

In Praise of the Office with Peter Cappelli and Ranya Nehmeh (S8:E8) - Transcript

🕒 Read 10 minutes

PODCAST

00:00

00:00

🔊 Listen to: In Praise of the Office with Peter Cappelli and Ranya Nehmeh (S8:E8) - Transcript

[How to Subscribe](#)

Chris Congdon: Peter and Ranya welcome to work Better.

Ranya Nehmeh : It's a pleasure to be here. Thanks.

Peter Cappelli : Thank you for having us.

Chris Congdon: Well, uh, we're really glad to have you because I think we're gonna talk about something that is on everybody's mind, right now. And you know, really we're still pretty early in 2026 when we're recording this, and I remember six years ago, you know, starting to watch the pandemic, spread across the world and it really launched us into this unexpected and mass experiment in remote work. But it feels like the pendulum has kind of swung back in favor of in-person work. And so I'm really interested in what made you feel like this was the time to write this book.

Ranya Nehmeh : Sure I can, I can kick this off. So yes thanks so much Chris. Well what we see right now is that the debate actually about hybrid work is really far from over because there's a lot of confusion actually around this topic. Cause as you said, a lot of leaders are really pushing people to come back into the office.

There's so many return to office mandates but we still have not figured out properly how to get hybrid right. And this is really also what kind of, you know, triggered us regarding our book because. The issue is not, you know, whether the office is good or bad. The real issue is that a lot of organizations just have not figured out yet how hybrid should work in a way that really supports performance, development and culture, and many more aspects as well.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, so success isn't just about attendance, like my body is physically in the office, but it's about getting hybrid work, right? Right.

Ranya Nehmeh : Exactly.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. That's great. Your book is called In Praise of the Office, the Limits of hybrid and Remote Work. So as somebody who, like I personally love the office, I'm like, I love that title. I'm actually somebody that you didn't have to drag me back into the office, after we are allowed to come back in. Like, I liked coming back in and, you know, seeing people and working together with them. But I know that I'm not the, you know, there are other people who think differently about that.

So I'd love to hear more about your research, what is the experience that so many organizations could benefit from if they're getting this work right in terms of using the office?

Peter Cappelli : Well, you know, I think part of the background to this is that it isn't the case that companies set out to operate the way they're operating now.

They had remote work because the government mandated it. And then, you know, for quite a while afterwards they were saying, we expect everybody to be back in the office first by 4th of July two, 2020. And then by Labor Day 2020 in the US and then by the next year, and then the reason they stopped saying that is because waves of pandemic kept hitting.

And they got tired of saying it, but it wasn't that they concluded, you know, this is really great. But after a while your employees get used to the fact that they were able to work remotely and they liked that, and taking it away is difficult. I think what we started to see in new research that's come out, including some of ours, is that it wasn't quite so wonderful in ways that we thought at the very beginning.

And some of that is simply because it took a while to start to see what was not working so well. But the punchline is: we know that there are lots of things about the way office work gets done that happen because we know each other and we have relationships with each other.

Simple one. We have a conflict. We don't. And you're down the hall from me. I just walk down the hall and say, what's going on with this form? I don't start firing angry letters off to you and you to me. 'cause we're next to each other. Right? And we kind of know each other. If you're new in the organization, people kind of look out for you and some people will maybe take you to lunch and you could just stick your head in the door if you have a question. None of that happens if you're working remotely.

So those things were being lost, but it took a while to figure out that they were being lost. And those are the kinds of things that we are thinking if you're going to be hybrid and that means partially remote, you gotta figure out a way to make those happen. Because they don't just happen naturally if people are not around each other.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. I experienced that firsthand where there were people that I just didn't meet or run into anymore, and just missing those kinds of connections made it difficult for me to know, like, who is this person? What do they do? How, you know, should I be pulling them into my project or not? Like, there was that, that whole, way of connecting with other people informally that I think we all missed a lot.

I wanna ask you about how we determine whether this whole experiment is working or not working, like, and what's behind some of your research on that. Because there's a lot of research that's been published talking about productivity and, you know, claiming that productivity is just fine when people are working remotely. So I have to ask, like for instance, your colleague at Wharton Adam Grant. He seems to question some of the work that he's put out, like the value of working in the office.

