

LSE IQ podcast: Has COVID killed the office?

What does the post-pandemic future hold for office workers? Will we drift back to old ways of working, or continue with hybrid/remote working? What do the experts advise on how best to adapt? Joanna Bale talks to LSE's Connson Locke, Grace Lordan and Carsten Sorensen, as well as Hailley Griffis, a social media management company executive, who believes that offices will soon become extinct. The episode explores new books by Professor Locke ([Making Your Voice Heard](#)) and Dr Lordan ([Think Big](#)) which both draw on the latest research in social and behavioural psychology. It also discusses Dr Sorensen's research-based ideas in his 2020 blog post, [Will remote working digital infrastructures become the norm?](#)

JB: *Welcome to the LSE iQ podcast where we ask social scientists and other experts to answer one intelligent question. I'm Joanna Bale from the iQ team. We work with academics to tell you about their latest research and ideas. This month we are asking, "Has Covid killed the office?"*

We're going to hear from one academic who says those who work remotely tend to work much harder; another who says that remote working can amplify our negative thought processes; and a third who reveals her vision for the fourth industrial revolution.

But first, I spoke to Hailley Griffis, head of public relations at Buffer, a leading social media management company. Her 84 colleagues are based in 15 countries around the world and work remotely, only meeting in person once or twice a year.

Their way of working was established well before Covid forced many of us to desert our offices and work from home, but could it be the future for many more of us?

HG (5.10-5.20): In normal times when it is safe and easy for everyone to be able to meet together, ideally you will see your immediate team twice a year...

(5.27-5.36) So, for me, I would see the marketing team once a year, and then I would see the whole company, including the marketing team, another time of the year. So ideally twice a year you'd see each other in person.

JB: *Hailley was talking to me over Zoom from her home in Charlottesville, Virginia. I asked her to explain more about how she connects with colleagues she rarely meets in person.*

HG: (6.45-7.32) So, we generally have a full week together. And, at first, we're really focused on meeting each other, generally a lot of new faces, meeting someone for the first time, discovering how tall people are. That's always a fun adventure that we all go on. You don't really know when you're sitting in Zoom staring at each other on a screen.

But then we'll do a lot of work as a company. We'll do a lot of sessions as a company where we're focused on the future of the company and really making the most of our time in person to brainstorm as well. I think that's one of the activities that in person is more powerful. So really working on brainstorming, collaborating, planning, and then also just taking the opportunity to meet each other, put faces to real whole bodies, to humans who you are seeing on the other side of a screen most of the time, and really build those relationships and those bonds across team and within the teams.

JB: *Hailley's experience of working almost exclusively from home may have already been a trend in the tech industry, but the pandemic has inspired other companies and organisations to rethink traditional working practices – although not all.*

Jack Dorsey, Twitter's former CEO, announced in 2020 that employees can "work from home forever", while Goldman Sachs CEO, David Solomon, called remote work an "aberration"

Others are taking the middle ground and opting for hybrid working where employees spend part of their week in the office and the rest at home.

But how does it work when your immediate team colleagues are scattered across the globe and you want to get together in person? Here's Hailley again.

HG: (7.47-8.06) It has evolved over time. When we were a smaller team, we used to meet up at...a series of Airbnbs. But we're much larger now. We're around closer to 90 people. And then folks also bring their significant others and their kids, which is really fun. So, for the last few years, we have met up at hotels ...

JB & HG (8.26-8.56): So, your partners and your children, do they have a bit of a holiday, then, while you're all working?

...Yeah. It's a lot of fun for them to get to travel. And I know some people have said they never would have gone to these places with their children if it weren't for having these retreats. Singapore was one such location, right, for a lot of teammates, that hadn't been on their radar to go there, which, I mean, it absolutely should be now that I know how fantastic it is. It should be on everyone's radar. It's a lovely place to visit.

JB: *As someone who has never spent five days a week working 9 to 5 in an office, but who also married a man I met in one, I am fascinated by what the future might hold for office workers. I wanted to find out what LSE experts thought was the ideal scenario for most people.*

Carsten Sorensen: (1.34-1.54) So, it's absolutely obvious to me that very few people can work entirely from home, because we will go more mentally ill than most of us are already. Whereas sitting like ... office drones day in, day out, and just waiting until the bus goes home, is really a bad idea as well.

JB: *Carsten Sorensen is Associate Professor of Information Systems and Innovation in LSE's Department of Management. I asked him why he thought so many companies were now moving towards a more hybrid way of working.*

CS: (3.07-4.30) The minute Martin Cooper invented the mobile phone, we already began this slippery slide ... So, we are all to some extent able to do some sort of, even mental work, making notes, when we are not in the office.

