

## **Avoid The Office at Your Own Peril**

by Charles B. Wendel

More companies are bringing employees back to the office either on a full part-week schedule, but in many cases employees put up barriers to a return to full time office work. Recently, an article discussed how a UK bank's culture was being eroded due to employee and manager reticence to work in the office.

The fact is that using health concerns as a reason to stay home is disappearing or has disappeared as a rationale excuse for not working with others in person. What the resisters to in-person work may fail to recognize is what they lose, in relationship building, internal credibility, and even job security, by "working" from home.

It was late Sunday morning decades ago. I was a partner at a large consulting firm. We had a major presentation the next day at our client in Phoenix. But the snow fell with fierceness and the airlines were canceling their flights. As the team finished the presentation, made copies, and bound them (it was a long time ago), one of my best analysts focused on calling airlines and trying to find a way to get to Phoenix by the next morning. It took hours, but she found a flight that went to St. Louis where we could catch a plane to Phoenix. When we arrived for the meeting the next morning the Chairman looked at the well-prepared but weary-looking team and asked ironically, "Any trouble getting here?" He knew well there had been a lot of trouble getting there.

Today, if the meeting had been scheduled in person in the first place, understandably, it would be moved to Zoom. Why go through the hassle of travelling in a storm?

But...the level of attention we provided resulted in a long relationship. And when I started FIC, that Chairman without my asking said, "We'll be your first client."

Year earlier, on a Saturday afternoon, I was sitting in the sacristy of a church minutes before my marriage ceremony. I was on the phone with the General Counsel of my bank employer. We were discussing the workout of a US borrower (I note, not originated by me) that involved a potential large loss to the bank.

Today, few executives would intrude during such a personal day, perhaps concerned about triggering the employee's sensitivities. And, today, the bridegroom would likely not make himself available for a call at that time feeling put upon by the employer.

But...that bank provided tremendous support when I had a health crisis and refused to allow a new office head to fire me. Eventually that office head disappeared.

Leaving banking for consulting involved a time consuming and intellectually rigorous process. Candidates faced multiple screening interviews with maybe a dozen consultants. Stress interviews were the norm. I wanted the job at the BIG prestigious consulting firm. The last interview, the critical one, was with a partner. I presumed not everyone saw him and that he made the ultimate decision about my fate. It was an after-lunch meeting and, for whatever reason (my charm? my intelligence?), we bonded. During the interview he offered me a cigar. Again, this was also a long time ago.

I got the job.

Why a sales or marketing approach succeeds eludes easy answers. I called on one bank target in person once or twice a year for eight years with no project sold. The meetings were enjoyable and informative, although over the years I gave the likelihood of converting the prospect to a client low probability.

But... after eight years the executive called with a specific need and the relationship began.

Each of the above incidents was critical to my business and personal life. Most involved a face-to-face interaction. All involved demonstrating a commitment that was genuine.

In many cases these days the hiring and work processes remain largely virtual. Many younger employees prefer working from Tulum or the Netherlands for their employers in Calgary or Newark. The senior staff as well has, depending upon your perspective, come to view virtual work as effective or, more likely, has become accustomed to the easier lifestyle it offers. One quick note: if you are hired online and work online, you are very easy to be exited online, as is happening now.

Last week I read in a UK publication that employees are not coming into their offices on Mondays or Fridays, the skeptical suggesting this leads to a four-day weekend. The writer stated that other employees are calling those who visit the office only on **Tuesday, Wednesday, And Thursday** with a short phrase that might be considered offensive.

So, don't be one.

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