Business English News 47 - Post-Pandemic Workplace

Transcript

Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic has **spurred** incredible changes in how we work. At the end of 2020, a **whopping** 42% of the American workforce continued to work **remotely.** This has meant rapid **upskilling** and massive investments in technology and **infrastructure**. But it would be wrong to think that this is an entirely new **phenomenon**, as Tech.Co news reports:

According to Candace Helton, operations director at Ringspo, "It's worth **noting** that 70% of companies have been working on **digital transformation** before the pandemic **hit**." But the pandemic **tipped their hands**, and the resulting change in **work cultures** around the **globe** will **push** even more businesses to accept remote options as the **new normal**.

In this new normal, relationships are different. There are no **corner offices** in the **virtual** workplace, no staff rooms, and no **cubicles**. There are fewer physical **reinforcements** of **hierarchy**. And it's oddly **humanizing** to see the CEO deal with the same **interruptions**, like kids and **barking** dogs, that we all experience working from home. It represents an important **shift**, as NBC describes:

Virtual conference meetings, which have become **the norm** during the pandemic, have **fundamentally** changed the **culture** of the workplace, **ushering in** a more **democratic** office. "We've had this amazing digital experience where everybody **occupies** equal space on the screen through video conferencing," says Antonia Carone, at Cushman & Wakefield. "We're going to expect that **equality** to continue."

For companies that are able to **embrace** this shift, there are rewards **aplenty**. The first and most obvious one is cost savings. Across the world, corporations are reducing their physical **footprints**, and **slashing** budgets accordingly. This is helping **the bottom line**, or at least **mitigating** the **negative impacts** of the pandemic. But it's not just about money, as Forbes explains:

One of the most significant **macro** benefits and biggest changes **brought about** by the pandemic is that employees are no longer **confined** by their locations. By removing **geographic constraints**, employers gain access to **talent** from around the world, which allows them to **cast a wider net** for suitable employees. It could also make it easier to **retain talent**.

Another **oft-cited** and surprising benefit of remote work is increased **productivity**. The experience of 2020 has clearly **given the lie to** the idea that people would become **lethargic** working from home. In fact, productivity has **shot up**, along with average working hours. The question now is whether this is **sustainable**. Some aren't so sure, as Forbes notes:

Recent studies have found that the **gains** in productivity seen at the **outset** of the pandemic may have started to **erode** towards the end of 2020. This **signals** a rise in work-from-home **fatigue**. The impacts of this fatigue are that workers **struggle** with **anxiety** and a lack of focus and **engagement** with their teams. A recent **poll cited** employee **burnout** from **overwork** as the biggest work-from-home concern among organizations globally.

Considering the **downsides**, is remote work **all it's** really **cracked up to be**? Are people like Tobi Lutke, CEO of Shopify, correct when he says "office **centricity** is over?" There's an important **flipside** to having your entire team work remotely. There are things we miss. And this might mean offices will never die, according to the Wall Street Journal:

Even though they may be expensive, offices do matter. The physical **interactions** they provide **foster collaboration**. The **rituals** of office life matter, as does our office **social life**, which helps keep us **engaged**. **Organizational culture** matters, and that is **conveyed** by these interactions. It is hard to **sustain** that via occasional video chats. CEOs know this; their single biggest concern about remote work **arrangements** now is how to keep their culture **functioning**.

Given these concerns, what appears most likely is that the post-pandemic workplace will be some kind of **hybrid**. You may find yourself **commuting** two days a week instead of five. Or you'll **head into** the office for key work activities. And when you do, expect health and safety to remain of **paramount** importance. This will inspire even more **innovation**, as Silicon Republic concludes:

According to one tech **evangelist**, this may include everything from **wearables** to help with **crowd control** to automated **sensors** in office **lobbies**. As businesses across the globe prepare to reopen offices, these environments will look **drastically** different to the pre-pandemic office. Indeed, the new normal might not seem very normal for quite some time.

Vocabulary

To spur: to cause something to happen; "Our factory accident spurred a lot of changes to our safety policies."

