

The Office is Dying. It's Time to Rethink How We Work.

Anne Helen Petersen and Charlie Warzel discuss how the great retreat from office life could make work better for everyone.

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Ezra Klein

I'm Ezra Klein. This is "The Ezra Klein Show."

Hey, this is Ezra. I am off this month, but today, we have Rogé Karma sitting in behind the mic.

I don't know if I've announced this yet, but Rogé is now our senior editor. He really runs the show and sits at the core of our collective mind. Sometimes, I worry he thinks more like me than I do, and when I leave, and he guest hosts, as he is today, sometimes people don't even realize I'm gone.

So I think you all will enjoy this. Today's episode is on a pretty crucial topic right now — the future of remote work, the future of the office and really the meaning of both — the role they play or could play in our lives. So I hope you enjoy it.

Rogé Karma

Over the course of this year, a lot of our lives have returned to something resembling a pre-pandemic normal. Restaurants are full again. Airports and hotels are packed. Even movie theaters have made a comeback.

But the one institution that hasn't really been true for is the office. Only about a third of office workers are back in the office full time now, and it

doesn't look like that's going to change dramatically any time soon. If you look at surveys, the vast majority of knowledge workers prefer some form of hybrid or remote work, and executives are increasingly coming to accept that reality.

But when you actually talk to people about their current work arrangements, many of them have mixed feelings, and I'm one of them. I work from home full time now, and don't get me wrong — I don't miss my commute. I love having a more flexible schedule. I'm an introvert who's way more productive without all the distractions and interruptions of being around people all the time.

But at the same time, I really do feel like the boundaries between my work and life have collapsed in ways that are hard to repair. I find myself not just working more often, but just thinking about work way more often. And again, I'm an introvert, but still, I felt way more loneliness in the past six months than maybe any time in my life since maybe high school.

But what makes this moment so frustrating is also what I think makes it most hopeful. Yes, the office is dying, but a new, better way of working has yet to be born. So while it might feel terrible and messy now, I think there's a real opportunity in this moment for not only rethinking where we work, but reimagining how we work. And that's why I wanted to invite Anne Helen Petersen and Charlie Warzel on the show.

Both of them have spent years covering the way we work from distinct angles. Warzel is a technology reporter who currently writes the newsletter "Galaxy Brain" for The Atlantic, and Petersen, as a longtime culture writer who writes the newsletter "Culture Study." And late last year, Warzel and Petersen — who are a couple, I should add — published an excellent new book together called "Out of Office: The Big Problem and Bigger Promise of Working from Home."

It builds off their experience leaving their life in New York behind in 2017 to move to Missoula, Montana, and work remotely years before the rest of us were forced into the same. And I actually think the book is even more relevant today than when it first came out almost a year ago.

So this is a conversation about how companies and workers can navigate this wild, truly unprecedented moment in the history of work. It's about what the office is for, about what the post-office future of work could look like, and it's about what it would take for working from home to truly begin to live up to its utopian promise.

One quick note before we begin: Not everyone has the ability to work from home in the first place, and the option to do so is, quite frankly, a massive privilege. But we couldn't cover the entirety of work in this episode. So this conversation is only about the subset of workers, sometimes called knowledge workers or portable workers, who can, in fact, work remotely. As always, the show email is ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com.

Anne Helen Petersen, Charlie Warzel, welcome to the show.

Anne Helen Petersen

Thank you.

Charlie Warzel

Thanks for having us.

Rogé Karma

So if you would have asked me a year ago, even six months ago, to make a prediction, I probably would have said that a lot more offices would have returned to fully in-person work by now, but that hasn't really happened. The amount of time office workers report working from home has actually risen in the past year. A bunch of companies that were talking about much

stricter return-to-office policies have either backtracked or aren't really enforcing those policies.

So I'm wondering why you think that is, and maybe we can start with Charlie here. Why haven't we seen as strong of a push to return to the office as we might have expected?

Charlie Warzel

I mean, I think one reason is pretty simple, and that's, once you give somebody a perk, once you give somebody some kind of benefit, it's really hard, just in life, to roll that back. And the benefit that so many knowledge workers gained over the past two and a half years — and to be clear, there were many downsides. But one of the benefits was genuine flexibility.

People were able to work where they wanted. They were able to weave work in with the rest of their lives. They could be present with their kids, attend to them for a few moments inside the house, and then switch back into the mode of work.

It was the flexibility that routinely was only granted to executives, who could take summer Fridays off and go to their beach house. And I think it's really, really difficult to roll that back. It's really hard to make a case, when your company functioned pretty well during the pandemic, when everyone was remote all the time, that the entire operation is going to fall apart if you're not all together inside this nucleus building.

Rogé Karma

So I take your point, Charlie, that this is a perk that's really hard to roll back. When you look at surveys of office workers, for example, the plurality of people clearly prefer some form of hybrid work. The vast majority either prefer remote or some form of hybrid.

And yet when I talk to people about their hybrid setups, they aren't exactly thriving. They're commuting to these half empty offices, still worrying about Covid just to sit on Zoom calls all day. And so I'm interested in how you understand that disconnect. And you've specifically written about hybrid work as the worst of both worlds. Maybe you can start here. If hybrid work is generally what people want, why isn't it working?

Anne Helen Petersen

Well, I think it's because the hybrid plans are bad, and no matter what you're trying to do with your office, no matter what you're trying to do with your workplace, you have to first really take stock of what the work is and what the work demands. And that requires a lot more kind of an eagle eye view of what you're doing on a day-to-day basis as employees, than most companies are willing to actually put any effort into if they're really — they're like, oh, I thought we were just coming up with a hybrid work plan, not reconsidering the entire workflow of our office and what we do and why we do it and why we do it the way that we've done it for so long.

But that look at the sort of work that you're doing can be really, really helpful in thinking about what work demands or would benefit from presence, from co-presence, and what work can really be slotted into these times away from the office. And so I think that, sometimes, people look at hybrid and say, oh, it just means that we're going to tell people they can come and go as much or as little as they want, and in practice that means that people are coming into ghost offices where no one's there.

They're not getting any of that feeling of collaboration or presence that they're seeking, and then when they're back home, they're just like, why am I not just here all of the time? And so I think that's the fundamental

problem, is people haven't done that difficult but necessary work of figuring out what the office is going to be for.

Charlie Warzel

I completely agree, and I think one thing we learned while writing the book and talking to people who spend a lot of time thinking about new ways to work is that, unfortunately, hybrid work is the hardest of all of the options. It is actually easier to drag everyone in and have everyone present and walk by and tap people on the shoulder and have that older way of working. It's also easier to have everyone remote and just ping the people and have that decentralized office.

The hard part with hybrid work is that it introduces all kinds of friction. It also introduces all kinds of potential inequities between the people who are present in person and the people who are opting not to be there. And so in order to make it work, it requires so much intentional design.

It requires having people whose entire jobs are figuring out how every employee in the company operates best and designing systems of communication and organization to make collaboration as good as it can be across a variety of mediums, including in person.

I think, as Anne said, this work — most companies, most executives, most people aren't willing right now to do that. It's so much easier to create some kind of half-assed, oh, you're going to be in the office two and half days a week policy, and without that design, you get what we're seeing. You get these ghost offices. You get people coming in to sit on Zoom all day and endure the commute without any of those spontaneous collaboration benefits.

