

White Paper

Returning to the Office: Benchmarking to Best Practices for Competitive Advantage

By Dr. Gleb Tsimpursky, CEO, [Disaster Avoidance Experts](#)



Empowering leaders
and organizations to
avoid business disasters

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Executive Summary

Many leaders have a preference for in-person work. Yet research conclusively demonstrates that those employees who can do so have a strong preference to work remotely much of their time, and a large minority of them all of the time. Moreover, remote workers show substantial productivity gains, cost savings, and risk mitigation. Mental blindspots called cognitive biases often inhibit leaders in seeing this clear conclusion. The best approach to returning to the office involves a hybrid-first model with some limited full-time remote options. Doing so will enable organizations to excel in retention and recruitment, boost productivity, re-energize company culture, gain substantial cost savings, and manage a wide variety of risks. In transitioning strategically to a hybrid-first model, benchmark to best practices. That involves first surveying your employees to get both information on their specific needs and buy-in for whatever policies you implement. The survey should serve as the basis for top leaders providing broad guidelines involving one to three days in the office. Offer full-time remote options for those workers who can show they can be effective and efficient remotely. Then, use a team-based approach to determining the details. Have each team leader of rank-and-file employees, in consultation with their team members and their peers, make decisions about what their team's schedule will look like. Based on that, downsize office space. Reshape it to focus on collaboration versus individual work. Revise employee performance evaluation to focus on tasks, not time spent. Ensure a regular weekly evaluation process that provides both hybrid and fully remote employees with a constant awareness of where they stand and what they need to do to improve. Adapt company culture to the new hybrid-first model strategically, addressing challenges of connection of employees to each other and to the company as a whole. As part of doing so, address diversity-related issues, such as technology-based discrimination. Train your staff to succeed in this hybrid model by helping them understand how to divide their work between collaboration in the office and individual tasks at home; likewise, boost their virtual and hybrid communication and collaboration skills. Finally, offer appropriate funding for their home office needs. Taking these steps will maximize your competitive advantage in the most important resource: your people.

Introduction

“I really like working with other people. I’m uncomfortable working by myself, it’s just not the same. So I’d love to have everyone go back to the office five days a week.” That’s what Marvin, the long-time CEO of a 4,000-people company, told me when we discussed his plans for the post-pandemic transition back to the office.

Then, he added: “However, we’re doing a lot of hiring for managerial roles right now to prepare for the post-pandemic recovery. One of the first questions applicants ask is if they have to move and how much time they can work from home, especially younger ones. Also, our internal surveys show that 29% of our employees want to stay fully remote and 58% prefer a hybrid model. I guess I have to accept the fact that the new generation of leaders and employees doesn’t have the same preferences that I do. Our most important resource is our people, and I need to make sure that I’m tapping that resource most effectively.”

I admired his willingness to update his beliefs and do what’s uncomfortable for him. People are indeed the most important resource of any organization.

Yet so many leaders are [failing to live by that maxim](#). They instead prefer to do what’s comfortable for them, even if it devastates employee morale and engagement. They fail to recognize how doing so deeply undercuts the bottom line through decreasing productivity, growing turnover, and subpar recruitment. The current call by many leaders for employees to return to the office full-time represents an especially egregious and self-defeating example of top executives choosing to do what’s comfortable for them over what’s best for their people and their bottom line.

Fortunately, many more forward-looking leaders walk the talk of truly valuing their people. After evaluating the internal and external environment, they recognized that they can’t simply try to turn back the clock to January 2020 if they want their organizations to [survive and thrive](#) in the post-COVID environment. Instead, they made the strategic decision to support their employees working remotely part or full-time. They saw this uncomfortable-for-themselves approach as a way of gaining and maintaining a competitive advantage in the most important resource for any company.

This piece relies on my interviews with 47 mid-level and 14 senior leaders in 12 companies for which I helped develop a strategic approach to remote work after the pandemic. It reveals the challenges that top leaders had to overcome in the process. It also reveals the best practices in telework they used to do so, which you can use as a benchmark for your own return to the office.

What Does the Research on Returning to the Office Say?

Several in-depth, independent, and large-scale research surveys on employees working remotely during the pandemic were published in early 2021. All of the surveys revealed strong preferences for working from home after the pandemic at least half the time for the larger majority, and for a quarter, full-time remote work.