Whopping: very large, for a number; "Shareholders were extremely happy to see that profits jumped by a whopping 44% last year."

Remote / Remotely: from a distance; if you are working remotely, you are not in the office but working from home or another place; "One of the advantages of working remotely is not spending time travelling to and from the office."

To upskill: to provide additional training or experience to develop skills; "Universities have been trying for many years to upskill their instructional staff to enable online course delivery."

Infrastructure: the basic physical systems – such as utilities or communication systems - that enable work to happen or business to operate; "In an effort to update our infrastructure, we're installing new servers in every one of our branches."

Phenomenon: an event or situation that happens; "One interesting phenomenon is that huge number of personal investors are now trading in futures and derivatives."

To note: to mention; "Before we finish up, I'd just like to note that this has been the best planning session I've ever been a part of."

Digital transformation: change in business and services through digital technologies; "Amazon Web Services has made enormous profits from the digital transformation happening throughout the business world."

To hit: to suddenly start having an effect; "The airline and hotel industries have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic."

To tip someone's hand: to reveal intentions or plans, especially those that were secret; "We were hoping to announce our new product in the fall, but news of a new release from a competitor tipped our hand."

Culture / Work culture / Organizational culture: an organization's culture or work culture is the particular values, behaviors, and beliefs that are commonly expressed by people; "Young people aren't just looking for a good salary; they want to find a work culture where they can be happy and build good relationships."

Globe / Global: the "globe" is the earth, and "global" means relating to the whole world; "The fight against climate change is a global struggle."

To push: to force or encourage; "I didn't want to apply for the manager position at first, but my colleagues have pushed me to."

The New normal: a situation that is unusual at first but becomes usual or standard over time; "Sorry if you don't like Zoom Ted, but it's just part of the new normal so you'd better get used to it."

Corner office: an office at the corner of a building, with windows on two sides, considered very desirable and typically occupied by executives; "Sure, I had a corner office, fancy suits, and a big expense account, but I still wasn't happy."

Virtual: appearing on or created by computers; "With robots and drones, we can now do virtual safety audits of our field sites."

Cubicle: a small enclosed office or area, separated by low or thin walls; "Many offices are removing the cubicle walls and opting for a large open workspace."

Reinforcement: additional support for something; "As we expand our network, we're going to need reinforcement to our administrative staff."

Hierarchy: a system of organizing people according by rank; "I came from a company with a strict hierarchy, so it's strange now to see junior staff being friendly with their bosses."

Humanizing: making a system kinder or revealing people's authentic selves; "A good team-building exercise can be very humanizing, as people show their vulnerabilities and fears."

Interruptions: something that stops an activity or conversation; "I suggest you all turn your cell phones off during the meeting to prevent any interruptions."

To bark: to make a sound like a dog; "I had to mute myself for a minute because my dog was beside my desk barking at a bird outside the window."

Shift: change or transition from one state or way to another; "We've managed to make a shift from a staff of 95% men to a 50-50 share of men and women."

The norm: something that is commonly accepted; "While a suit and tie is the norm in many companies, we like to encourage a little less formality."

Fundamentally: related to the basic nature of something; "I'm sorry John but I fundamentally disagree with your idea that we don't need changes at the board level."

To usher in: to mark the start of a process or activity; "Hiring a young CEO ushered in a new period of innovation and energy in our company."

Democratic: based on the idea that everyone is equal; "We foster a democratic workplace where everyone can bring forward new ideas."

To occupy: to be in or use a place; "We currently occupy three floors of a downtown highrise but we can probably reduce that to two, given how many people now work from home."

Equality: the state of being equal or having the same rights; "We have several policies designed to promote equality between men and women in our company."

To embrace: to positively accept or adopt something new; "Dave is 75 years old, but it's great to see that he still embraces new ideas and technologies."

Aplenty: more than enough; "If you're hungry, there's muffins aplenty left over from the morning's meetings."

Footprint: the amount of space that something takes up; "With so much growth, we've had to increase our office footprint from 10,000 square feet to 30,000."

To slash: to cut or reduce drastically; "Many airlines have slashed their workforces by laying off up to half their employees."

