

Back to Work! But How? **by Charles B. Wendel**

Earlier this month CNBC quoted Jaime Dimon saying, “I’m about to cancel all my Zoom meetings,” Dimon said. “I’m done with it.” Goldman Sachs, among other companies, also wants its workers back in their offices. When to return and how are big questions that employers and employees now struggle with.

The CNBC article provided one critical reason pushing Dimon to get workers back to the bank: “Dimon also said clients told him that in cases where JPMorgan lost business to rivals, it was because ‘bankers from the other guys visited, and ours didn’t. Well, that’s a lesson.’” That is a telling observation, one that some clients and bank friends have noted. Our sense is that smaller banks, those less encumbered by big HR bureaucracies, moved quickly to return to seeing clients and working together in their offices to provide client solutions.

Of course, it is easy for Dimon and many other corporate executives to work in a world of social distancing and protection from the hoi polloi. Many CEOs see to have a protective shield created by intimidation or the fear or discomfort felt by their employees. By their nature they are a protected class. Not for them the ride on a dirty subway housing homeless or even waiting in line for an elevator.

Pre-pandemic how were some banks viewing their employee’s and the quality of their work environment? Two years ago, more than one bank we know was redesigning its space to cram more people on to each floor, up to 20% more. Offices were eliminated, privacy abandoned as an open floor plan prevailed. It was sold to employees as a tool to increase communication and collaboration. It was sold to employers to lower operating expense.

That approach will no longer be acceptable to employees. Now, partition barriers need to rise, and personal space needs to be expanded. Pre-pandemic I worked in a client’s conference room that had been designated for four people. That was despite my outstretched arms being just about to touch the opposite walls. In the current world that space might not be fit for two employees.

Top people see being in the office to maintain tighter control over employees and be able to reach them whenever they want. The employees we know yearn for the interaction of office life (and getting out of the house). But more than ever before, they want and expect one-two days a week at home or other breaks from what will remain the stress of commuting and office work, particularly while wearing a mask.

A major issue results from the widely different attitudes we have toward dealing with the current situation. Some of us get rid of the mask as soon as we are outside while others wear masks while driving alone in their own cars. Many continue to wear masks outside even though a *New York Times* report found the risk of outdoor transmission of the virus was not the 10% the CDC

stated, but rather less than 1%. There are probably other reports that would disagree with the *Times* analysis.

With the government sending mixed messages about the timing of the economy opening up and what exactly that means, it is difficult for business executives to lead the effort to return to offices, to downtowns, to life. But that may be what they need to do. No roadmap exists for this and what might work in Nashville or Miami might not work in NY, even for the same company. Actions require a level of sensitivity and customization that may be unusual to a company in which the King or Queen has been able to make pronouncements and others execute their commands.

“Everybody back to work” must and will occur. Execs should not make commands but reach out, listen, experiment until, if ever, we return to a normal working world.

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