A [Harvard Business School study](#) on remote workers found that:

- 27% hope to work remotely full-time
- 61% would like to work 2-3 days a week from home
- Only 18% want to go back to the office full-time

[Another survey](#) of those working from home had the following top-line findings:

- 42% say if their current company does not continue to offer remote work options long term, they will look for another job
- 68% perceive a hybrid model of significant remote and in-person work as the ideal model
- 87% would prefer to work remotely at least some of the time
- 80% report they adapted well to full-time remote work
- 76% of employees consider benefits when evaluating whether to stay in a job, and they list remote work, flexible schedules, and mobility opportunities as the top three benefits
- 34% want resources to help set up a home office, and 33% want resources to subsidize other remote work expenses
- 35% report working more hours and 54% report taking less time off
- 50% are not concerned about their career growth
- 43% of remote workers say that they would be nervous about their job security if they worked remotely while others returned to the work site
- 26% plan to look for a job with a different employer after the pandemic, and of these, 34% want to find a job where they can work remotely and 80% are concerned about their career growth
- 48% feel more pressure to be online all the time while working remotely
- 39% find it difficult to socialize with co-workers
- Remote worker connection to company culture improved from 36% in May 2020 to 47% in March 2021, showing that working remotely may actually boost company culture
- 42% of workers who plan to leave their current employer would grade their employer's efforts to maintain culture during the pandemic as a "C" or lower compared to 30% of all workers

A [third survey of remote workers finds](#):

- 46% would look for a different job if their current employer doesn't offer remote work after the pandemic
- 54% would be willing to stay in their job if not offered remote work after the pandemic, but be less willing to go the extra mile
- 80% expect to work from home at least three times per week after the pandemic
- 81% think their employer will support working from home after the pandemic
- 74% would be less likely to leave their employer if offered remote work, and 71% would be more likely to recommend their company to a friend
- 75% of people are the same or more productive during COVID-19 while working from home
- On average, remote employees worked an extra 26 hours each month during COVID

- (nearly an extra day every week)
- 80% believe there should be one day a week with no meetings at all
- 23% of full-time employees would take a pay cut of over 10% in order to work from home at least some of the time
- 57% weren't concerned that working remotely would impact their career progression
- 77% feel that after COVID, being able to work from home would make them happier
- 72% agreed that the ability to work remotely would make them less stressed
- 77% report that working remotely would make them better able to manage work-life balance
- No more than 25% of companies pay or share the cost of home office equipment
- 32% report that training in remote work would make them more effective
- 62% of respondents saw interruptions/being talked over as their top telework challenge
- 57% of respondents said that the audio quality of video conferencing is a challenge, and 56% said the video quality was a challenge

A [fourth survey's](#) key findings on staff working remotely in the pandemic:

- 58% said they would "absolutely" look for a new job if they cannot continue remote work
 - 31% said they aren't sure what they would do
 - and only 11% said that working remotely is not a big deal
- 46% feel concerned that returning to the office means less flexibility
- 43% believe it will bring less work-life balance
- 84% rank not having a commute as the most important benefit of telework
- 55% believe their productivity has increased while working remotely, 33% said their productivity has remained the same, 6% think their productivity has decreased, and 6% aren't sure
- 35% see overworking as their biggest challenge with remote work, 28% list dealing with technology problems, 26% report challenges with reliable WiFi, and 24% indicate Zoom fatigue
- 56% experienced burnout

Here's a [fifth survey](#) (including both remote and non-remote workers):

- 47% of employees say they would likely leave their job if it didn't offer a hybrid work model once the pandemic ends
- 41% say they would be willing to take a job with a lower salary if their company offered a hybrid work model
- Asked about the top benefit of hybrid work, 38% cite the top benefit of hybrid work as less time and money spent commuting, 34% say work/life balance, and 21% list improved work performance

Finally, a [Microsoft study](#) of remote and non-remote employees, combining survey responded with data from LinkedIn and Microsoft 365 products, found that:

- 73% of employees want flexible remote work options to be permanent
- 66% of leaders are planning to remodel their company spaces for hybrid work
- 67% of employees want at least some in-person collaboration after the pandemic
- 54% of employees felt overworked, 39% felt exhausted, and about 20% believe their company doesn't care about work/life balance
- 46% of those currently working remotely are planning to move to a new location in 2021 because they can now work remotely
- Remote job postings on LinkedIn increased more than five times during the pandemic, and women were 15% more likely to apply to such positions than in-person ones
- Comparing collaboration trends in Microsoft 365 between February 2020 and February