I just read a LinkedIn post where he said that remote work doesn't hinder productivity. And he goes on to cite research with government workers that suggest that they're 12% more productive at home. So I'm kind of curious, like when you guys run into each other at the water cooler, like do you have big pro anti office debates with each other?

Peter Cappelli : Uh, no. I haven't seen Adam in years. He doesn't come into the office, so he's permanently remote.

Chris Congdon: Well, he's missing out the fun.

Peter Cappelli : yeah, he's missing out. I think what Adam is talking about is that there was a study done a while ago, looking at what's called a meta-analysis. Where they summarize research that's been done before.

There's been a fair amount of research done before the pandemic. In fact, most of it was before the pandemic. And these meta-analysis treat every piece of research equally. And that concluded that there were kind of just not particularly obvious performance issues with working remotely, but they don't have measures of performance, frankly, in those studies.

They're just asking people, how do you think things are going? Do you feel like you're, there are two studies that show things are fine and they're individual contributors. There are people who don't interact with each other and they could be remote, they could be on opposite planets.

It wouldn't matter. One of them is patent attorneys. Oh, and the other was call center workers and travel agencies. So for those folks, they're not doing office work. Things look fine. There've been a bunch of studies since then that are quite carefully done. Some with randomized control trials and they show negative effects.

So this is part of the story, right? Those two studies that I mentioned before got a lot of attention because they've been around for a little while. And the studies that we're referring to have not been around for very long. And most folks probably, unless you went to actually look at yourself, you wouldn't have seen them. My bet is Adam hasn't seen them.

Chris Congdon: Okay. Well, and I feel like, maybe, you know, the main mainstream media isn't necessarily kind of promoting that narrative as much maybe because we feel like that whole conversation is behind us and it's done. But I do think that, I think you're tapping into, you know, an issue that I think a lot of leaders, feel intuitively, like whether they have the data or not, they're just feeling this sense of people being a little disconnected, maybe not being on the same page, not feeling perhaps as connected to each other in the organization, and I'm curious what your research shows in that regard?

Ranya Nehmeh : What, go ahead. I think I'll just start and just say, you know, well things like, for example, we do see that things like culture, you know, when we talk about connection, it's also very much about the culture. You know, culture is not built through things like posters or leadership emails. You know, it's built through observation and you know, people really learn, what's valued by watching how these decisions are kind of made, you know, how leaders behave. And, and we do see, you know, a weakening of a little bit of culture when you do not have these constant interactions with each other.

Chris Congdon: I think everybody, has been interested in, like, what, what is the state of things today in terms of hybrid work versus in-office work. We've done research recently that says that almost half of leaders, 46%, are actually looking for people to be in the office five days a week. Now this is in the US so you know, maybe that's a little bit different around the world, but I was actually surprised when I saw that because that seemed like a pretty big number.

And yet there's another good size of organizations, again, from what we found in our research, like about 42% that are more in that hybrid zone that are kind of somewhere between one to four days a week. And that's a pretty big range, whether somebody just comes in on Mondays or whether they come in, you know, through the better part of the week.

So I'm just curious if you were talking to those leaders in that kind of 42% who are. You know, expecting people to be in at least some of the time, but not all the time. You know what are some of the big lessons coming out of your work that you would wanna share with them?

Peter Cappelli : Well, I think just maybe first on the data thing, there is a hard time for a lot of employers to even know how many people actually come in. So there are lots of companies that have hybrid policies that say three days a week and the employees aren't coming in. So absenteeism has been a huge problem with hybrid. And most employers with it, were reporting that their employees are actually not showing up.

A study that I did with one of our PhD students here, postdocs here, Jasmine Woo. We went around, looked at hybrid places, and people were just not there. Maybe 4% of the employees came in. And part of the story is that a lot of organizations shrunk their office space down.

And they moved toward open offices. So they've actually taken your office away. *12:10- 12:19 So it's not too surprising that employees don't particularly want to come back 'cause their office is gone. They've made things much worse for them.*

I think to your question about what would you tell them? Well, I mean, one thing is if you've got a hybrid workplace, do you even know whether your employees are coming in or not? Do you know whether they are cooperating with each other? Are they looking after new hires?