And, of course, the blight of email, which I have now removed from all mobile devices, I have no email address that has to do with my work, exactly to make sure that I force myself to have that boundary. So, I would argue that everybody is, to some extent, having some element of virtual working. Unless of course, if we do what I would classify as less important work that turned out, during the pandemic, to be essential work, namely street sweeping and helping people in hospitals, and driving the bus and other such work.

Those of us who do information work, we really need to carefully think about that hybrid. In particular because for old people like me, I know a lot of people at LSE, I've been here enough, so I can sit home for a couple of years. Whereas young people we have just hired, they don't know anybody, they are lost. And so, let alone the mental impact, but also just the networking of being able to know how things work, that is not easily communicated on Zoom calls.

JB & CS (5.28-5.34) At what point did you remove your emails from your phone?

CS: Oh, that's a long time ago. I think that's more than two years ago....

CS: (5.43-6.34) The main reason is I'm a workaholic. And places like the LSE may be world leading, but it also, I think, tends to attract people who like working more than anything else. So, this was just a way of me dealing with my own issues of, it's never enough. You are never good enough. There's always somebody who's better than you, younger, more energetic. So, if you don't get yourself in order, you will die under the pressure.

And this is actually one of the key problems. The more we go virtual, the harder people work. When you work from home, you work harder. Because you are not sure whether people think you're not working harder, so the slippery slope. And you don't have the forced breaks, you don't have any fire alarms that force you to go to the street corner and wait, you don't have coffee breaks with people. You can just keep working through, even if you do the occasional wash in between.

JB & CS: (6.58-7.49) And do you know of other people who've done that. Who've taken their work emails off their phones and their laptops?

CS: But this is a whole global trend. I even bought this Swiss phone called Punkt, which is a dumb phone that doesn't have anything on. It can be just a phone and it could then be a 4G dongle if you want your laptop to go online. So, the whole point is it's a long trend, the idea, people in Scandinavia going out for dinner, putting their phones with the screen down. And the first one who looks will have to pay for the dinner, all of these things, it is simply because we are now beginning to understand the consequences of all of this, that it is simply not good to constantly online. And this is what we've been, during COVID. The whole idea is exactly we've been in our jim jams, and just permanently online. That's not good for anybody.

JB: *So Carsten believes that when we work remotely, we tend to work much harder and never switch off, which is not good for our mental health. But some of us have found that it makes for a better work life balance. In recent years, I've found it essential when dealing with the demands of being a parent – an experience I share with Hailley Griffis, Head of Public Relations at Buffer, who we heard from at the start.*

HG: (9.52-10.40) I would not be able to do what I'm doing right now, having a new baby at home, if I had to go into an office. I'm so fortunate right now that I'm able to spend so much time with her during the day and at lunch and to take breaks and be able to see her. And it would absolutely be completely different for me if I weren't at home with her. I think that would be such a different experience. And it's just...so much better for me.

...For parents in general, we have seen that a lot. We have seen people who say, "It's so nice to be able to drive my kids to school and be there, pick them up after school."

JB: *Caring responsibilities aside, I can see that for many people, particularly those starting out in their careers, working entirely remotely is particularly challenging.*

Connson Locke is a Professor in the Department of Management. Her book, Making Your Voice Heard, looks at how we influence others and why we are prone to miscommunication and biases.

Connson Locke: (7.59-8.40) If we're all isolated, and only communicating by email or text, it becomes a lot easier to misunderstand each other or to have these biases where, or to misread the tone of something. And then suddenly the culture starts falling apart. Where perhaps before you were quite a cohesive team because you would bump into each other at the coffee machine. Now you don't see each other at all. And someone misreads an email, and suddenly the relationship has fallen apart. So, I think it becomes much more important to take care of ourselves internally, and also to reach out to people, to take the extra time to reach out to people and make those connections.

CL: (6.16-6.23) So, in my new book, there are three sections. There's the Face You Show the World, Your Inner Power, and The Social Context...

CL: (6.56-7.48) The Inner Power, is when I talk about how do you manage yourself internally. Your resilience, your self-confidence, the voice inside your head that sometimes undermines you, imposter syndrome. And when you're working from home, when you're isolated, that voice becomes louder. And I think it becomes much easier, to sort of focus too much on what we've done wrong or to send an email, and suddenly think, oh wait, maybe I shouldn't have sent it. Or maybe I should have phrased it differently. Or maybe they're angry at me.

Whereas when you're in the office, maybe the person is just down the hall, and you can go chat with them, and you don't have all of those negative thoughts circulating. So I think what becomes much more important, is focusing on building that internal resilience and confidence.

JB & CL: (8.43-9.56) So what do you think the future holds, in terms of how working will change over the next 10 years and beyond? And what do you think those key skills are that people will need?

