Richard Borge

A Two-Year, 50-Million-Person Experiment in Changing How We Work

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Kristen Egziabher was all jitters just before the pandemic, awaiting news of a possible raise, until her manager came back dejected from his meeting with the higher-ups.

"I was presenting the case for you," he told her. "And people were like, 'We don't really know Kristen. We only know her work.'"

What?

Sure, her work. What else could be relevant to a performance review? But this was exactly what had always irked Ms. Egziabher, 40, about her office,

where she served as a project manager for a Texas food chain. No matter her productivity, her colleagues seemed to care primarily about the chitchat — what'd you do last weekend, where'd you get that purse? Ms. Egziabher, who is Black, felt that her white co-workers were fixated on who was jostling for entry to their in-group.

"What does all that matter for my pay?" she wondered. "If we're being real, I don't care what you did last weekend."

Remote work brought a reprieve. Several months into being sent to work from home, Ms. Egziabher got a promotion and an 11 percent raise: "If I had continued going into the office," she added, "there might have been some excuse around likability."

When one of America's earliest open-plan offices debuted in Racine, Wis., in 1939, women made up less than one-third of the country's labor force. The design of that early office, not so different from the one that modern workers experience, fit the needs of a particular employee: someone who could stay late because he didn't have to rush home to make dinner for his children; someone pleased to cross paths with the boss because it meant time to talk golf.

The office, in other words, was never one size fits all. It was one size fits some, with the expectation that everybody else would squeeze in. Office banter, for example, might have been a small annoyance for a segment of workers. But for many others, it amplified a sense that they didn't belong.

The last two years ushered in an unplanned experiment with a different way of working: Some 50 million Americans left their offices. Before the pandemic, in 2019, about 4 percent of employed people in the U.S. worked exclusively from home; by May 2020, that figure rose to 43 percent, according to Gallup. Of course, that means a majority of the work force continued working in person throughout the last two years. But among white-collar workers, the shift is stark: Before Covid just 6 percent worked exclusively from home, which by May 2020 rose to 65 percent.

"The only thing holding back flexible work arrangements was a failure of imagination," said Joan Williams, director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings. "That failure was remedied in three weeks' time in March 2020."

But now some executives are throwing open their office doors, propelled by loosening Covid restrictions and declining cases. Office occupancy across the country reached a pandemic peak of 40 percent in December, dipped because of the Omicron variant and then began to rise again, reaching 38 percent this month, according to data from the security firm Kastle. Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, American Express, Meta, Microsoft, Ford Motor and Citigroup are just a handful of the companies starting to bring some workers back.

The Return of Return-to-Office Plans

After the Omicron variant crushed companies' hopes for a return to in-person work late last year, a new R.T.O. chapter now appears to be opening.

- **New Perks:** Tech companies are hoping to lure their employees back to the office with concerts, food trucks and other offerings.

- **The Right Mind-Set:** Back at the office, the gossip, the loud talkers and the nosy colleagues are making a comeback. Here is how to deal with it.

- **Anxious Workers:** As many companies loosen their Covid safety rules, some employees are feeling uncomfortable with the rush back.

- **Inflation Woes:** As prices continue to go up, the cost of an R.T.O. routine — travel, coffee, food — is adding to workers' concerns.

- **Questioning Office Life:** Some workers fear a return to a more rigid workplace culture. Employers are already hearing rumblings of frustration.

When over 700 people responded to The Times's recent questions about returning to their offices, as well as in interviews with more than two dozen

of them, there were myriad reasons people listed for preferring work from home, on top of concerns about Covid safety. They mentioned sunlight, sweatpants, quality time with kids, quality time with cats, more hours to read and run, space to hide the angst of a crummy day or year. But the most strongly argued was about workplace culture.

"There's not much point in returning to the office if we're just going back to the old boys' club," said Keren Gifford, 37, an information technology worker in Pittsburgh who has not yet been required to return to her office. "What a relief not to have to go in day after day, week after week, and fail at making friends and having fun."

Many, like Ms. Gifford, realized they felt like they'd spent their careers in spaces built for somebody else. Take something as simple as temperature. Most building thermostats follow a model developed in the 1960s that takes into account, among other factors, the resting metabolic rate of a 40-year-old man weighing 154 pounds, according to a study published in Nature Climate Change. That left women to spend their prepandemic years filling cubicles with shawls, space heaters and blankets they could burrow into "like a burrito."

Some even kept their desks stocked with fingerless gloves, like Marissa Stein, 37, a staffer at an environmental nonprofit. Once Ms. Stein started working remotely, she could set her home temperature to 68 degrees, a compromise between her husband's chillier preferences and her own.

"Sometimes I will sneak it up to 70 when my husband isn't paying attention," she said.

But that's just the smallest example of how the office was physically designed to fit the needs of a very specific type of worker.