Rogé Karma

One way that I think both of you are describing that I've come to think of the problem with the current hybrid models is that the problems with remote work seem to be bleeding into the office, and the problems of office work seem to be bleeding into remote. So when you're in the office, you're still dealing with the half empty office. The culture hasn't fully come back. You're on Zoom calls all day. You're probably worried about Covid.

And then when you're remote, you still have to be working on the office 9:00 to 5:00 schedule. You still have to be constantly checking Slack or Teams. You still have to live close enough to the office to commute. And so I think when people imagine hybrid, they think, oh, it's the best of both. I get to be flexible some days, but I also get to see my friends and colleagues. And then what you really get is these parts, especially if you're not intentional about it, is these different parts bleeding into each other.

But I think I do — for that reason, I want to give a voice of skepticism here, which is, if I'm a C.E.O. hearing this, and I'm hearing that hybrid is really hard, I'm hearing that it might require me to create entirely new positions to make it work, it is going to be difficult, why shouldn't my response just be, look, this hybrid approach isn't working? It's too hard to implement. We had something great before in 2019. Let's just make everyone come back into the office. Why isn't that the right response here?

Anne Helen Petersen

Well, I think some places have tried that, and I think that they've had a fair amount of attrition, especially amongst people for whom that flexibility has become nonnegotiable. A lot of the data that Charlie and I rely on, and that we frequently cite, comes from Slack's Future Forum, and what they found is that mothers and fathers, in particular, not just want a flexible work schedule, but demand one. And if they can't have it, if they're

threatened with it going away, they're already looking for jobs if they haven't left already.

And so I think that if you hire a company that's like, we only want a certain type of person, we don't want any parents or any people with caretaking responsibilities, and we also don't care about these feelings of inclusion within our workplace, because, again, we're thinking about this data that shows that people of color in the workplace feel more inclusion, feel more comfortable, in hybrid and remote scenarios, you're essentially setting yourself up to put yourself on a trajectory going backwards in time as a company instead of forwards.

I think that there is this overwhelming feeling amongst white male executives that the office was a neutral space, and I think that leaders who are smart are coming to understand that just because it was a space that felt comfortable and productive for me did not mean that it felt that way to others.

Charlie Warzel

I think one of the things that this whole control experiment has taught us is just to see how broken work was prior to the pandemic. I think it granted a lot of people some clarity, whether that was thinking about their commutes, thinking about the wasted time in the office, thinking about the centrality of the workday in their life, and just how much of the rest of their life got pushed further and further into the margins every consecutive day, week, month, year.

And when I try to think about the case for the skeptical C.E.O., the thing that I keep going back to is this idea that we are obsessed in the working world. So many books get written about ways to innovate your business, ways to change, ways to adapt to a new information dominated, fast-paced

society, what have you. And people are so ready to accept — executives are so ready to accept a new tactic or a new piece of communication software and then tout it as this form of cutting edge innovation, but there's a way to innovate here as well with the way that you design your work practices, with the way that you grant people this flexibility.

And I think, to what Anne was saying with inclusion and the way that different workers are actually thriving in this, what you're doing with a true hybrid environment is you are giving new people a chance to contribute in different ways. You are actually playing to the skill set of all the people who didn't actually thrive in the office, and that's such an opportunity. I think where executives go wrong, they see this friction as just straight up downside.

But this friction is actually, and we argue this in the book, it's this ability for us to find better ways, to make work more human, to make work more focused on efficient communication between workers and executives, and I just see that as an amazing potential possibility. And what's so frustrating right now is how few executives, especially the ones who think of themselves as innovators, don't recognize this for the opportunity that I think it is.

Rogé Karma

Yeah, and I think that there's some really good data to show that it's actually just a bad business decision, to Charlie's point. The Stanford economist Nick Bloom, who I think has done some of the best work generally on remote work, him and some co-authors just released what I really think of as the gold standard study on hybrid versus in-person work. They did this huge randomized control trial of something like 1,600 workers in a tech company.

So these were computer engineers, folks in marketing, finance, et cetera. Some were in the office five days a week. Others had a hybrid schedule working from home two days a week, and the results were really striking. Among the hybrid employees, quit rates were 35 percent lower, which is really important when you consider just how much attrition costs a company in terms of rehiring and retraining. People's self-reported happiness and work/life balance went way up, and productivity actually improved slightly. There was one measure they did where they looked at literally the most objective measure I think you can. Lines of code written went up around 7 percent. And what really struck me about that was, to the conversation we've been having, a lot of hybrid arrangements are kind of a mess right now, and yet hybrid work is still outperforming full time office work on all of these measures, which I think is just really telling.

Charlie Warzel

I just think that it's a great point that needs to be hammered home, which is just, so much of our working life prepandemic, and during the pandemic, to be clear, is people feeling like they're toiling, people feeling like they're giving so much of themselves to their jobs and have to fit their lives around that. I think it's remarkable how people perform when they feel like their needs are being attended to a little bit better, or that they're getting what they want, or that they have just a little bit more autonomy over their days.

And I think that that's really just the thing that we continue to be grappling with. Post vaccines, we're all really trying to assess, both in our own lives, but also inside corporations and in, I think, capitalism at large, how important is this shared space? What does it do for collaboration?

What does it do for culture, for morale? What does it do in making our lives more miserable, more hectic? I think this is all just a grand

experiment that a pandemic forced upon us, and we're trying to figure out the lessons of that and how we can apply them going forward.

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, I think — I mean, Nick Bloom's work is really interesting, too, because he was studying remote work before the pandemic and understood the ways in which productivity went up amongst fully distributed people before the pandemic. So also has an insight into the ways in which what we've studied or what we've conceived of as remote work over, especially, the first couple — year, year and a half of the pandemic was very different than these fully distributed models that existed before.

And I think that's just worth underlining again and again. If you, at home right now, are thinking about, oh, my gosh, I still can't stand my work from home scenario, I just feel really lonely, I never work with anyone, I never see anyone, it's not the future. There are so many different setups and co-working scenarios moving forward that are going to, I think, really define the future of work. But we're just getting there now. We're getting to some of those iterations now.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Rogé Karma

So I want to return to this question we've brought up a few times, which is what is the office for? Because if we're going to make hybrid work better, this is really the first question that companies need to ask. And to a point you brought up earlier, Charlie, one way to think about these past two years is as a massive experiment in what the office actually does and the role it plays in our working lives.

And so I guess what I'm interested in hearing from you both is, we have this great experiment. What have we learned? What is the office for, and what is it not for?

Anne Helen Petersen

Well, there's a great myth, that I'm sure you have heard, and that everyone listening is heard, which is that there is so much innovation and creativity that happens by happenstance in the hallways at an office. And there's actually been some pretty great research, I've seen it published in Harvard Business Review and cited other places, that this is not the case, that this is absolutely a story that people tell themselves about the importance of the office. And maybe you have had a drive-by interaction that is useful, and that's great, but it is not the primary function — utility of the office.

I think that what people are realizing is that the office is very, very important for collaborative work. So a great example is, let's say you have a document that you need to co-write, and in theory, Google Docs would be great for this right. You all sit down, and you do it.

But it goes through so many iterations, it takes a week. Lots of people have to approve, and maybe that's the sort of thing, if you sat down in a conference room for 30 minutes, you could just pound it out, get it done. So that sort of collaborative work, and also intense creative brainstorming work that builds on itself, I think, is also the sort of work that the office is extremely utile for.