... I think the future is going to hold a lot of change, a lot of upheaval, nothing that we can predict. And therefore, I really think the main skill that we need, is that inner power, is that resilience. And really thinking about how do we manage negative emotions? How do we manage our own mental, and emotional health? And learning to take care of ourselves. I mean, this is one thing I've found as a mother of teenagers, as a team member, as a programme director at LSE.

All of these roles require me to kind of be the strong one and be the one who's going to be able to help support other people when they're failing or maybe to reach out and see that, oh, this person really needs a bit of time off. Ok. Maybe I can take on a little bit more and help cover for them.

JB: *Connson then talked candidly about how she has coped with the extra demands of working through the pandemic while juggling work and parental responsibilities.*

CL (9.57-10.49): I haven't actually had a holiday, but I'm ok with that because I have all these other ways that I'm taking care of myself. I see a therapist once a month, and it's just someone that I can talk to. There's nothing in particular that I need therapy for. It's really nice to have an hour a month, where it's just about me. And I can vent and I can say whatever I like, and I know there are no consequences. And she can kind of bounce it back at me and kind of make me understand if I just needed to vent or maybe she'll say, "You know what? Maybe you should talk to that person about that." It's just nice to have that objective view from someone that I trust.

The other thing that I do is ... There's a book called *The Artist's Way*, and I recently pulled it out again.

JB: *Connson is referring to a 1992 book called *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path To Higher Creativity* by Julia Cameron. It teaches techniques and exercises to help people harness their creative talents and skills.*

CL: (10.51-12.07) It's a book that I've referred to quite regularly in the past 20 years. But I was talking to my therapist about how I was kind of losing it a couple of weeks ago....And this was also not just about work. This was about all the news, all the horrible news that's happening in the world. The dictators, just the really upsetting news.

And she said, "I think you need an artist date." And that comes from that book. And the artist date is when you take yourself, it's like two hours a week. You go and you do something just for fun ... So I went to an art shop and I thought I'd buy some art supplies. But actually the art shop was a little bit disappointing. And then I passed a little cafe on the way home, and they had these beautiful ice creams out front.

And so I sat in the cafe by myself, and had a big bowl of four different flavours of ice cream. And I had a lovely time. It was just so indulgent, and luxurious and I felt wonderful afterwards. And this is what I mean is, the future is not going to get any better. So we have to get better at taking care of ourselves.

JB: *You are listening to the LSEiQ podcast. This month we are asking, Has Covid killed the Office?*

Grace Lordan: (13.40-13.56) It's weird because my life didn't change so much because of COVID, only that I wasn't able to come in the two days a week. So, I've always been a hybrid worker and I've always needed to be somebody who would have focus time at home that was uninterrupted. If I didn't have that I would be a terrible employee for the LSE.

JB: *Grace Lordan is Associate Professor in Behavioural Science at LSE and sits on the UK government's Skills and Productivity Board.*

GL & JB: (13.57-14.18) So, I missed coming in those two days. But if I could actually hovercraft in here, and hopefully that's what the fourth industrial revolution will bring for me. If I could hovercraft in here, my life would be so much better.

.. Yeah, I can just see you going along the Thames on a little hovercraft!

GL: (8.46-9.59) People who have predictions for the fourth industrial revolution will say, we won't see drivers anymore, we'll be sitting in driverless taxis. There won't be cashiers at the checkouts anymore, that will all be codified. You won't necessarily have to fiddle around with the self-checkout that we're doing now, there will be advances in that....So it's one step further than we actually were in the past. And it will disrupt the world that we're working in.

And I think in some ways, COVID has accelerated the pace of the fourth industrial revolution because a lot of people who needed to show up who relied on others, have now substituted to relying on people who are a bit further away. So we've kind of seen outsourcing. But within the UK, for our colleagues who've chosen to move to Cornwall and other nice places and also more internationally, but also relying on machines much more as compared to the past.

So when I talk about the fourth industrial revolution, I'm really talking about that disruption. And if you're an individual, that really means thinking about what are the tasks that you want to be doing in the future, asking yourself, are they future-proof, and then really not getting hooked on a job label because I think we're going to see many new jobs coming on stream, thankfully. And it would be wonderful if people were ready to take on those posts.

JB: *Grace is Founding Director of The Inclusion Initiative at LSE and is an expert in unconscious bias and discrimination at work. Her latest book, Think Big, draws on behavioural science research to advise how best to achieve long-term career goals. She echoed Connson Locke by emphasising resilience and other soft skills.*

GL (10.36- 11.13) : I think what's going to be new for the fourth industrial revolution is the reliance on soft skills.