2021:

- Time spent in Microsoft Teams meetings has more than doubled (2.5X) globally
- Average meeting is 10 minutes longer
- Average Microsoft Teams user is sending 45% more chats per week and 42% more chats per person after hours
- Despite meeting and chat overload, 50 percent of people respond to Teams chats within five minutes or less, a response time that has not changed year-over-year
- Number of emails delivered to commercial and education customers in February, when compared to the same month last year, is up by 40.6 billion
- 66% increase in the number of people working on documents.
- This barrage of communications is unstructured and mostly unplanned, with 62% percent of calls and meetings unscheduled or conducted ad hoc
- LinkedIn data indicates nearly a doubling of job-switching intent in 2021

Other research backs up this information. For example, consider a [thorough survey](#) comparing productivity of in-person vs. remote workers during the first six months of stay-at-home orders, March to August 2020, to the same March to August period in 2019. Employees showed a more than 5% increase in productivity over this period. Another [study surveying 800 employers](#) reported that 94% found that remote workers showed higher or equal productivity than before the pandemic. Non-survey research similarly shows [significant productivity gains](#) for [remote workers](#) during the pandemic. Moreover, governments [plan](#) to [invest](#) in improving teleworking infrastructure in the future, making higher productivity gains even more likely.

Such remote work productivity gains aren't surprising. [Prior research](#) showed that telework boosted productivity pre-COVID. After all, remote work removes many hassles taking up time for in-office work such as lengthy daily commutes. Moreover, working from home allows employees much more flexibility to do work tasks at times that work best for their work/life balance, rather than the traditional 9 to 5 schedule. Such flexibility matches [research showing](#) we all have different times of day when we are best suited for certain tasks, enabling us to be more productive when we have more flexible schedules.

Some might feel worried that these productivity gains are limited to the context of the pandemic. Fortunately, [research shows](#) that after a forced period of work from home, if workers are given the option to keep working from home, those who choose to do so experience even greater productivity gains than in the initial forced period.

An [important academic paper](#) from the University of Chicago provides further evidence of why working at home will stick. First, the researchers found that working at home proved a much more positive experience, for employers and employees alike, than either anticipated. That led employers to report a willingness to continue work-from-home after the pandemic.

Second, an average worker spent over 14 hours and \$600 to support their work-from home. In turn, companies made [large-scale investments](#) in back-end IT facilitating remote work. Some paid for home office/equipment for employees. On a related note, remote work technology has improved over this time. Therefore, both workers and companies will be more invested into telework after the pandemic.

Third, stigma around telework has greatly decreased. Such normalization of work from home makes it a much more viable choice for employees.

The paper shows that employees perceive telework as an important perk. On average, they value it as 8% of their salary. The authors also find that most employers plan to move to a hybrid model after the pandemic, having employees come in about half the time. Given the higher productivity that the paper's authors find results from remote work, they conclude that the post-pandemic economy will see about a six percent productivity boost.

Here are the **key conclusions of a meta-analysis on all of these studies**:

1. Over two-thirds of all employees who worked remotely in the pandemic want and expect to work from home half the time or more permanently, while over a fifth want to work remotely full-time
2. Over two-fifths would leave their current job if they didn't have the option of remote work of two to three days per week
3. Over a quarter plan to leave their job after the pandemic, especially those who rate their company cultures as "C" or lower
4. Over two-fifths of all employees, especially younger ones, would feel concern over career progress if they worked from home while other employees like them did not
5. Most employees see telework and the flexibility it provides as a key benefit, and are willing to sacrifice substantial earnings for it
6. Employees are significantly more productive on average when working from home
7. Over three-quarters of all employees will feel happier and more engaged, be willing to go the extra mile, feel less stressed, and have more work-life balance with permanent opportunity for two to three days of telework
8. Over half of all employees feel overworked and burned out, and over three-quarters experience "Zoom fatigue" and want less meetings
9. Employees need funding for home offices and equipment, but no more than 25% of companies provided such funding so far
10. Over three-fifths of all employees report poor virtual communication and collaboration as their biggest challenge with remote work, and many want more training in these areas

Back to the Past?

The majority of employers - ranging from [two-thirds](#) to [three-quarters](#) in various studies - plan for a hybrid schedule of having previously-remote employees return to the office for about half the time. That would satisfy the 60-65% of all employees who want such a hybrid schedule, as well as the 15-20% seeking full-time in-person work.