Everything else, there are things that maybe you might prefer about the office. You're like, oh, I feel less lonely, or I like seeing other people, or I like doing teambuilding, happy hours. Some people really like that stuff, but they are — it is profoundly exclusionary in a lot of different ways.

And while I can understand, especially why younger employees, employees newer to the office who are not yet ingrained in the company culture, feel desperate for that function of the office, there are other ways to integrate someone into the company culture that don't demand a commute, getting ready, inflexibility in the way that your day works, all of those things.

Charlie Warzel

One thing that I think about when trying to figure out what the office is for, I think the office is, to some degree, a place for people who work together to learn a bit about each other. I was reading a story about the new executive editor of The Washington Post and some of the struggles of the first year of her tenure, and one of the things that came up in there is a lot of people didn't really have a sense of who she was as a person and vice versa because of the fact that most employees were out of the office.

And so I think that there is some of that, simply having a familiar relationship. Observing somebody day in, day out in person gives you a lot of information about them that it's difficult to pick up in other environments. So I think, to some degree, the office is this place to communicate and pick up a lot of ancillary data or intelligence about your workplace, and it's the stuff that isn't in the employee manual.

Workplace gossip is really important, especially, again, for younger employees, this ability to learn the unwritten rules of your workplace and navigate it or the unwritten rules of your industry. And I think that stuff happens on chat apps. It happens remotely. Again, there's more friction there, and I think that will evolve.

If we change the way that we work, a lot of that data will just naturally start to appear in those remote spaces, or will be exchanged in digital

channels that aren't part of the corporate infrastructure. But right now, I think so much of the difficulty of this moment is because a lot of what the office is for isn't for work, but it's for this kind of unofficial data. And we're trying to figure out the ways to impart that on people and have that culture in a different medium.

Rogé Karma

So I think there's a few points that, I think, all of us clearly agree on here about when it comes to the function of the office. But it seems like where there's still a big question, and I sort of sensed it in some of the tension between your two answers, was this category of what The Atlantic's Derek Thompson has called soft work. When you leave the office, when you go remote, you're still doing a lot of the hard work of making PowerPoint decks and sending email and writing papers.

But for soft work, those moments where you'd run into a colleague on the way to the bathroom, and you'd catch up about your weekend, or you'd stop by someone's desk to try out a new idea on them, that, I think, to some extent, could be over romanticized, but it's definitely true that it's plummeted. And I think that, Anne, you make a really good point. I don't think there's a lot of good evidence that kind of soft work is so important to creativity and innovation.

But what worries me about the decline of that sort of softer work, those loose connections, is what it means for loneliness. Earlier this year, Microsoft released this big study of over 30,000 remote workers from something like 31 countries, and one of the findings that stood out most to me was that 55 percent of hybrid employees and 50 percent of remote employees feel lonelier at work than before going hybrid or remote.

And don't get me wrong, we had a serious loneliness problem well before the pandemic, but for many people, I think the office was one of the last institutions where we were around the same people consistently, where we could have these casual interactions and form friendships and meet potential romantic partners, and that kind of thing just doesn't happen as much remotely, or at least, it's harder to make happen.

I mean, I — even the connections we do make, they don't feel nearly as good as they do in person. I don't think I've met anyone who genuinely enjoys Zoom coffee chats. And so don't get me wrong, I love remote work in so many ways. I love the flexibility. I love not having to commute.

And I'm pretty introverted, so honestly, I don't miss what often felt like forced small talk. But at the same time, it's possible I go days, even a week, without seeing anyone face to face except my partner. So on a day-to-day basis, I feel fine and productive, but then over time, there's this gnawing feeling of loneliness, this craving for human connection. And I worry about that not just for me, but especially for people who don't have the level of familial and social support that I have.

Anne Helen Petersen

I'm so glad you asked about this because I think it's a huge problem. And I think that the fundamental problem predates the pandemic, and that work had become the primary source of interaction, of comfort, of friendship, of relationships for so many people. It should not be our employer who is solving our loneliness problems.

We should not be thinking, oh, I wish I saw more people at work. It should be, I wish I had more people in my life. I wish I had more of a social infrastructure outside of my job.

Just generally, I think it's a sad state of affairs when we are relying uniquely on our employers as our social hub in any capacity, and I think sometimes, people — this is a difficult thing to talk about because people are like, I like my work friends. Or me and Charlie's case — we met at work. And there's nothing wrong with having work friends, but I think the situations in which work becomes the primary source of all of your connection is more indicative of an unhealthy relationship with work just generally.

And I say that personally, part of the reason Charlie and I met at work was because we had no life outside of work. When you spend all of your time working, you have no time to form those relationships outside of work that would be sustaining, and so it makes sense that, if you're spending all your time working, and you no longer have those in-person interactions, and you also don't have those sustaining relationships outside of work, that you're going to feel very lonely.

But how do you develop them? A lot of people, especially young people, and I think especially millennials, never built up that muscle. Do not know how to form those relationships.

And so now, they're sitting here with their jobs, reconsidering their jobs, is this who I want to be? Do I want to be defined by my job? Do I want all of my friendships and my source of companionship to come through my job? I don't think so, and I think you're also seeing a very different attitude emerging amongst the next generation of workers as they're figuring out what place work is going to have in their lives.

Rogé Karma

I think that's such an important point, Anne, and I agree. I don't think we should need the office to be able to make these connections. There are lots

of other ways to build community, to build relationships, but in addition to not knowing how to do this, I also think we've just set up our society in ways that make the office really easy and make these other institutions really hard.

The office, for all of its faults, it was this central institution where you would come together and interact with the same people on a consistent basis. There was a structure to it. There were resources behind it. There's all this physical and social infrastructure we invest to make it accessible, and the sad thing is, that's just not as true for a lot of these other avenues of finding community.

You've written a lot, Anne, about the bowling alone phenomenon, the way that churches and civic life and volunteer organizations have really declined in recent decades, and I've felt that when I tried to go get involved in my community and make connections outside of work. It's really hard.

The different organizations are scattered. They're really understaffed and under-resourced. They're hard to access if you don't have a car. And so my big worry is that if we take away the office without building up some of these other institutions, then the result is just going to be more loneliness, more atomization, more time spent sitting in our apartments alone, doomscrolling on social media, and that seems like a really important social problem to address.

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, I mean, the success of my newsletter, I feel like, is entirely rooted in people who feel this fundamental yearning for a community and struggle to make a space in their life for it, or even to know how to cultivate it, in part because their lives have been so subsumed by work for so long. And I

just fundamentally think that we cannot rely on our corporations to provide this infrastructure of connection. They will always fail us.

And so what you're seeing instead, as people reconsider the placement of work in their lives, is a lot of people who are trying to figure out how can I forge this community? Since we have allowed these other forms of social connection to atrophy, how can I begin forming this in my neighborhood, through mutual aid organizations? On a more macro level, how can we rebuild not just a social safety net, but an infrastructure of care for one another?

Charlie Warzel

We interviewed, for the book, some early career employees, people who graduated into the fully remote, mid-pandemic work force, and one of them was a young woman who basically detailed this nightmare scenario of coming in and feeling just totally adrift both in the organization, but also in the idea of what their career should be and feeling that they didn't have any of that workplace data. They were struggling and feeling very alienated from everything, and their job was consuming so much of their time that they had what you describe as this kind of deep loneliness and floundering.