So when we think about knowledge, it's very easy for me to Google something and acquire knowledge now. But after the fourth industrial revolution, the gains would go to workers who can actually change that knowledge, mould it into a different way, work with people in a collaborative way. So if you think about kind of what should you hone alongside the traditional cognitive skills, creativity, innovation, resilience, because you need to be resilient to kind of moving around a bit more perhaps than you did in the past, adaptability and also curiosity, which I think is an absolutely wonderful thing.

JB: *Finally, I wanted to know what my interviewees thought about the long-term future of office working. Has Covid killed it off?*

Here's Carsten Sorensen

CL (13.57-15.57) So, I think one of the interesting things here is this is sort of a natural experiment in how we now think about life. Because you could argue all the people who every single day are like little chickens in a tube, in and out for hours every day. You know, this is a chance for them, 'I spent a year at home. How many years have I got left? How many years do I want to spend in the tube?' And so I think it has led to a lot of people reconsidering their life choices. And because we haven't had this kind of experiment for quite a while, the obvious thing is really that we have been boiling the frog.

People have accepted worse and worse conditions. And personally, if I had to every day be on the tube, I would quit my job. I mean, categorically. And we have now seen how people suddenly have realised how nice it is to have a small garden, and they are moving out of the centre of London. And so I think people can use this as an opportunity of course, to reflect on, 'do I want to be in the office every day?' And of course, some people don't have choices and the ones who do have choices, well then the employers will have to think about how you can coordinate things better. But there might be new, flexible ways of doing it. I co-authored a report on flexible working spaces, that tried to look into how to have creativity in these shared office spaces, like WeWork and others.

And I think we need to find...new types of offices that are suitable for purpose. But I think the office is still going to be there. They're still going to be deeply insecure managers who want to force people to sit in front of them so they can see what they're doing, although they're on the computer all the time. But I also think there will be a lot of hard discussions, tough discussions, on where do I really need to work and be? And when I need to be there, then I will come.

Connson Locke

CL (20.57-22.14) ...The office exists for more than just getting work done. There's a social element too...We talk about online education. Oh, well, all these online courses. Does that mean you won't have physical universities anymore? No, because just like the office, the physical university exists for a reason. And you will always have people who crave that social interaction, and who want to be around other people.

And when I look at our students, I can see that when I'm sitting in the room with them, there's a different feeling. The educational content is no different. They can learn just as well online as in- person. But the social aspect of it is completely different. The relationships that you form from sitting next to someone. In fact, today when we were having some trouble with the technology, one student leaned over to another student who was having trouble logging in, and just help them log in. You're not going to get that online. So it's those little things. One colleague helping another. You can't get that if you're all working from home.

Grace Lordan

GL (17.06-17.18): ...I think COVID will make the office less regular. So I think pension funds that have huge amounts of monies in buildings are probably in trouble, but I don't think it's killed the office. I think the office spaces will get different on the whole...

(17.32-17.51) I think there's space to think about our newer atypical employees in ways that we didn't necessarily before. There's ways to think about how people just work differently. Some people need to be in a crowd, others don't. And within, I think, the traditional office structure, we can do some very easily reconstruction and take into account all those tastes and preferences...

(03.39-03.47) If we could encourage firms to experiment with an open mind and really allow their preferences take the back seat, I think we could end up with more productive workforces.

JB: *So Carsten, Connson and Grace think offices will continue to exist but will adapt to accommodate a more hybrid way of working.*

But Hailley Griffis, the social media management company executive who only meets her colleagues once or twice a year, disagrees.

HG (23.06-23.36): Hybrid is an interesting one. We'll see how that plays out over the next couple of years. There are several challenges that can come up with hybrid workforce. For example, if you have leadership who's working from the office, but some employees aren't, then there could be preferential treatment for employees who are in the office versus remote workers, and that creates a really, really difficult culture for remote workers to be successful in. That can be really challenging. So I'm not going to say that hybrid is impossible to do right, but hybrid takes even more intentionality.

(21.54-22.30) I think regardless of whether or not organisations want to start working remotely, I think that they're going to have to, because individuals, employees want to work remotely. We've seen that time and time again. We see that in our State of Remote Work Report every year. People want to keep working remotely for the rest of their careers. They have good experiences working remotely, despite there being an ongoing pandemic, we've seen those numbers. And individuals have the power. Especially in the tech industry where we work, it's a very competitive marketplace. So if you're looking for talent and that talent wants to work remotely and you're not giving them that, you might be losing out on talent.

(22.47-23.05)...So I do believe remote work is the future, both from the perspective of from an organisational level, when it's done right it can be a huge superpower, it can be fantastic for the organisation, and then because we're seeing employees, we're seeing individuals wanting to do that work and wanting to do that work remotely.