It would be a serious problem for the 20-25% who want to remain full-time remote. Many of the latter already [moved out](#) of their [previous geographical areas](#). They [structured their lives](#) around fully-remote work forever.

Yet before addressing this tension, let's consider the small proportion of employers who intend to force their employees who can easily work remotely back to the office full-time. For instance, Goldman Sachs CEO David Solomon [called](#) working from home “an aberration that we’re going to correct as quickly as possible.”

It's not only traditional businesses like investment banking making such decisions at clear odds to employee desires and improved productivity. Google has declared that employees will [not be regularly permitted](#) to work remotely more than 14 days per year. The CEO of Netflix, Reed Hastings, [described remote work](#) as a “pure negative” and intends his employees to get back the office after vaccination.

Many leaders whom I interviewed also felt resistant to permitting remote work for their employees. They listed a number of reasons for disliking telework.

A large number described a desire to return to what they saw as “normal” work life. By that they meant turning back the clock to January 2020, before the pandemic. After all, they said, once the pandemic is over, why can't we go back to what worked well?

After I dig a bit deeper on why they wouldn't want to permit employees to work where they want and where they are most productive, these leaders share additional reasons. A key concern for many involves personal discomfort. They want to see and engage with their direct reports in person, not remotely. They like the feel of a full, buzzing office. They like to be surrounded by others when they work.

Other reasons involve challenges specifically related to remote work. Many list concerns about deteriorating company culture as an issue. Others see growing [work-from-home burnout and Zoom fatigue](#) as major issues. They list a rise in team conflicts and deterioration of trust as serious concerns about telework. Many feel frustrated by challenges in virtual collaboration and communication, ranging from problems with technology to insufficient skills among staff. A final category of concerns relates to a lack of accountability and effective evaluation of employees.

Mental Blindspots Leading to Disastrous Telework Decisions

What's going on with these senior leaders who show resistance to seemingly-simple decisions on working from home? Unfortunately, we're all vulnerable to dangerous judgment errors that behavioral economists and cognitive neuroscientists call [cognitive biases](#). These [mental blindspots](#), which stem from our [evolutionary background](#) and the [structure of our neural pathways](#), lead to poor [strategic](#) decision-making and [planning](#). Fortunately, by understanding

these cognitive biases and taking [research-based steps to address them](#), we can make the best decisions, whether on telework or other business areas.

Many feel a desire to go back to the world before the pandemic. They fall for the [status quo bias](#), a desire to maintain or get back what they see as the appropriate situation and way of doing things. Their minds flinch away from accepting the major disruption stemming from the pandemic.

Unfortunately for them, with so many people having successfully worked from home for so long, the genie is out of the bottle. They're used to it: to them, working from home is the status quo. Surveys show the vast majority adapted to it well and want to continue doing so for half the work week or more after the pandemic. The disruption happened.

Yet many leaders have spent this time gnashing their teeth and seeing work from home as a "purely negative" situation, in the [words](#) of Netflix CEO Reed Hastings. To them, telework represents a deviation away from the pre-pandemic status quo, to which they want to return. They're closing their eyes to reality and ignoring what's in front of them.

A major factor in leaders wanting everyone to return to the office stems from their personal discomfort with work from home. Like Marvin, the CEO I quoted at the beginning of this piece, they spent their career surrounded by other people. Sure, the leaders have their corner office. But they regularly walk the floors, surrounded by the buzz and energy of staff working. Moreover, much of their time involves meetings with other leaders. They're extroverted and gregarious and they like other people. Is it any wonder, given their experience, that they want to bring back the atmosphere that surrounded them their whole career?

They're falling for the [anchoring bias](#). This mental blindspot causes us to feel anchored to our initial experiences and information. Given that their whole career focused on in-person interactions, they feel anchored to that mode of collaboration. They struggle to break the chain of that anchor and accept the viability of work from home as a viable permanent solution, rather than a forced necessity.

The evidence that work from home works well for the vast majority doesn't cause them to shift their perspective in any significant manner. The [confirmation bias](#) offers an important explanation for this seeming incongruity. Our minds are skilled at ignoring information that contradicts our beliefs, and looking only for information that confirms them.

A very common way I've seen confirmation bias play out is a refusal to do anonymous employee surveys on their preferences for telework vs. in-office work after the pandemic. Then, I express curiosity about their reasoning. After all, the costs of surveys are negligible, and the information critically important. Reluctant leaders usually tell me they know that the large majority of employees would rather work in the office than at home. At most, the leaders say perhaps the majority would like to take off a half-day on Friday and finish work at home.