The bottom line: the amount of money a business earns or loses; "Sure, we're bringing in more revenue, but our costs are higher, so the bottom line looks about the same as before."

To mitigate: to reduce harmful effects; "We've got a new wellness program to help mitigate some of the stress we're seeing among our employees."

Negative impact: harmful effects; "It appears that working from home has some benefits for individuals, but it has negative impacts on team functioning."

Macro: large or generally; "Besides these day-to-day challenges, we need to look at the macro level social changes that are affecting our business."

To bring about: to cause to happen; "A company focus on health and wellness has brought about a big reduction in employee sick days."

Confined: limited; "The safety concerns aren't confined to just one plant, but to every facility we have."

Geographic constraint: a limitation created by things or people being in different places or regions; "With modern technology, there are no real geographic constraints to outsourcing. Your American firm can hire designers in Pakistan!"

Talent: skilled people; "There's a lot of great talent coming out of our local university that we need to tap into."

To cast a wide net: to involve a large number of things or people; "Rather than limiting our marketing efforts to youth, why not try to cast a wider net?"

To retain talent: to keep good employees; "We're good at finding excellent workers, but we need to figure out how to retain all the talent, as many don't stick around for very long."

Oft-cited: referred to frequently, for research or a piece of writing; "According to one oft-cited report, 40% of local restaurants may close within the next year."

Productivity: the rate at which goods are produced or work is done; "Since we added a night shift at the factory, productivity has gone up by 30%."

To give the lie to: to show that something is not true; "Recent events in the U.S. have given the lie to the idea that it's the most democratic country in the world."

Lethargic: lazy; "After a really intense few months on the road, I'd really like to have a few lethargic days to recharge my batteries."

To shoot up: to increase rapidly; "Zoom's stock price shot up at the start of the pandemic as individuals and businesses bought subscriptions to the platform."

Sustainable: capable of continuing for a long time at the same level; "Always happy to see these good sales numbers, but are they sustainable? Can we do this again next quarter?"

Gains: increases; "The gains we've seen from our manufacturing division mean we can invest more in expanding capacity in our service department."

Outset: beginning; "People took a while to really accept Carly, but I thought she was great from the outset."

To erode: to gradually reduce the strength, value, or importance of something; "Increasing competition in our industry has really eroded our ability to make money."

To signal: to indicate; "Many economists worry that falling stock prices signal a bigger economic problem."

Fatigue: tiredness or exhaustion; "Employees are complaining about the fatigue that comes with so many back-to-back virtual meetings."

To struggle: to try to do or deal with something difficult; "I struggled to figure out what I wanted to do for many years, until I found a job in marketing, which I love."

Anxiety: a nervous or worried feeling; "Like most people, I get a lot of anxiety before I have to give a presentation."

Engagement: a state of being involved and interested; "Our recent employee satisfaction surveys show a high level of engagement with our internal communications."

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Poll: an opinion survey; "According to a recent public opinion poll, 20% of remote workers would quit their job if their boss told them they had to go back to the office 5 days a week."

To cite: to refer to research, statistics, or a piece of writing; "Your presentation would be more impactful if you cited some statistics to support your ideas."

Burnout: a feeling of being extremely tired after a period of hard work; "If you think you're experiencing burnout, you should talk to Jerry, who works 70 hours a week!"

Overwork: the experience of working too much; "When I was an ambitious lawyer, overwork led to a severe illness and I was forced to take three months off."

Downside: disadvantage or negative aspect; "One downside of working at home is that I've gained 20 pounds."

All it's cracked up to be: as good as expected, normally used in the negative; "People seem to like the new iPhone, but I tried it and it's really not all it's cracked up to be."

Centricity: the state of being especially important or at the center of something; "We're moving toward more of a customer centricity model where we consider the user experience at every step in their journey."

Flipside: the negative aspect of a plan or positive situation; "Social media has definitely improved our reach, but one flipside is that it takes so much time to manage."

Interaction: the activity of talking with other people; "I've gone several months without in-person interaction, so it will be strange to return to the office!"