It's possible they're doing a lot of those things, but if you're just assuming it because you haven't looked maybe you should just take a look. So we described some things that you could do to check to see whether any of that, sort of community building, sort of exchange, collaborative stuff, helping each other is really going on.

Now, Rana's got the little framework here to lay out for you to tell you how you might move forward on this.

Ranya Nehmeh : Well, actually we came up with this framework in the book, we've added it, and it's called the BOND Framework. And it's really to kind of help organizations bring people back to the office, but also in a hybrid setup.

So it's not just fully like the five days a week that we're talking about. It can also be in a hybrid way because a lot of issues that we see is that, you know, people don't understand why they need to come to the office. You know, so you make people drive 30 minutes to come to the office to sit in a Zoom call all day by themselves. That totally defeats, you know, the purpose. So what we are saying is this BOND, it, it's like an acronym.

So first you build the case for connection, which is like showing the real benefits for why you need to come to the office, which are things like growth, learning, career development, you know, change the narrative. It's not about control, but it's really about coming back for your career development, you know?

O is to own the expectation, so be very clear and model consistently the behaviors that you expect from the employees, N is to normalize engagement. So create these rhythms and shared practices so that, you know, you come in when your team is coming in, not just you're coming in to be alone all day. So that it draws people in naturally and of course demonstrate inclusion. So really make sure that everyone, regardless where they're working, really feels part of the organization's kind of story. So this kind of should shift the conversation from mandates to meaning and and from, from compliance to connection.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, I think that's a great way to think about it, because just it feels like mandates of any sort. Like as human beings, we just naturally push back against a mandate or being told what we must do, and really helping people to understand how, how that can be a better experience for them, I think is really important.

But I am curious, you know, I think that changes throughout your career. So there may be somebody earlier in their career who's really excited about coming into the office, who wants to, meet people, be seen and you know, have mentors, et cetera. I'm curious how you would position that with a much more experienced employee, somebody who's been around the organization a long time, who might be kind of sitting back saying, you know what, I've, you know, I've done this for years and years. I know my job. I'm doing fine. Why? Why do I bother coming in?

Peter Cappelli : Yeah. I think this is where guilt is very useful to remind them

Chris Congdon: guilt always works.

Peter Cappelli : Yeah. The reason that you can do your job is because you started out in an office where people helped you and looked after you and they told you what to do and yeah, you could be someplace else and get the work done, but you are the.

Kind of people that new hires need to learn from. So if you're not there, you know, it hurts the organization. You know, it might not be perfect for you as an employee, but there are lots of things that are not perfect for us as employees. Right. That's why we get paid for doing it.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Yeah. Another thing that I would be interested to learn more from you about is just when you are managing workers who are more remote like that, that's very different in our organization, we were working globally before the pandemic ever hit. So I had people on my team who were based out of Europe and we had to learn how to work together remotely.

But for a lot of organizations, a lot of leaders, that's a brand new experience. And I'm interested if there are things that you would wanna share with leaders to say, well, how do I manage differently in a hybrid environment if I'm not seeing somebody all the time?

Peter Cappelli : Well maybe distinguish between, um, distributed work where you're never gonna see them. Right. And hybrid, where you're occasionally going to see them and frequently see them.

Yeah. I guess I would say for dis, for real distributed work, I would just ask 'em to think carefully about whether that's a great idea or not. Or it seems to be a really bad idea when you hire somebody to manage a team. And that supervisor's never gonna see their direct reports. I mean, that's just really a bad idea.