They fall into the cognitive bias called the [false consensus effect](#). This mental blindspot leads us to envision other people in our in-group - such as those employed at our company - as being much more like ourselves in their beliefs and values than is the actual case. Literally every time I convinced them to do the survey, they found that the large majority of the workforce wanted to work from home at least half the time, and a substantial minority permanently. In fact, surveys at a couple of companies indicated that more than half wanted to work from home permanently, leaving some leaders shocked.

What about the specific challenges these resistant leaders brought up related to working from home, ranging from burnout to deteriorating culture and so on? These represent serious issues. However, further inquiry on each problem revealed that the leaders never [addressed these work-from-home problems strategically](#).

They transitioned to telework abruptly as part of the March 2020 lockdowns. Perceiving this shift as a very brief emergency, they focused, naturally and appropriately, on accomplishing the necessary tasks of the organization. They ignored the social and emotional glue that truly holds companies together, motivates employees, and protects against burnout.

That's fine for an emergency, a week or two. Yet COVID lasted for over a year. So they adapted their existing ways of interacting in "office culture" to remote work, instead of figuring out strategically what kind of culture and collaboration and communication methods would work best for telework. That speaks to a cognitive bias called [functional fixedness](#). When we have a certain perception of how an object should be used, or how people should behave, we ignore other ways of using an object or behaving. That's even if these new uses and behaviors offer a much better fit for a changed situation and would solve our problems much better.

Competitive Advantage in the New Normal

More forward-looking leaders realize the world changed. Like Marvin, they may prefer on a personal level to be surrounded by people when they work. They may feel uncomfortable with the idea of not having a full-time in-office culture. However, they recognize that for the sake of their most important resource, it simply makes sense to let those employees who can productively do so work from home much or all of the time.

For example, a [host](#) of [large companies](#) - ranging from insurance giant Nationwide to tech firm Facebook to financial major drug maker Novartis - decided to let many or all of their currently-remote employees work from home permanently. [Many more](#) announced a [switch](#) to a permanent hybrid model of 2-4 days of remote work after the pandemic. They include Citigroup, Ford, Google, Microsoft, Siemens, Salesforce, Target, and many others.

Of these hybrid-first companies, many permit a substantial minority - 10-30% - to work remotely if their roles allow such work easily. Such roles include call center staff and others who do not need to collaborate with fellow employees extensively.

To capitalize on their main competitive advantage, the leaders at the companies whom I helped to transition strategically back to the office overwhelmingly adopted a hybrid-first model. That means having most staff come in from one to three days per week. They also permitted full-time remote options for those employees whose roles facilitate full-time work. In addition, they allowed those who wanted to come in full-time to do so.

The top leaders I spoke with cited several factors as motivating their hybrid-first models. The first and primary concern stemmed from retention. Their internal surveys on remote work preferences matched the large public external surveys indicating a strong desire among most employees for hybrid work and a substantial minority - occasionally a majority - for fully-remote work.

Now, the internal surveys generally did not ask about job switching intent, given the low likelihood of accurate answers to such questions. Still, the top leaders knew from external surveys that very many employees are seriously considering job transitions after the pandemic. Naturally, some of these employees worked for them. Moreover, many of the internal surveys asked employees whether they moved away from the corporate office location during the pandemic; anywhere from a quarter to a third or more in most surveys answered affirmatively. Given this situation, and the desirability of flexible schedules and remote work, these top leaders realized that a hybrid-first model with fully-remote options would greatly improve retention.

That retention improvement stemmed especially from the [Spring 2021 recruitment surge](#) as companies stepped up their hiring for the post-pandemic recovery. That surge gave employees, especially the most capable ones that had the most options, many more opportunities. Failing to offer hybrid and fully-remote options meant the prospect of losing the best staff.

On the flip side, many top leaders cited recruitment as a major driver of their hybrid-first models. Over 90% of the companies I helped planned for a major recruitment ramp-up for the post-COVID world. They cited a desire to appeal to the best candidates as a key reason for their shift.

The executives recognized the widespread perception among employees of flexible schedules and substantial or full-time remote work as a [major benefit](#). Thus, they perceived this model as enabling them to get better labor at lower prices. Those savings would be much higher than their planned investment into supporting their staff financially with funding for work-from-home equipment.

