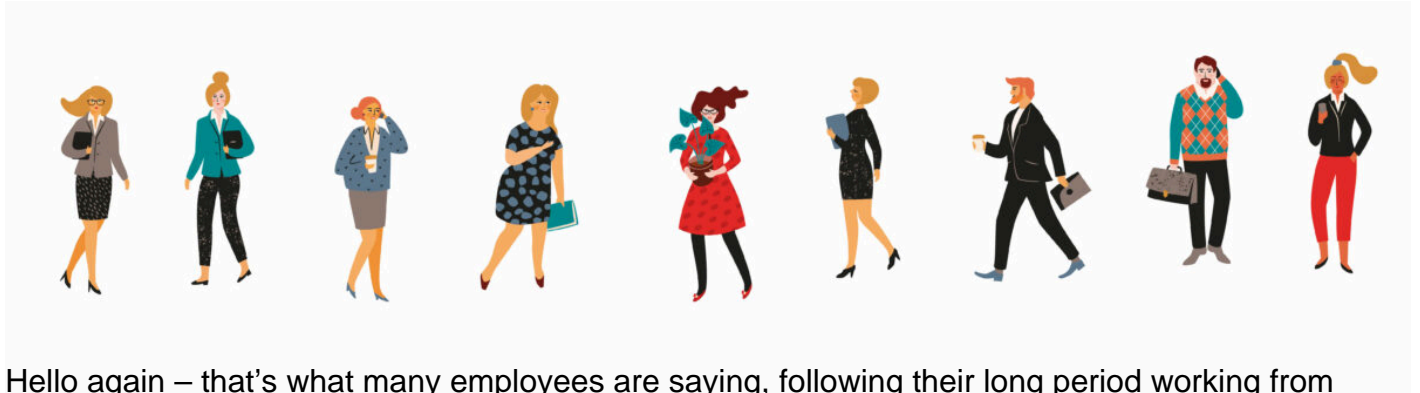


Office culture reloaded: A new approach to old contentious issues

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Hello again – that’s what many employees are saying, following their long period working from home, due mainly to the pandemic. No sooner had the sofa and the kitchen chair replaced their ergonomically designed office equivalents, no sooner had the routine set in and jogging bottoms become established as the new workwear, than it was time to return to the office – if only for a few days a week. So it’s no wonder that the cultural shift from a quiet little room at home to a large open-plan or shared office is rekindling some contentious areas of conflict.

The points of friction are not exactly new. Colleague X still speaks on the phone at a volume that makes it sound like a rant, and colleague Y has apparently still not lost her penchant for eating garlic-flavoured lunches at her desk. Not to mention the classic issues like temperature, ventilation and tidiness. How did these things get sorted before the era of working from home? No-one can remember any more. But it’s leading to excessive stress and strain and making the return to the office more difficult.

We even have to learn how to make small talk and polite conversation again. Whereas video conferences are usually over and done with quickly, in-person meetings still seem to go on for ever. During the lonely months spent working at home, many people seem to have developed an urge to talk which means they have to discuss everything in the most minute detail. At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who, after working for so long in isolation, now have to get used again to spontaneous meetings, loud voices and direct contact.

Making the return to the office easier

Even if the conflicts from the past are all well-known, it's still really important that the return to the office is carefully monitored. Open discussions, team meetings and talking about things are the best ways to start getting along together again, and it always helps to address any problematic areas openly. In addition, appropriate working patterns need to be established that match people's actual attendance in the office. Guidelines for working together, in the form of an office policy, will support collaboration and avoid conflict areas by providing a written set of rules. Community Managers are the first port of call when it comes to observing the guidelines. They will take account of the different interest groups, coordinate communications and, last but not least, form a connecting link between everyone in the office.

Creating a pleasant physical ambience and attractively designed separate zones in the office can help people literally to avoid potential conflicts and will encourage employees to return to the office. Having quiet areas such as silent rooms or libraries offers a balance to the open-plan or shared office and provides places where people can concentrate on their work or just escape for a while. Creative rooms and meeting zones, on the other hand, foster collaboration and help to rekindle team spirit. Outdoor areas and places for resting and chatting informally may also make the office a more attractive place. How the return to the office actually works out varies greatly from one person to another. While some people could hardly wait for the day when they would be reunited, others are still overwhelmed by the new situation. However, the fact is that social contact, even if it brings conflict with it, is essential for productive cooperation and for stimulating creativity and fresh ideas.