And we published some of that as an excerpt, and that person reached out to us afterwards and actually said — this was about six or eight months after the initial reporting — and said, I actually have a completely different opinion on everything that I told you back then. And what they realized was that all that alienation that they had felt, while it was still really difficult in the moment, was actually potentially beneficial to them in the long run.

As a result of graduating into the pandemic work force, they really understood their job as much more of a transactional relationship instead of that familial one. They were able to impose really firm boundaries between work and their personal life as a result of that alienating onboarding process, and I think that there's something important there. I take all of the points of the loneliness, of the alienation, of feeling lost. I think that's really important.

I also think, too, that part of this great control experiment is slowly changing the norms and the expectations of what we want out of work, and one of those very well might be that certain people start viewing work as, honestly, what it is to some degree. It's a transaction between employees and employers. It's not a family, and that family rhetoric is often incredibly exploitative to the workers.

Rogé Karma

So there's another angle of this I want to get at here because, if we're talking about these problems of loneliness, of alienation, one response is we have to invest in community. Another response is we have to change our view of work. But another way to approach this is maybe what we need is better technology, and I'm really interested in your thoughts as a technology reporter here, Charlie, because if you go back 10 years, working from home was truly terrible. There's no Zoom. Not many good applications for chatting.

And even if you go back to the beginning of the pandemic, the April 2020 version of Zoom was really bad compared to what we have now, and that's important because we're actually seeing a lot of investment in work from home technology. The amount of new patents for work from home technology has more than doubled over the course of the pandemic, and as their technology gets better, there's a real chance, I think, it could be

used to address some of these limitations. So I'll put this to you first, Charlie — if Zoom and Slack and Google Docs are generation one of remote work technology, what could generation two or three look like?

Charlie Warzel

This is such a complicated question because I think all of us, for decades — and this is what we do with technology in general. We tend to think of it as almost a silver bullet. It's going to solve this problem. It's going to make this easier.

And so when I think, when we look at it, what is the 2.0, 3.0, 4.0 versions of workplace technology, collaborative technology, I think what's really important is not to have this overreliance on it because it's really actually all about the implementation of that technology. Slack, let's use for an example, is potentially a great tool.

It allows you this instantaneous communication and this way to organize conversations and projects and for people to collaborate from anywhere in the world in this very low intensity, ambient way. It's a wonderful thing for a lot of businesses if used correctly.

But what we end up seeing is a very lazy implementation in so many offices of something like Slack, and what ends up happening is it becomes another channel overlaid on top of all the other communication channels where you have this long running performance of your job. You're live action role playing your job, and that ends up being such a drain on productivity.

It ends up being such a drain on the worker experience. It becomes this digital shackle when it's implemented lazily, when there aren't norms, when there aren't cultural rules for how to use this technology efficiently

and respectfully in your workplace. And so what's the next generation of these technologies going to look like?

I would imagine that there's going to be a lot more visual or audio ambient presence, where you have something running in the background where someone can do a digital or virtual equivalent of knocking on your door or your cubicle and trying to pop in quickly to ask a short question. I think there will be all kinds of ways to take the ambience of the office and bring that into a digital setting, and those things very well might be transformative. They might lower some of that feeling of loneliness. They might make collaboration better and more efficient, but it's really all about the implementation because if we just unleash the software on people without rules and norms about how to use it, it's inevitably going to do what all this technology does, which is just become an additional layer into people's lives, and it will undermine all of the efficiency that it promises.

Rogé Karma

So let's talk about implementation. I think, if there's one thing that really has come across from our conversation so far, it's that our current model for thinking about the office is broken. But there are lots of new companies being created right now that have never had a conventional office and never will, and that means there's a real opportunity to think about the kind of office, the kind of culture, the kind of technology that we could employ that can make some of these trade-offs we've been talking about less acute.

So let's think utopian here, and I'll start with you, Anne. If we were designing the office from scratch, how would we design it? What should the office of the future look like?

Anne Helen Petersen

Well, it depends on how big the company is, I think, because one thing that I found really interesting and provocative about the future of larger companies is this idea of the home office as almost like a museum, like a pilgrimage spot. So it's a place that holds the keys to the company culture, for better or for worse, in terms of leadership. You get to be there and get to have that presence.

And we have this to some extent with headquarters, but these spaces would not be a place where hundreds, thousands of other workers are as well. It'd be more a place where you go to onboard, a place where you go for large events, a place where you go for conferences, for times of celebration, for commemorating who you are as a company, for that manufacturer of culture broadly. And then you have all of these satellite places, and this, I think, really facilitates real flexible work that allows people to live in more places than just expensive coastal cities, where you can come into these spaces and use them collaboratively.

The other thing that I think about, just like if you were a company that has people mostly in one area, and you want to facilitate an environment where people can and do come in two to three days a week, is to make it much more like a college library. So you have these spaces for quiet, dedicated work for people who want to be in co-presence with one another, but don't want to be disturbed. They want to have their productivity that they get at home.

And then you have breakout rooms, conference rooms, but that can be reserved and collaborative. And then you have places where you can post up and be next to one another, working all of the time. I mean, think back, if you went to college, when you went to the library, it was a very social space a lot of times. I had friends who would be like, I can't go to the library tonight. I need to actually get work done.

But you would also have that space available for people who wanted that, and I think that sort of iterative, flexible space is something that, if someone were designing an office right now, you would have much more of that. But instead, we're getting a lot of retrofits that I don't think are expansive in their thinking about what the office is actually for.

Rogé Karma

So I think a really important point that comes across in that answer is that I think the idea of the office as a single place, a single physical location, is just a very 20th-century way to think about work. I think something that's really come across in this conversation is that work really isn't one thing. We've talked about deep individual work. We've talked about brainstorming, meetings. There's — that soft work. There's onboarding.

And if that's the case, if work isn't just one thing, then maybe we don't just want one space to serve all of those roles. Maybe the, quote, unquote, office of the future is a series of spaces.

The home is where you get a lot of your hard, deep work done, and then maybe there are co-working spaces where you work together with other members of your immediate team once or twice a week. And then maybe there are regional locations where, every couple of months, bigger teams can come together for team building and bonding.

And to your point about the museum, Anne, maybe there's a more central location where new employees are onboarded and trained and things like that. But I think something that's really interesting in that answer is that, maybe, the way we should think about the office is much less of as a single location and more as this bundle or collection of different functions or tasks that different spaces can be employed to fulfill.

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, I love that, in part because it really challenges what The Atlantic writer Ian Bogost calls the ideology of the office. He makes an argument that we're not going to go to this distributed model or hybrid model because the ideology of the office still holds so strong, and what he means by that is it's not the physical office per se. It's more this understanding that work gets done under supervision, that I need to be able to see you to understand that you are doing work, and that also, for leaders in particular, for managers, for C.E.O.s, people in the c-suite, that my power, my authority, comes from that ability to supervise. And I think that's a very old fashioned understanding of the way work gets done, but also a very prevalent one.

And so if we do break up the physical spaces of the office into much more of what you were describing, in terms of a series, a suite, of understanding of what the office is, then I think it will also be effective in breaking up some of that ideology of the office.

Charlie Warzel

I think that this speaks, as well, to this idea of, especially with hybrid work, but also just with fully distributed work, of friction being a good thing. One thing that we did in the book was we interviewed a number of management consultants about the way that management is very broken, and the way that so many managers — especially in industries like the technology industry, you have these workers who are really good at a certain part of their individual jobs. And they're rewarded for that by getting management responsibility. You're a fantastic programmer. Would you like to be responsible for a team of programmers?