Moreover, allowing some staff members full-time remote work means a vast expansion of the talent pool. After all, remote workers can be hired anywhere, rather than in a specific geographic area. Moreover, those in lower cost-of-living areas are willing to take lower salaries.

Even the best people won't work well if they're unhappy, disengaged, and stressed. Internal surveys conducted by these top leaders aligned with the external surveys showing that if their currently-remote workers didn't have substantial work-from-home options after the pandemic, they would be less happy and engaged, unwilling to go the extra mile or recommend the company to their peers. The same internal surveys showed that those working from home gained more work/life balance and flexibility; they would feel stressed and constrained without at least a hybrid model. Who wants frustrated and stressed-out workers bad-mouthing the company to their peers, right?

Top leaders cited a desire to protect the productivity boost experienced by remote workers as another motive for their hybrid-first models. Surveys of managers and employees, along with internal company data, showed a boost in productivity of anywhere from 2 to 14% in these companies for those employees who worked remotely in the pandemic. This average hid an important countertrend. While on average productivity per employee increased, more employee time was eaten up with meetings and other communication. That means that productivity gains came from tasks employees did by themselves, rather than collaborative tasks, which took on average more effort.

The leaders felt that having employees work in the office a couple of days would address some of the productivity challenges of collaborative tasks. After all, face-to-face communication is generally more efficient for more complex and nuanced issues. Thus, workers would focus on collaborative tasks while in the office. While at home, they would focus more on their individual tasks. That way, the leaders figured they could get the best of both worlds.

A major financial benefit of this approach stemmed from cutting down on costs from real estate and associated office-based services and products. The leaders I spoke to cited plans to substantially downsize office space as a significant but not primary factor in their decision-making process. They did plan for some major one-time investment into reconfiguring their office spaces for hybrid work, but these costs paled in comparison to ongoing real estate savings.

Finally, the leaders cited a desire to mitigate risk and prepare for future disruptors as a factor in their new policies. If staff worked from home a large chunk of their time, the company would be much more prepared to make shifts to working from home in case of any future disruptions. A diversified workforce located away from company offices is less vulnerable to the risk of localized or even regional events.

Of course, it requires an adaptation of [risk management protocols](#) to ensure employees harden their home office against disruptions. It also requires additional risk management strategies to ensure that employees living in areas prone to disruptions such as hurricanes have others cross-trained and ready to take on their work in case of any disruptions for that employee.

Return to the Office Best Practices

Based on my research as well as practical work helping 12 companies devise and implement a strategic plan to transition back to the office, here are best practices you can benchmark against.

Survey Your Staff

First, conduct an anonymous survey of your currently-remote staff on their preferences for remote work. All companies are different, and you want to know about your staff in particular. An additional benefit: employees like to feel that they have input on major company decisions, especially those concerning their working conditions. You'll get a lot more buy-in, even from staff who may be unhappy with your final policies, if they feel consulted and heard.

While you may choose to ask a variety of questions, get at least information on their desire for frequency of work in the office. Ask that in the first question of the survey, since people are most likely to answer the first question. Here's a good way to phrase it:

After the pandemic has passed, which of these would be your preferred working style?

- A) Fully remote, coming in once a quarter for team-building and team strategy retreat
- B) 1 day a week in the office, the rest at home
- C) 2 days a week in the office
- D) 3 days a week in the office
- E) 4 days a week in the office
- F) Full-time in the office

Very likely, your results will be close to the major external surveys. In all the companies where I consulted, there were never more than a quarter who wanted to go back to the office full-time. In fact, one company with over 3,000 employees had 61% of its staff express a desire for fully remote work. And it wasn't even a tech company!

In the highly probable case that your results aren't too different from the typical company, you'll want to adopt what the leaders of the companies I helped instituted. Namely, you'll institute a hybrid-first model with some flexibility for employees who want to work remotely permanently and whose roles permit them to do so.

Team-Led Choices for Remote Work

Avoid simply declaring a consistent policy from the top, or allowing individual employees to determine autonomously what they will do. Instead, the [best practice](#) is for the leadership to provide broad but flexible guidelines for the whole company and then let teams determine what works best for them. Empower each team leader to determine, in consultation with other team leaders and their team members, how each team should function. The choice should be driven by the goals and collaborative capacities of each team rather than the personal preferences of the team leader. The outcome for each team should range from fully remote with team meetings once a quarter for team-building and team strategy to two days remote and three in the office.