And some of the companies now attempting to call their staff back are facing a wave of resistance from workers emboldened to question the way things always were — which is to say, difficult for many people. There are

people of color whose colleagues wouldn't stop asking them how to work the copy machine. There are the introverts who never wanted to chat about fantasy football leagues. There are the caretakers who used to rush out for school pickup, feeling they were failing to meet unspoken professional expectations and just barely meeting their families' needs.
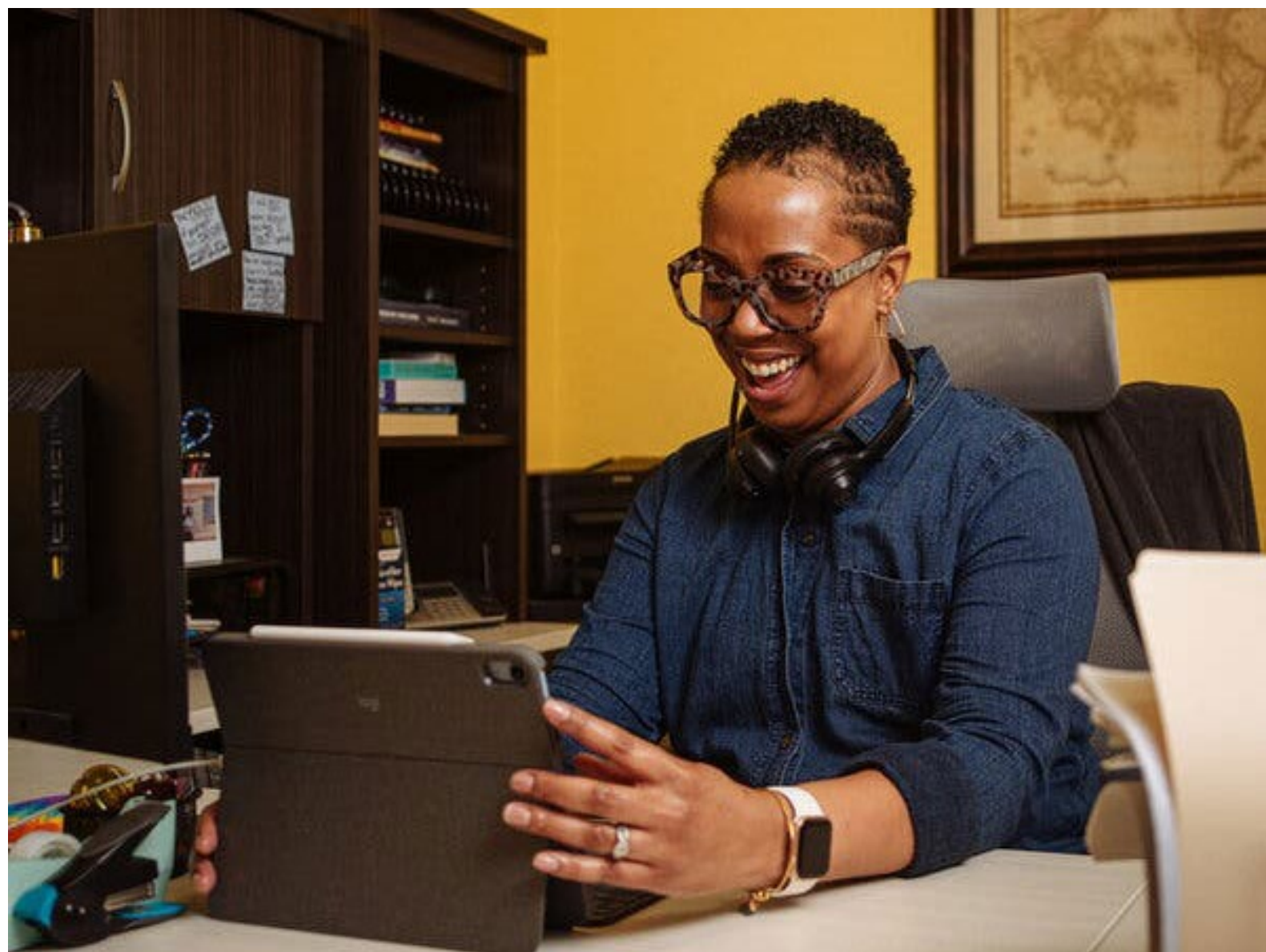
Like many people who began remote work during the pandemic, Ms. Egziabher now prefers working from home so that she can focus on work — not office politics. Josh Huskin for The New York Times

Two national surveys found that since the onset of the pandemic there's been a reduction in the percentage of employees who say that working long hours or being available beyond business hours is important to be

successful at their organizations, according to Youngjoo Cha, a sociologist at Indiana University.

"We had a nationwide experiment in telecommuting," Dr. Cha said. "These conditions challenged the notion of ideal workers."