And what we found is, a lot of times, these people were promoted into management roles reluctantly often, and without any real training as how to do their job. And in an office, that proximity enabled them to paper over

this lack of actual interpersonal management skill, and there were horrible consequences of that, everything from gender pay inequity to just great amounts of resentment between managers and rank and file employees.

And one thing that these management consultants have really showed us, when we spoke to them, is the way that remote work is forcing them to learn a number of those skills because they don't have that ease of presence. They don't have that immediate authority of being nearby, and those who are succeeding as they're relearning how to do their jobs as managers are learning how to communicate to their employees, but also, as Anne said, trust and build this trust.

And one way that trust works is by modeling vulnerability. If you, as a manager, show that you are vulnerable, that you are imperfect, that you are struggling with trying to find this balance of work in your life amid a pandemic and all the uncertainty of 2022, your co-workers see that, and they're inclined to model it back to you, that vulnerability. It's building a different way to work. That seems, to me, like just a massive opportunity, and a lot of that comes from that removal of this authoritative centralized location of the office.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Rogé Karma

I want to use this as a place to pivot, to have a broader conversation about remote work. I think the central thesis of the book is that remote work, for all of its potential, could very easily just end up reproducing and even deepening the toxic dynamics of the office. It has all of this potential, like you said, to rethink how we think about management, about productivity, about communication.

But in reality, it also has the possibility, especially if we port the model of the office onto it, it has the possibility of making work worse. And so I want to ground this in a quote. You write, quote, “this is the dark truth of remote work as we know it now. It promises to liberate workers from the chains of the office, but in practice, it capitalizes on the total collapse of work life balance,” end quote. Can you just unpack that for me?

Charlie Warzel

Yeah, some of this is rooted in my own personal experience and in both of our personal experiences, but kind of hit hardest for me. In 2017, we moved from New York City to Montana and were doing our jobs remotely. And this is obviously before the pandemic, when there were no restrictions on where I could work, and I could go to a coffee shop without any fears of exposure or anything like that.

And what happened was, I immediately was so insecure, being removed from the office, about my ability to produce and how I would be perceived as a worker, and so worried about protecting this privilege that I had of a flexible work, that all I did was work to protect it. My sense of work/life balance was pretty bad before, to be honest, but it was obliterated once I was a full remote worker to the point where I would roll out of bed, immediately begin to work, and throughout the day, neglect all the different responsibilities in my life as a partner in order to perform presence and also just get more done outside of an office than I would have inside it.

And it got to the point where I was sitting on my couch one night, and I had cold sweats and this deep anxiety watching Netflix because the couch was the place where I did all my work. So it was like I was relaxing inside my office. I had so totally collapsed to the barriers between my work and

my life that any relaxation, any kind of unplugging from the office actually felt bad.

And so I had to go through this honestly relatively traumatic process of trying to figure out how to reclaim some kind of balance, and that began with a real series of evaluation questions about whether my life was going as planned, whether I was the person that I wanted to be, or whether I was just this working robot. And one of the impetuses for the book was that we saw a lot of people speedrunning my experience during the pandemic.

I had this ability to take the time to work through this, and I watched a lot of people stuck inside hiding from a deadly virus trying to navigate this, and that was one of the original seeds of the book. And I think you can see this collapse happening in some of the workplace data.

Microsoft, back in the spring, released some information. They were tracking the keystrokes in their workplace productivity software internally of employees, and what they noticed is, before the pandemic, there were kind of two peaks in the workday — one before lunch, and one after lunch — and that was the peak usage stats of company software.

And what they noticed, a year or so into the pandemic, is this smaller but definitely noticeable third peak that was appearing late in the evenings around 7:00, 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, 11:00 at night, and this was this third hump of productivity. And there's two ways you can look at that.

One is that the workday is changing, that norms are changing, and that people are actually building their workdays around their lives in a potentially healthy or interesting way. But the other way to look at the data is that those two earlier peaks before and after lunch haven't changed all that much. They're still seeing the same amounts of keystrokes of,

quote, unquote, work, and we're just adding on the third one after the kids go to bed, after dinner.

And there's this idea that our workdays are actually just getting longer because we are porting that office mentality into the rest of our lives. And so I think that's the danger here, which is that we fall into this situation where I was, say, in 2017, and that because of the fact that we're running this controlled experiment in real time, to continue the metaphor, we don't have the ability to take stock of what we're doing to ourselves, and that we create this work culture that normalizes three productivity peaks in the day instead of two. I think that's a really big worry that we're going to lose sight of that.

Rogé Karma

I'm glad you mentioned the triple peak, and I think, to your point, I would feel better about the rise of the triple peak if it wasn't for another Microsoft study, which found that the average workday has expanded by 13 percent, which is about 45 minutes, since March 2020, which means that, for a lot of people, even if this triple peak comes with the promise of flexibility, it's actually, right now, the product of an expansion of work.

And so I want to dig into some of the ways that not everyone, but many of us who are working from home, are working more than ever. One of the craziest statistics I've seen so far is that the average Microsoft Teams user saw an average of an over 250 percent increase in their weekly meeting time from March 2020 to February 2022.

Now, obviously, some of that is just meetings that used to be offline happening online, but that's clearly not all of it. And if you just talk to remote and hybrid workers, they'll tell you that they're in way more

meetings now than before the pandemic, and it's pushing their work later and later and later.

And so I just want to understand why you think that's happening because it's not intuitive that's simply switching from in-person to remote would create this explosion of meetings, but it really has. So why do you think it has?

Anne Helen Petersen

I think the cause of over meeting culture is two things. The first is that, during the pandemic, especially in the early months, the way that people reacted to the anxiety of feeling like they weren't effectively demonstrating how much they were working was by putting meetings on people's calendars.

And you can actually see there's some interesting data that we got for the book where meetings would spike, actually, when there were periods of increased anxiety in the home, like when school started again. When parents were worried about the fact that, oh, my kids are Zoom schooling. I don't want my boss to think that I'm not dedicated. I'll put more meetings on other people's calendars. And I think that once those meetings got on the books and were normalized, they're still there, so that's one thing.

The other thing that I think is happening is that there is very little understanding of how to make incremental meetings, and some of this is technology. The automatic setup in many companies is to either put half an hour or an hour on someone's calendar, and many meetings require five minutes, 10 minutes, 40 minutes. And we do not have a very good apparatus for those lengths of time.

And then a corollary to this, too, is that I think there's a lot of things that don't need to be meetings that have become meetings, again, as a way to allow people an opportunity to be present with one another. So anything over six, seven people probably shoot be an email, but a lot of times, people now don't read emails because people are sending emails that should be Slacks or Team messages, and people are sending Slack or Team messages that should be phone calls.

And this is part of that larger overview that many people need to do for their companies, is looking at the types of communication they're using and understanding and underlining what sorts of communications should be used for what sorts of problems.

Rogé Karma

So one thing I worry about happening here is that companies realize that there are too many meetings, so they start relying a lot more on asynchronous communication — Slack, Teams, email. But that isn't always better. I would highly recommend people go listen to our show with Cal Newport on the way that this overreliance on these tools can, in some cases, be even more time consuming and distracting than meetings themselves.