Managing remote workers is hard. Managing some in the office at the same time, you're managing others who are never in the office and trying to treat them fairly. Really hard and you get yourself into legal trouble in the US 'cause you're not treating them equally, you know? So I think that's a pain. For those who are actually in, in a hybrid setup, you know, managers have to be much more intentional about how to manage them. So what we mean here is that really. You have to schedule regular development conversations. You need to be very deliberate about who gets exposure to what projects and why. You need to create a structured kind of communication rhythms and you need to, you know, check that their understanding of everything is actually what should happen. So it's really, you have to be very intentional about it because when you're in the office, you see people, you can have these quick conversations, you can get quick feedback. it's very different. Mm-hmm. And in order to replicate that online, you really have to do it in an intentional way.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Uh, okay. So I have to ask a very, uh, specific question, but I'm very curious about your thoughts, which is camera's on, camera's off. Do you have a point of view about that when we're working with hybrid teammates?

Peter Cappelli : Oh, yeah. You can tell we do.

Ranya Nehmeh : Peter's favorite topic.

Chris Congdon: Okay, well let, let's hear it. Peter, what do you think?

Peter Cappelli : Well, the cameras are off. Uh, people are doing other work and if they're doing other work, they're not paying attention. Yeah. And if they're not paying attention, the meeting isn't working.

And certainly I saw that in the organizations that we were going around looking at and meetings are not productive. You have to have a Post, this place I was at, they reported having, needing to have post-meeting meetings because people didn't really know what was going on during the meetings.

The meetings get bigger and bigger because it's easy to just add people to them.

I think the biggest thing employers should do is reign in meetings in general. You know, there's lots of meetings that don't need to happen, and particularly with hybrid and remote, you know, you should, if you're gonna be at a meeting, you should be in it. Then your camera should be on. I mean, otherwise don't bother. I would say. Camera on or don't come.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, I just saw a stat, so I'm a little biased on this one too, for my experience. And I just saw a stat that said, uh, during, uh, remote meetings particularly where cameras are off like 37% of the time people are multitasking and that actually felt low to me.

So, okay. Well I'm glad to get, uh, cover on that one. The other thing I wanna talk about is just. We've not only been through a big shift since the pandemic in terms of how we're working, but the power dynamics have really shifted because, you know, we all remember, as, you know, we were making our way through the pandemic.

Like there were just, um, it felt like people could ask for anything that employee, employers were really willing to do whatever it was, uh, to be able to make employees happy, to be able to attract them, to retain them. And it feels like in the current job market where unemployment numbers are higher and the economy feels a little uncertain. It feels like that power has shifted.

And I don't know what you think about this, but I'm just really curious if you're thinking that the way we manage hybrid work can somehow, serve both. So both the employer and the employee are feeling more equilibrium as opposed to a big power swing.

Peter Cappelli : Yeah. Just, just briefly, I don't, I don't know that during the pandemic, the employees had so much power as they were in such difficult circumstances.

You know, your kids were home, schools were closed. People were sick, everybody was stressed out. Employers were doing things for them because they had to. You know, of course. And the employees were really pitching in above and beyond the call of duty. I think after the pandemic we did have a tight labor market for a year or two there. And it is true that employees had more power then, and they have less power now.

I think the one aspect of that relates to remote work is the fear that you heard this from HR people telling the senior people they're gonna quit if you make 'em come back. And I don't think that was ever true, frankly. And people say they're gonna quit all the time about virtually everything if you survey them and they don't quit, because to quit means you gotta find another job. And in this context it means you gotta find another job that will allow you to work remotely. And there are fewer of those now and they're hard to find.

So I think the employers don't believe you're gonna quit if you make them come back now. And I suspect that did play some role in this. I think what Ranya was describing before, though, is the right way to think about this. Simply because you can force them to come back now doesn't mean that you should at the point of a gun, make them come back, right? But I have no doubt there are some employers who think that way.

Ranya Nehmeh : I was just gonna add to that and just say, I think that also when organizations, you know, avoid setting very clear expectations, even around hybrid work, then employees experience a lot of inconsistency and frustration.

So leaders don't get the collaboration or culture that they're trying to rebuild, and you have employees who are, you know, maybe not happy. So I do think that there are things that can be done better in that respect.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Well, so let's talk about that because you know, of course from our perspective and a lot of our listeners are people who are really focused and committed to creating great places for people to work. And, you know, I know that there, there's a point of view that sometimes people don't wanna come back to their office because their office stinks. And you know, I think that might be very true in a number of situations. Certainly not all though. And I'm interested from the work that you've done, what do you think, what would you say to those of us in the audience who care very much about, the workplace? Like how do you think a good office should look and work and be, uh, today?