To foster collaboration: to promote working together between people or groups; "We like to foster collaboration among employees by encouraging them to propose joint projects between departments."

Ritual: something you do regularly and in the same way; "At our company, Thursday drinks at the local Irish pub has become a bit of a ritual."

Social life: enjoyable time spent with other people; "As a very busy CEO of a successful tech start-up, I didn't have much of a social life or many friends."

Engaged: interested and involved; "We would like an experienced and energetic facilitator so that people are engaged in the training."

To convey: to communicate something indirectly; "I think our new logo has to convey that we're a young and innovative group."

To sustain: to support something to continue; "If we hope to sustain our current revenue growth, we'll need to hire a bunch of new salespeople."

Arrangement: the way something is organized; "The new color is nice, but I don't think the arrangement of desks will really work for the staff."

To function: to work or operate; "I learned how to use Slack pretty quickly, but getting a handle on how Asana functions has taken me much longer."

Hybrid: a mixture or combination of two different things or styles; "Our new vehicles are hybrids, combining the benefits of a gas engine and an electric one."

To commute: to travel between home and work; "I used to commute an hour each way into Chicago, but not since I bought a condo downtown."

To head in: to travel toward something, especially work or the city center; "Since I moved to Anaheim, I don't head in to LA more than a couple times a year."

Paramount: more important than everything else; "Sure, those are all important criteria, but experience is paramount when we hire this new designer."

Innovation: the creation of new ideas, things, or methods; "To encourage innovation, we host staff retreats where people brainstorm new ideas and approaches."

Evangelist: someone who is excited about something and tells others about it; "We need some young social media influencers to be evangelists for our new product."

Wearable: technology that is worn on the body; "Among all the wearables Apple has made, the iWatch is probably the most successful."

Crowd control: methods used to control or limit numbers of people or group activity; "We've hired a security company to help with crowd control at our new music festival."

Sensor: a piece of technology that detects or responds to changes in the environment; "Every package we ship has a sensor that helps us track its location in real-time."

Lobby: the entrance area of a large building; "Once you enter the lobby of our building, please check in with security before taking the elevator to the 5th floor."

Drastically: extremely; "Our costs are going to be drastically higher with these increased fuel costs."

Language Review

A. Collocations

Match words from each column to make collocations found in the article.

1. To foster	a. a wide net	
2. To shoot	b. talent	
3. To retain	c. up	
4. To cast	d. transformation	
5. The bottom	e. collaboration	
6. Digital	f. life	
7. Social	g. constraint	
8. Geographic	h. line	

B. Vocabulary Quiz

1. If you openly accept a new way of doing something, then we say you _____ it.

    a. Mitigate
    b. Embrace*
    c. Push
    d. Erode

2. Two things that are common parts of digital transformation are _____ and _____? [choose 2]

    a. Remote work*
    b. Cubicles
    c. Geographic constraints
    d. Upskilling*

3. _____ is a feature of a traditional workplace _____.

    a. Interruption / culture
    b. Infrastructure / norm
    c. Talent / productivity
    d. The corner office / hierarchy*

4. Which of the following indicate a decrease or decline? [choose 2]

    a. Erode*
    b. Slash*
    c. Gains
    d. Shoot up

5. How can we describe something that can continue at its current rate or state?

    a. Confined
    b. Mitigating
    c. Sustainable*
    d. Functioning

6. To emphasize how large a number is, you can say it is _____.

    a. The norm
    b. Whopping*
    c. Lethargic
    d. Engaged

7. Which two expressions can be used to mean "cause to happen"? [choose 2]

    a. Shift
    b. Cite
    c. Bring about*
    d. Spur*

8. Which of the following is NOT a negative impact of work changes?

    a. Burnout
    b. Anxiety
    c. Engagement*
    d. Fatigue

Answers

A. Collocations

1/e, 2/c, 3/b, 4/a, 5/h, 6/d, 7/f, 8/g

B. Vocabulary Quiz

1/b, 2/a, d, 3/d, 4/a, b, 5/c, 6/b, 7/c, d, 8/c

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