And so I want to talk about the source of a lot of this asynchronous communication. You all have mentioned the phrase "LARPing your job" a few times here, and I think that's a really important concept for understanding the swell of communication, not only meetings but asynchronous communication, that is leading to overwork. So tell me about this idea of LARPing your job. What is it, why do we do it, and how has remote work changed it?

Charlie Warzel

Yeah, my former colleague John Herrman coined this term a while back to speak about the performance attitude of a lot of these chat applications, especially Slack. And I think anyone who is engaged in this kind of portable work and uses these tools — I think this will be instantly familiar. You have a lot going on in your life, in your day.

You're busy, and you're not really able to give as much attention to your job as you feel you should be in a given moment. And so what you do is you open up your phone, and you skim a conversation going on between a bunch of your colleagues and probably your boss in Slack, and you contribute something pretty meaningless, but nonetheless, it's a contribution, and it's visible. Your little dot is red. It means you're logged on. Therefore, you must be engaged.

But what it is, it's kind of like work ephemera, work detritus. It's not creating any kind of productivity. It's just this performance of presence. And what that's rooted in, obviously, is anxiety.

All of our jobs feel so precarious, and the stakes are so high. We need our jobs because our health care is tied to our jobs in America, and I think this anxiety persists everywhere. And the workplace chat apps are a great way for it to bubble up because it's just so easy to offer something up that makes you look like you're really engaged when you're not.

And such a big problem with that is, often, those emails, those Slack messages, they're not just sent out to nobody in particular. Oftentimes, they're making work for other people.

So your performing of your job is sometimes creating things for other people to attend to. And so I think there's this way in which LARPing your job creates this vicious cycle where we're very anxious about our status in

an organization and how precarious it is, and it just ends up making more crap for people to deal with.

Rogé Karma

I think it's important to point out, too, that this happens at the firms that consider themselves the most cutting edge and productive, and often isn't just even about worker anxiety. It's also about what the firm demands.

So my first job out of college was at McKinsey, which is a management consulting firm that literally specializes in helping other companies be more productive. And I was told pretty early on that, if I wanted to be seen as a good worker, I needed to stay up at least past midnight every night working. And I told people, but I can get my work done faster than that. Why stay up arbitrarily?

And I was literally told by one of my managers, if you want to advance at this company, you can't stop working before midnight. And if you're going to stop working before midnight, make sure to delay sending your emails to make it look like you were up past midnight. And I remember just being so mind blown, the fact that this was literally supposed to be the bastion of productivity, and yet so much of the way we were being evaluated was based on this kind of performance.

And it gets at this point that you make, Anne, which is that the root problem of this LARPing phenomenon really comes down to the way that companies have historically measured and defined the productivity of knowledge work. So I was wondering if you could just talk about that piece of it a bit.

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, this gets to this larger conversation about what good work looks like. And I think, in a lot of high powered places like McKinsey, places like financial firms, places like law firms where you're billing by the hour, there really is this understanding that excellence is time spent even if that time spent is ultimately, oftentimes, quite wasteful.

And I think this is a very American understanding, that more is always more, more time is always more, better work, that really flies in the face of so much research on what actually contributes to good work, especially good work over time, sustained good work that lasts longer than just a couple of years in your 20s when you feel like you could work forever and never sleep.

And I think really smart companies are re-examining, or have long been re-examining, what excellence looks like and have decoupled it from any understanding of how many emails sent or how many meetings attended, and are looking more closely at what is the quality of the work, how creative is it? Is someone a good mentor? Because mentorship actually takes time, but it doesn't necessarily take time in a way that is visible to others.

And that's something that I think remote work can actually really help with, is people being able to take that time between work and refresh and do things that give them a much more robust and three dimensional life that also make it possible for them to do much more excellent work. This is the case for me, I think.

I'm producing more, writing more, having more success than I ever have before. I also work fewer collective hours over the course of the week, and one of the ways I'm able to do that is that I don't have Slack anymore. I'm spending so much less time just trying to evidence that I am working to others, and then spending that time doing work or not doing work.

Rogé Karma

But I also think that there's a way in which remote work can actually make this worse, especially if you're at a company that requires you to have these kinds of communication tools. I think it's pretty clear that the way most companies were measuring people's productivity before the pandemic was time at your desk, was presenteeism. And I think it's pretty obvious that the aesthetic of working hard at your desk was never a very good measure of actual productivity.

But when you're remote, even the parts of your job that used to be visible, the kind of work you got done sitting at your desk, typing away, making a slide deck or writing a piece, suddenly, all of that work is now invisible. There's no way for your boss to just glance over and see what you're doing or see that you're working. And in the meantime, the only things that are visible to your boss, to your manager, are the emails you're sending, your participation in certain group Slack channels, the little green or red dot by your name to show whether you're online.

And so I feel like remote, if you have the right setup, it could free you from having to LARP your job. But for a lot of people, I think there's actually just way more pressure to use these channels to perform work because it becomes one of the few ways that you can actually show that you're working.

Charlie Warzel

Yeah, I mean, I think that's something to acknowledge. But when I hear you explain that, while I'm incredibly sympathetic to all of it, from the pressures that a worker feels, and that's so real, and the pressures that managers feel not being able to perform the authority of their jobs, I also just think that it's a great example, especially on the management side, of not supporting your workers.

I go back to that idea of building trust. So much of this is a trust issue on the part of managers. The version of them LARPing their job is calling the meeting or demanding more via Slack or even just creating that kind of anxiety so that their employees are constantly checking in and giving them something to do.

And I just think that mentality is going to have to change if true flexible hybrid work is to succeed because we can't manage the way that we did before. We can't demand the same things, and we have to start to create systems of work where employees feel comfortable not always performing and feel like their job isn't constantly in a state of precarity.

Rogé Karma

And I just want to step back for a moment because I think, also, what we're saying here is a pretty radical claim, even if I believe it's a largely true one. Basically, that in the name of productivity, in the name of efficiency, our workplaces, our managers, are pushing us into ways of working that actually rob us of our productivity, that we've created this entire culture that builds on itself around performing productivity instead of actually being productive to the point where I a lots of people who work that third peak, that night shift, simply because it's the only time of day where they feel like they can get some peace and quiet from the constant barrage of communication that this LARPing dynamic requires.

But that really raises the question of how we can begin to address some of these dynamics, which I think you started to get at, Charlie. And I think you all have a really helpful framework for this in the book. So, Anne, would you mind just talking about the distinction between boundaries and guardrails?

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, so I came up with the concept of boundaries versus guardrails when I was trying to describe how we come up with something new to protect against the runaway train of working all the time that isn't that phrase, boundaries, which has become so worn out as to effectively be meaningless. When someone says that they have boundaries at work, what they are often articulating is something that they've put up around themselves that they want to push past continuously to show just how dedicated they are to work.

You could be like, oh, well, I need to take care of my kid, but I guess I can stay a little bit later. Someone else can help with that. Or I try to not work on the weekends, but look, here I am working on the weekends. I'm evidencing what a good worker I am.

And guardrails, instead of being something that is the responsibility of the individual and also the responsibility of the individual to maintain, a guardrail is collective and structural, and it applies to people all the way at the top echelons of an organization all the way down to the bottom.

And I use that metaphor of a guardrail instead of a boundary because guardrails, if you think about them on a highway pass, they are something that is put in place by the government to protect not just individuals, not just the people who have to travel that place every single day, they're there to protect everyone. It doesn't matter who you are.