Studies of 10,000 office workers conducted last year by Future Forum, a research group backed by Slack, suggest that women and people of color were more likely to see working remotely as beneficial than their white male colleagues. In the United States, 86 percent of Hispanic and 81 percent of Black knowledge workers, those who do nonmanual work, said that they preferred hybrid or remote work, compared with 75 percent of white knowledge workers. And globally, 50 percent of working mothers who participated in the studies reported wanting to work remotely most or all the time, compared with 43 percent of fathers. A sense of belonging at work increased for 24 percent of Black knowledge workers surveyed, compared with 5 percent of white knowledge workers, since May 2021.

Of course, some miss the work-life boundaries that their pre-Covid lives enabled: "My husband will sometimes come home and turn on the T.V., and I'm like, you turned on the T.V. in my office!" said Barbara Harris, 49, who works in professional services in Virginia.

Others, especially managers, argue that culture building is tougher to do virtually — does anybody really want another Zoom trivia night? Some people wrote to The Times to mourn their bonding conversations with teammates over Dungeons & Dragons, Nintendo and Marvel, or simply to say that remote work can get lonely: "I feel a little bit depressed when I wake up at 8 a.m., go to my coffee table, sit there at my computer on Zoom from 9:00 to 5:00, and then just close my computer and haven't left my tiny studio all day," said Dave Marques, 24, a student and freelance writer.

But managers pressing for a return are finding themselves up against those employees attached to their newfound sense of comfort.

Before the pandemic, Ms. Gifford, in Pittsburgh, didn't understand why her workplace wouldn't just let her work. There was a high school-style clique in her office that talked about Fortnite, cryptocurrency and who had swept up winnings at the most recent poker night. Ms. Gifford said they only asked her about her family, as if being a mother were her entire personality.

"They all know each other, and they have these inside jokes," she said. "There's this strong sense of 'back in the day we were so tight knit, we've got to get back to the office.' And I'm like, 'I don't know what you're remembering.'"

When she's at home, Ms. Gifford can have conversations with colleagues confined to work, without overhearing their other chatter.

For Chantalle Couba, 46, a consultant in Charlotte, N.C., the specter of office banter is made worse by the gulf between her colleagues' experience of the pandemic and her own. To some of them, the past two years seemed to have meant: "Let me just retreat to my lake house." Ms. Couba, meanwhile, can't count even three people in her communities who have not lost loved ones to Covid-19.

One day recently, she started her morning on the phone with a friend who was trying to decide whether to cremate or bury her mother, who died of Covid. Then Ms. Couba had to hop on a work call and muddle through niceties. She was relieved to be at home, so she could hang up afterward and take time to breathe.

Last year, as Ms. Couba quietly checked on Black women in her circles, she found that for most of them leaving the office had been a source of relief. She sometimes thinks back on the workplace behaviors and microaggressions she used to confront. Once she sat near a man who read aloud resumes submitted by job candidates who didn't go to prestigious schools, then tossed them dramatically in the recycling bin.

"There are still a lot of spaces in a lot of industries where just being a woman of color is an outlier," she said. "The side conversations, the pre-meeting conversations, the post-meeting conversations, the inside jokes — they all subtly add up to tell you that you don't quite fit."

"What have companies done to upskill senior leaders and managers so they're going back into the office with empathy?" Ms. Couba added. "Not one single person who re-enters the office in the next three months is the same as the one who left."

Employers can hear the rumblings of frustration. Salesforce last year rolled out a "success from anywhere" model, in which most of its employees can choose to be permanently remote or flexible, with a memo declaring the 9-to-5 workday dead and noting that nearly half of its staff want to come into an office only a few times per month. PricewaterhouseCoopers announced that some 40,000 of its employees would never be required to return to the office. Last month, Dow Jones and BNY Mellon told employees they would have more flexibility than many of their industry peers, with team leaders deciding how often their employees need to be in the office.

But workplace researchers worry that at many companies, return to office plans will have some "choose your own adventure" elements that penalize those who need flexibility. People might have to request permission from their managers to work from home, for example. Or managers might revive old notions about employee performance and develop a bias against those who can't spend as much time in the office.

"It's really important for managers to look at who are they promoting," said Sheela Subramanian, vice president of Future Forum, Slack's research consortium. "If everyone in the office looks like them or acts like them, they need to go back to the drawing board."

And some employees, buoyed by the labor shortage, are holding their work-from-home ground, with some two-thirds of remote workers reluctant to return according to the jobs platform FlexJobs. Alice Lemmer, 64, who had

worked in university services, quit in September before her required return date for full in-person work. Beth Boucher, 40, who works in public health in New Hampshire, is part of a team gathering data on her organization's productivity, hoping that management will be convinced to keep allowing remote work. One response to The Times questionnaire put it bluntly: "I won't be going back to the office. Ever."

Back in San Antonio, Ms. Egziabher recently put in two weeks' notice at her old job. She received an offer to work at a company based in California that will allow her to be fully remote. The fixtures of her nearly two-decade career now seem like relics of a past she can't imagine reinhabiting: high heels, early mornings, constant slights.

She says a little prayer of thanks for what remote work has allowed, an ethos strangely absent from the office: "Let's just focus on the work."

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