senior leaders and employees over this issue will ease. Now, back to my prediction that hybrid work models will become the norm and the rift between senior leaders and employees over this issue will ease, that essentially the battle between work from home and return to office will find some equanimity. I do think it will take a good portion of 2024 for this to fully evolve, for us to get to that point. It really is going to take something; it's going to take senior leaders and the managers who support them to fully understand how to effectively not just get the work done because we have certainly proven that we can get the work done throughout the pandemic but also effectively conveying, perpetuating, and evolving organizational culture among the 84% of the value of the organization that is the human capital or the employees.

Leaders need to understand how to reach people, connect with them, and convey organizational culture across space and time. This can be more effectively achieved when employees who prefer to work fully remotely understand what's missing for their leaders. It requires empathy on both sides of the equation and new skills for both employees and leaders to navigate this new landscape.

As for the specific skills needed, I prefer to keep these episodes short. So, the details of these skills will have to wait for a future episode. For now, I hope to have shared the backstory behind my prediction for this year and why I believe it will take the entirety of 2024 to unfold.

So, my friends, the work-from-home war is not over. I trust that you now understand it better as a result of listening to this episode and that you agree with me that we can find a new equilibrium. However, it will take time, understanding, empathy, and learning new skills to truly get to the other side. I'm along with you for the ride this year, and we will continue to unpack this issue as the year unfolds. I will also be sharing skills and ideas that will help us transition to the other side.

Remember, the future of work is not only about technology; it's about the values we uphold, the communities we build, and the sustainable growth that we strive for. We need to keep exploring, innovating, and envisioning the remarkable possibilities that lie ahead. As always, stay curious, stay informed, and stay ahead of the curve.

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Until next time, my friends, be well.