And an example of a guardrail would be something like, at this company, we do not work when we are on PTO. This might sound like a policy that most companies have, but in practice many, many companies, especially companies that are salaried knowledge work companies without union protections, they have practices of absolutely checking email and responding to email and taking a couple of hours to work while they're on PTO, while they're sick, anything like that. And so a guardrail would be

something that is not just in the company handbook, but it is a communicated understanding between manager and managee, and it is practiced by everyone in the company.

Charlie Warzel

And I think an important part of that, too, is that there's consequences involved. So the person who works during their PTO actually gets called in when they come back by their manager and is issued a formal warning. You are actually working against the organization here. You are going against our values and our guidelines. You're creating more work for other people in this sense, and there's actual disciplinary procedures or something.

And that may sound ridiculous to some people listening, but that's how you create these norms. You get rid of something negative in the workplace by implementing consequences for it, but with work, what we have is, instead, this destruction of work/life balance is implicitly rewarded.

There's this, oh, you really shouldn't have done that, but thanks, it was really helpful. I'm really glad you did get back to us. And what that does is just, as Anne was saying, it just reinforces that, and it creates that culture where there's this unwritten or unspoken expectation of constant on-demand work.

Rogé Karma

So I have to say, I love this boundaries/guardrails framework. I think shifting this more to the responsibility of the collective of the company is really important, but I'm glad you brought up enforcement, Charlie, because that's where I've really seen these kinds of guardrails often fail. And I think part of the reason that happens is the way that working hours

themselves have become an elite status signal in our society, in our culture.

I think people forget that, for a lot of the history of civilization, idleness was a key marker of elite status. The rich show that they were better than you by refusing to do anything that even looked like work. And so you have the situation where, up until 60 or 70 years ago, you can tell how rich someone was by how little they worked.

And today, that relationship has just been completely reversed. Elites work much more than they used to. In terms of sheer hours, they work more on average than middle class, and there's sprung up this whole status hierarchy built around work.

I remember, when I was in college, the consultants and the investment bankers would argue with each other about who was working longer hours, who was pulling more all nighters, almost as a badge of honor, and that seems true at a societal level as well. Being busy, working long hours, has almost become seen as a signifier of your eliteness, of your self-worth.

And so I'm wondering how you think about that layer of it because I think that culture layer of the extent to which status is bound up with overwork and working long hours is at the heart of why it's so hard to enforce these guardrails or boundaries because we've all really internalized some of the signaling.

Anne Helen Petersen

I mean, this is the blessing and the curse of the salaried job. Because companies are not paying you by the hour, you open yourself up to expectations of working far beyond whatever the unspoken or spoken norms are for how many hours you should be working in a week. And so I think there are two different types of this fetishization of overwork.

Some of it is a real martyr syndrome, where it's I care about this so much that I will put in every single hour that I possibly can to show everyone else in the world how dedicated I am, and that's a burnout trap right there. And you see this in nonprofits, but then also in other care professions, things like health care and education, social work.

And then you have the status, the fetishization of overwork, which as you point out, is really endemic to things like finance and consulting and other places where it becomes this badge of honor, how little time you have for anything else in your life, and that includes care work. That includes the cultivation of friendship. That includes taking care of yourself in any meaningful way, and I mean that in terms of sleep and nutrition and being outside, anything like that.

And so how do we let go of that? I found, even amongst my friends who are ostensibly totally on board with the entire project of, yes, we all need to work less, when they talk about a friend or a sibling who lives in Germany and only works 37 hours a week, there's this note of derision. Like, must be nice, instead of, oh, wow, isn't that great that they have found a manageable work/life balance that also provides a living wage.

And so I think that there's something about a lot of our brains that is broken, and part of the problem is capitalism, and part of the problem is precarity, that the way that we grapple with the anxiety of feeling like the bottom could drop out at any moment is by working all the time. Part of the solution is guardrails at an organization, but a lot of companies are never going to do that. They thrive on burning people out.

A company like McKinsey, part of their ethos is let's burn people out to see who rises to the top over the course of their 20s, and the only way to institute healthy guardrails is unionization. And I don't think that you're necessarily going to see that at a place like McKinsey, but there are a lot of

other places that are using unions as a way to create guardrails because leadership refuses to create them themselves.

Rogé Karma

So we've been talking a lot about how remote work can change work, but I also want to talk about something you get at towards the end of the book, which is how it can change society more broadly. And I want to start with one of the almost utopian possibilities you raise, which is that a shift to a better version of remote work wouldn't just be better for us as individuals, that it can actually help revitalize our communities as well. We started getting into that earlier, but I was wondering if you could just talk through that idea for me.

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, so this connects, I think, with some of what we've discussed before in terms of when your life stops rotating entirely around work, it opens it up to rotate around a lot of other things, and not just your immediate family either. So one thing that Charlie and I have been able to do with our flexible work schedules is we commit to helping provide care for our friends and their kids.

This coming school year, every Tuesday and Thursday, they're going to come over to our house from, I think, 3:00 to 4:30, and that's a thing that you usually rely on a grandparent for or someone else that has kids. But we have the ability to arrange our schedules so that we can create that pocket of time twice a week to hang out with a 5 and 8-year-old.

And it also makes it so that I can insert my hobby, which is gardening, into different points in my day instead of always feeling anxious, like oh, my gosh, I have to create a whole hour or five hours or carve out these times through the week that actually make the hobby seem so overdetermined

that I don't end up doing it at all. I can just sprinkle it throughout the week, and I think a lot of people really are desperate for that sort of thing. And it also makes it possible for me to sign up for things that I otherwise wouldn't be able to.

A lot of volunteer organizations ask for a steady commitment of maybe an hour a week, an hour every other week, two hours a week, and that's the sort of thing that, when you can control the hours that you are working, you can block off two hours every Thursday that you work at the food bank. And yet if your employer trusts you, that you will be doing the work no matter what, that's a real incredible way that you can be part of a community while also balancing your work responsibilities at the same time.

Rogé Karma

I have to say, I love those examples, and I really hope that you're right about this. But I'm also worried because what I've often seen happen is the opposite. As we were talking about before, one of the major social trends of the past 70 years is that we've become far less rooted, far less bound to particular places.

And I think, for a lot of people, the office was really the last thing, the last institution, binding them to a given place. So then when you could work from home, there's really not a lot left to tether you to a given community, especially if you've been living in this world where work was the center of life. I mean, just look at what's happening to cities right now.

Over the past few years, there's been this real exodus from a bunch of major cities that has a lot of policymakers worried, really worried, about the future of those places, and people are just traveling a lot more now. If your office is remote Friday and Monday, then the logic is why not just

work from another city or country or cabin in the woods on those days and then be able to spend your weekend in a fun new exciting place?

And don't get me wrong, I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with those choices on an individual level. I know lots of people doing those things, lots of people leaving cities, lots of people traveling on the weekends more, and they seem really happy with those choices.

But they certainly aren't more engaged in their communities, and that really worries me when I think about the future of cities, the future of place, the future of community life, that we've sort of given people more time by allowing them to work flexibly, but we've also ripped away this institution that, for a lot of them, was the reason they were in this place at all. And so I'm just wondering how you think about that tension.

Charlie Warzel

I think we're so early to it all. I mean, if we're looking at this experiment, we're still inside a very active pandemic that we're constantly failing to manage. So all of the flexibility is still inside that set of circumstances, and it's treacherous to navigate.