Peter Cappelli : Well, yeah. I guess we should at first be clear that we don't have any ties to Steelcase. We know you do this stuff for a living, but I think one of the worst things that happened during the pandemic was this shrinking of office space where employers got rid of offices and move people first to cubicles, but then move them to open offices.

And we know from prior experience employees hate open offices. The only reason they're done is because they're cheaper. You're just jamming people together in desks and God forbid we have another pandemic and you're all just next to each other.

And they hate hoteling which is the other alternative where you just never know what desk you're gonna be in, but you're pretty sure you're not gonna be sitting with the people who are part of your team. So, you know, this is part of the story. If you're an employer, you want people to come back and you're telling 'em, come back to an office, which is far worse than what you had before and they're not gonna be happy about it. Right? So not too surprising, right.

Ranya Nehmeh: Maybe if I can just add to that just to say I, I really don't think that people, they don't resist offices, but they really resist bad offices. Um, so if the office is going to justify the commute, then it has to offer something that is different and better.

So what I mean by that, I think, you know, there has to be private spaces for focus because as Peter said, you know, when you cram people all in one room, everybody's talking very loudly. That's why people say I work better from home. So you really need to, even in collaborative environments, you still need quiet areas where people can think, where they can really focus.

You also need to have social and collaborative spaces. So a bit of both where people can brainstorm, where they can connect, they can have these informal connections. So I think that the modern workplace really has to support both productivity and connection as well.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, I, I couldn't agree more. And you know, we obviously have a point of view about this as well. You know, we've done a lot of work in this area to understand the diverse things that people need.

And, uh, for sure Peter, I mean, I think we actually did a study that was closer to just as we were coming out of the pandemic and we asked people a question like, you know, what would get you to come back into the office? You know? And the number one thing was my own desk. Like I want my own desk. I would be willing to come more into the office more days. If you gave me my own desk versus giving me, I don't know, people were doing lunches and concerts and all kinds of things to, you know, get people back into the office, but they really wanted a desk. And that's not surprising because I think human beings are just drawn to having their own space and being able to have some autonomy and control, uh, over what their day looks like.

So I know we're gonna have to wrap up. I think we could talk all afternoon about this 'cause it's a fascinating subject, but I think if, if you had like one or two key things that you wanted to leave our listeners with today Peter and Rania, could you both maybe share with us, like what do you think the big takeaway should be for employers or people who are designing spaces today?

Peter Cappelli : Ooh, I will let Ranya go first so I can think of the answer.

Ranya Nehmeh : Well, I think, I mean, I would really say that hybrid work, um, it really works best when the office is intentional. So that word, we keep reemphasizing it. Um, and when the expectations are very clear of what employees you know, what employees expect and what time should be designed together for face-to-face and whatnot. So the why is very important, I think, for why you should come into the office.

Chris Congdon: That's helpful. Peter, did you think of anything?

Peter Cappelli: Yeah. Yes. Um, I, I guess I would say to be intentional about everything, sort of as Ranya was saying, and to not go with your gut.

So do you really know what people liked the most about remote work before? And it, I think there's evidence, it's not simply commuting time, it's control over their work. The ability to deal with emergencies, get work done at home when I'm sick. Could you solve some of those problems for people without necessarily having to go to full remote work?

You know, thinking intentionally about, as Ranya was saying, what do you really need? And what we need is people to know each other, get along with each other, be willing to help each other and collaborate. You can make that happen as we all do before remote work.

There were some places that did that well, everybody in the office in some place that did it poorly. And so management matters is the punchline. And I think for those of us who study management, the conceit that you could just send everybody away and not have them together, ever see each other and not manage 'em, and somehow it's gonna be okay just seems crazy, right? Yeah. So don't go down that path.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. I think that's really helpful advice. So, uh, Peter and Ranya, it's been a really illuminating conversation with you today and I'm really grateful that you took time to join us on Work Better Today.

Peter Cappelli : Okay. Thank you.

Ranya Nehmeh : Thank you. Thanks so much.