

How working from home is making us more authentic

Darren Woolley | July 2, 2020



Much has changed in the past few months. Social distancing and working from home have required some significant changes. Some of these are positive, while others not so. But one of the things I have noticed is that business relationships and business conversations have changed. Stripped of the trappings of the corporate world and reframed through any one of the ubiquitous video conferencing platforms, these conversations have become more authentic and human.

How could they not, when instead of inviting people into your office or conference room or one of the many anonymous meeting rooms that fill up corporate offices everywhere, you now are inviting people into our homes? No more security or reception person to control access, no more austere waiting rooms, no more signing in the visitor log or typing your details in to get a visitor's label, for security purposes.

Now we have links to invite us into virtual meeting rooms. Except, while the meeting room may be virtual, it is clear that the other person is sitting in their lounge room, or dining room or home office. In the background you may be able to see the art on the wall or down into their kitchen. But just the same as they are now seeing you in your home. These conversations may be happening in a virtual meeting room, but the fact is the context has changed.

Likewise, the life going on in the background has changed. In the office the only interruption to the meeting may be an inquiry for your tea or coffee requirements, or an executive assistant popping in to remind you of the next meeting starting soon. Instead there are children and pets and partners in the background, often making noises and causing distractions as you do when you are having a life.

What is different is the reaction of the others in the meeting. Remember "BBC Dad", Professor Robert Kelly, when his children crashed his interview on BBC back in 2017? It made the news globally and became a YouTube sensation. Now when one of my twins wanders into the room, when "Daddy is on a call", beyond a polite smile or the odd comment on "starting work experience young", nobody cares. Or more importantly, everyone just accepts that we are more than just our job titles - we are also parents, partners and friends.

A colleague observed that online conversations seemed to get to the matter faster. What they meant was that in meeting face-to-face in an office environment, there is usually a period of social chit-chat as the parties establish the social norms of the relationship. This happens online too, but it happens faster. Is this because when taken from the business environment and placed in our homes we are able to connect much faster?

Personally, I have found small meetings (large meetings are always problematic online and off) are more productive when working from home. They say that on average it takes 66 days for a habit to form. I am hoping that even if we return to the office, people will not be so quick to pull on their professional armour and put on their masks. Instead they will maintain that authenticity and humanity.

Or perhaps the cultural weight of the office will trigger us to go back to the more guarded and cautious ways of the professional businessperson. It would be a pity. It is far better to hold a conversation with a whole person than just one facet of a person.

As this mass exercise in working remotely has proven, it is possible to work effectively from home and at the same time fulfil all our other roles in life as well - baker, chef, coach, teacher and more. I remember only last year, a client was feeling guilty when I called them during the day, not knowing they were working from home to care for an unwell child.

In New Zealand, a survey found that 89% did not want to return to the office to work post lockdown. Perhaps it was the time saved from not having to commute, or perhaps they just really enjoyed the freedom to be a human in business.

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