But I just think it's going to be so complicated and it's all going to happen over time in ways that are expected and unexpected for the people who opt to be really detached from a sense of place and use that flexibility to roam. I think you're also seeing people who are moving back home to be closer to family, to be caregivers.

I think that there is a sense that some of this can sound utopian, but I also think there's a sense in which it actually makes sense and creates this interesting virtuous cycle, where the less you're reliant on work to provide you that sense of belonging and meaning and community, the more you have time to participate in a community, the more you

participate in a community of any kind. And again, some of these can be digital communities. It doesn't have to necessarily be you are attending the City Council meeting, but that's wonderful.

And I think the more you rely on those communities, the more you realize that you don't need work to fill that void, and I don't think it's a linear process. I don't think it's an easy process at all, and I think it's really important to note that this is a seismic change in our lives. I mean, for a lot of, quote, unquote, knowledge workers, everything about the way that we did our jobs changed for a significant period of time.

And to unwind those changes and to actually see the ways that they splinter off in positive and negative ways, I think, is going to take a while. We're so interested in proclaiming this experiment as a success or a failure right now, but I think we're just starting to figure out and to tease out some of these questions about what we need to demand from work and our communities and what we really want our lives to look like going forward.

Rogé Karma

I think that's a really nice place to start coming to an end here. Before we get to our final question I just want to end where you end the book, which is your letter to workers, and here's my particular question for you. We can set better office policies. We can create guardrails. We can even pass public policy that makes work less central.

But at the end of the day, for a lot of us, for me, for I think a lot of people listening, we really have to grapple with that internalized workist within us. And so I'm just wondering, because I really appreciate your approach to this at the end of the book, like what advice do you have for people listening, for working with that part of yourself?

Anne Helen Petersen

What I would say is that, I think, sometimes, people are really hard on themselves for their inability to let go of that inner workist or inner Protestant capitalist work ethic that tells them that the solution to problems, or the way that you work through that larger anxiety of precarity, is by working all the time, is that it takes a long time to unlearn, and that I am continually in the process of unlearning it and watching out for it.

This has been a podcast that's about the future of the office, but it's no accident that this book followed on the coattails of my work on burnout and thinking about how to recover and return from burnout. And so much of it is just really spending some time thinking about, how did we get this way, how did I get this way, and how do I do that long work of unlearning that my value, my sole value as a human, is my capacity to work all the time? But I think Charlie probably has some insight into this, too.

Charlie Warzel

As far as advice, I think what I've had success doing in my life is trying to do a personal inventory. I mentioned earlier that there was something traumatic about it, about going through that process of self-evaluation, and what was traumatic about it was that, fundamentally, I wasn't the person that I wanted to be. I was a really great employee and really productive, and by all the metrics of my workplace or my career, I was excelling. I didn't really have any hobbies.

There came a point in that inventory where I legitimately didn't know what it was that I liked. I just liked the fact that I was good at performing my job. That was a really difficult experience psychologically, and honestly, it's one that has coincided personally with therapy.

And so I think one way to approach this, for anyone who's trying to do some inventories in their own life, would be to think of it through that lens of something like therapy or exercise. This is not a situation — work/life balance, or whatever you want to call it, is not something that you just immediately — just like your therapist will never stop you midsentence and say, well, I think you're fixed, see you later, or you'll never finish a workout and then say, well, I never have to exercise again, I'm fit, it's an ongoing process.

And it's something that you're going to succeed at some days and fail at on a multitude of days. This is part of the messy part of being human, and it requires constant vigilance and constant inventory and a constant reassessment of is the way that I'm living my life in line with what I want out of it? And that's often really difficult work. But I think for everyone, it's beneficial to take that time and really take that stock.

Rogé Karma

Well, I really appreciate you both taking the time to join me for the show, so I want to end where we always end the show, by asking you each to give a couple of book recommendations, books that have influenced you that you'd recommend to the audience.

Charlie Warzel

I am going to choose two books that were really influential in the research process of this book, so they're generally oriented around work. The first is "In the Age of the Smart Machine" by Shoshana Zuboff, who is also the author of the probably better known "Age of Surveillance Capitalism." "The Age of the Smart Machine" is really about work and the modernization and technological advances of it.

It was written in the '80s, so it doesn't really concern the internet so much, but it does revolve around the early implementation of computers and this idea of the anxiety that workers felt, being alienated from the physical nature of their jobs with technology. And I think you can read that now, and even though it's an analog description of what's now fully digitized, all of the lessons are there, and it's an extremely instructive historical perspective on labor and technology and the conflicts therein.

The second book is "The Myth of the Paperless Office" by Abigail J Sellen. It's about what, on the surface, should be a really boring topic, which is paperless offices, but it has this wonderful lesson at the heart of it, which is that the companies that succeeded in a transition to a paperless office were the ones that weren't actually trying to go paperless.

They're actually the companies that were trying to do something else, were trying to be more efficient or trying to find new ways to work and actually did what all the other companies, who were trying to go paperless, couldn't do. And so it's a wonderful examination of the ways that really focused an intentional change and slow change to get the results that others can only dream of.

Rogé Karma

Awesome. And, Anne?

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, the first set I would recommend is a book I returned to again and again, and it's called "Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street" by Karen Ho. And it's an ethnography of people who work on Wall Street, mostly in the 2000s, and the way that Ho is able to elucidate some of that stuff that often goes unspoken about the way that Wall Street and finance banks understand what excellence looks —

Rogé Karma

Applies to a lot of consultants, too, I'll tell you.

Anne Helen Petersen

Yes, 100 percent. It is a fantastic and incredibly readable book, and I think that anyone who hates a culture of overwork and wants to understand exactly what they want to reject will find this really illuminating. And then the other book is more recent. It's Angela Garbes's "Essential Labor," and her argument is, essentially, that taking care of children is the work of a society. This is straightforward, but I think we've forgotten it. We've lost sight of it, and that's both in terms of structural changes, but also just what we are doing as individuals in a community to take care of children and also of one another. And it is an incredibly readable book as well, and I think that it has set a fire in a lot of different people that I know who have read it recently. So I strongly recommend.

Rogé Karma

And your book is "Out of Office: The Big Problem and Bigger Promise of Working from Home." Charlie Warzel, Anne Helen Petersen, thank you so much for joining me.

Anne Helen Petersen

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Charlie Warzel

Thanks for having us.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Rogé Karma

Before we go I just wanted to flag a few other episodes and resources that folks who enjoy this conversation might find useful. If you're interested in a deeper conversation about our relationship to our jobs, you can check out my conversation from last year with Sarah Jaffe on the case against loving your job.

If you're interested in the dynamics around LARPing your job and the problems of Slack and Teams, you should check out Ezra's conversation with Cal Newport from last year on what he calls the hyperactive hive mind. And lastly, we weren't able to get into some of the broader social impacts that remote work is having on cities and the economy more broadly, but I'm going to link some great pieces by the economist Adam Ozimek and the writer Matt Yglesias in the description. They go into more detail on those issues.

"The Ezra Klein Show" is produced by Annie Galvin and yours truly. Fact checking by Michelle Harris, Mary Mark Locker and Kate Sinclair. Original music by Isaac Jones. Mixing by Sonia Herrero and Isaac Jones. Audience strategy by Shannon Basta.

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