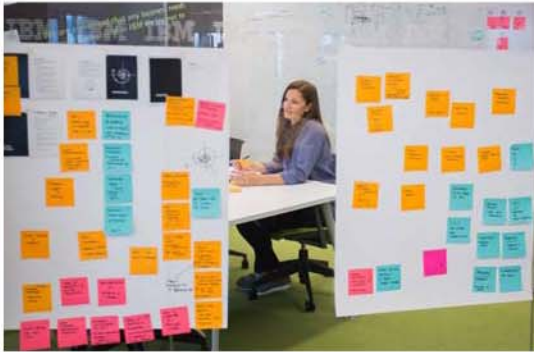


# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

## The Boss Wants You Back in the Office

Managers demand more collaboration and greater control over the workday, but bringing workers back isn't easy



Joni Saylor, a product design director who worked remotely for IBM until 2013, says telecommuters sometimes struggle to adjust to working in teams after operating on their own. PHOTO: JULIA ROBINSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By *John Simons*

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Big businesses have embraced flexible work practices, but fewer of them seem to favor full-time working from home.

International Business Machines Corp. [IBM +0.36% ▲](#), Aetna Inc., [AET +0.12% ▲](#) Bank of America Corp., Best Buy Co. [BBY +0.62% ▲](#), Honeywell International Inc. [HON -0.22% ▼](#) and Reddit Inc. are among employers that have ended or reduced remote-work arrangements recently as managers demand more collaboration, closer contact with customers—and more control over the workday.

Bringing workers back to the office isn't easy, managers say. Remote employees often set their own hours and ways of working, and bridle when faced with open-plan offices and set meeting schedules.

A large majority of U.S. employers let staffers telecommute sometimes, according to the Society for Human Resource Management.

Yet the portion of U.S. workers who performed all or some of their work at home fell to 22% last year, from 24% in 2015. Such workers spent an average of 3.1 hours a day toiling at home last year, down slightly from 2015, according to the Labor Department's American Time Use Survey.

Coming back to the office can be “honestly terrifying” for remote workers, says Andrew Marder, a research analyst with Capterra Inc., a business-software review site owned by Gartner Inc.

Mr. Marder telecommuted for about three years while blogging about investing for the Motley Fool financial website. He was also a full-time caregiver for his newborn during part of that time, and juggled writing and parenting duties by working many evenings.

Moving to an office role at Capterra in 2014, Mr. Marder had to get used to the lack of privacy at work and an hour-plus commute to Arlington, Va. As a telecommuter, he was used to working at any hour to meet deadlines. Once in the office, he struggled with

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prioritizing tasks and managing his time during work hours, frequently missing deadlines in the first months on the job.

His manager, J.P. Medved, set weekly meetings to plan Mr. Marder's workflow, arranging his calendar and plotting everything from research

phone calls to team meetings and deadlines. Mr. Medved says those changes improved Mr. Marder's ability to submit work on time.

Bosses acknowledge that remote workers don't suffer from productivity problems. Research has found telecommuters who can work outside normal office hours and don't have to spend time commuting often are more productive than their cubicle-bound counterparts. Rather, managers want their teams within view and are willing to trade some efficiency for the serendipity that office-based conversations might yield.

Companies tend to clamp down on telework during periods of turmoil and reinvention, says Ken Matos, vice president of research at Life Meets Work, a workplace consultancy.

"Leaders often say 'I like my co-located team better than my [remote] team, but the work gets done just as well,'" he adds.

As a finance vice president at Tetra Pak International SA, George Benaroya observed waves of colleagues return to company workspaces when new leaders would take over divisions and rein in remote work.

Office comebacks were often a letdown, recalls Mr. Benaroya, who left the company in 2012. Workers accustomed to personal space and sole use of their equipment at home had to adjust to cramped spaces, full parking lots and jammed printer queues.

The formerly remote employees' egos were bruised, too: The top managers who made special time for them during office visits paid less attention once those workers were a regular presence, he says. Managers spent extra time hand-holding ex-home workers, leaving less time for other duties.

"You lose efficiency," Mr. Benaroya says.

Tetra Pak spokeswoman Carol Yang says the issues that Mr. Benaroya describe don't reflect the company's current situation.

This spring IBM, long a promoter of remote work, offered thousands of work-from-home employees a choice to follow their position back to an office location or apply for a new role. Those who chose to do neither could leave the company.

Marketing manager Dave Wilson spent a decade working from home in Nashua, N.H. With two young children home during work hours, distractions abounded and Mr. Wilson says he felt isolated from colleagues.

So when his job was relocated to Raleigh, N.C., he took a position marketing the company's Watson artificial intelligence products at IBM's Littleton, Mass., campus.

Mr. Wilson says he was eager to return to an office, a better fit for his "water-cooler guy" personality.

He relishes the verbal sparring of the office, too. During a recent meeting to critique IBM's e-commerce offerings, participants challenged one another and got in each other's faces to make their points—when he attended similar meetings via conference call, people would disengage unless they were leading the conversation, he recalls.

IBM's leaders want to provoke those creative tensions, and have spent \$750 million to redevelop its workplaces around a new system of teamwork; the company has also

trained 160,000 employees on working more nimbly.

As former telecommuters arrive at IBM's Austin, Texas, location, Joni Saylor will help to integrate them into office culture. Ms. Saylor, a product design director who worked remotely for IBM until 2013, says telecommuters sometimes struggle to adjust to working in teams after operating on their own.

Best Buy's work-from-home program gave 5,000 headquarters employees free rein to choose where they worked, a perk that complicated tasks like scheduling meetings, says Best Buy spokesman Jeff Shelman.

"There was no control," he says. "Managers didn't have the tools to do their jobs."

The company ended the policy in 2013. Workers now arrange time out of the office with their managers.

The four years since the telework rollback have coincided with Best Buy's resurgence. Net income has more than doubled in the period and shares have climbed more than 200%, though the company is reluctant to draw a connection between those results and the end of remote work.

"Obviously, there were lots of other things going on," Mr. Shelman says.

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