The top leadership should encourage team leaders to permit, wherever possible, team

members to work remotely, if the latter desire to do so and can demonstrate high productivity. In fact, some of the conversations I cited earlier with reluctant leaders came from discussions with team leaders who wanted their direct reports to come to the office when, objectively, they lacked a sufficiently justifiable reason to do so.

Likewise, there should be a very good reason for more than three days in the office. Such reasons exist. For example, in one company for which I consulted, the sales teams who placed outbound sales calls decided to do full-time office work. That stemmed from the team leaders arguing persuasively that sales staff benefited greatly from being surrounded by other sales staff during outbound calls. Such calls are draining and sap motivation; being surrounded by others on the sales floor making similar calls boosts motivation and energy. Moreover, hearing others make calls offers an opportunity to learn from their successful techniques, which is difficult to arrange in telework settings. However, such exceptions are rare. Generally speaking, no more than 5% of your staff should be in the office full-time if that's not their inherent preference.

All team members should come to the office on the same days. That way, all can collaborate easily, with no awkward conversations where half the team is in little squares on the screen. The office of the future will be much more a place for collaboration and much less one for individual work.

Reshape Your Office Space

A hybrid model will enable you to cut costs on real estate. The less frequently you have staff come in, the less real estate you'll need, so consider that in your guidance to team leaders.

Start adjusting your office space by planning for anticipated usage. Have each team leader indicate how often they plan to have employees come in and on which days of the week. Encourage some shifting of days of the week if too many plan to come in on one day, and not enough on other days. A good way to do so is having team leaders rank their preferred days of the week from one to five. Then, use an algorithm to assign teams to various days to maximize preference satisfaction.

Also, survey staff to find out how many plan to come in on days when they're not required to do so. Some of your employees who prefer to work surrounded by others or have problematic home office arrangements might choose to come in when their team stays home.

Separately, determine your space needs for larger staff events. These might range from quarterly retreats to large-scale in-person trainings (keep in mind you can always rent such spaces).

Next, make plans to decrease your real estate footprint accordingly. Arrange to have some of your office space in coworking venues. Doing so will mitigate the risk either of excess or insufficient space. Keep in mind that some teams will likely change plans as they figure out how to do hybrid well.

Next, you'll want to transform your office space layout. In the hybrid model, in-office work will focus much more on direct collaboration with team members. Secondly, it will involve working side-by-side with other team members who you can ask quick clarifying questions or to whom

you can provide guidance.

Currently, [typical offices](#) have 80% of their space dedicated to personal use and 20% shared space. You'll want to use the results of your survey to change your office space accordingly. A common change for many companies involves increasing collaborative space to two-thirds, and decreasing personal space to one-third.

As part of doing so, you'll want to get rid of most individual cubicles and offices. Retain them only for team leaders at all levels who need private spaces for sensitive conversations, as well as anyone else requiring such spaces.

Change the office space and technology to facilitate hot-desking. Have employees use laptops and retire desktops. Upgrade your video technology in shared spaces to [facilitate meetings](#) where some people will be videoconferencing from home. After all, some team members will choose to work-from-home permanently. In other cases, such videoconference technology will be important for cross-functional teams that don't come in on the same days.

Four-fifths of the companies I helped guide in returning to the office chose to save costs on remodeling for pandemic safety. How? They either mandated vaccination for all employees, or only permitted vaccinated employees to return to the office. If you do the same, you'll save substantially on remodeling costs.

To minimize liability, you'll want to keep to [current OSHA guidelines](#) about masking and social distancing while they're still in effect. Still, the remodeling investments are mainly relevant for addressing employee safety and risk of COVID spread. Given [CDC guidelines](#) permitting indoor gatherings of fully-vaccinated people, you'll minimize COVID risks and employee anxiety by making your office for vaccinated people only.

The one-fifth of the companies that chose to permit unvaccinated people in the office decided to invest into substantial remodeling and frequent cleaning, following [OSHA guidelines](#). That remodeling included installing commercial HEPA filters, physical barriers, hygiene stations, providing PPE, and so on.

Revising Performance Evaluation

Too many managers and companies [still rely](#) on "time in the office" as a primary measure of evaluating performance. That transformed into "time logged on" during the pandemic's remote work. Such a focus led to a race to the bottom of employees logging in more time, including after hours. Doing so not only compromises work/life balance and mental health. It also fails to measure what truly matters in employee performance: how much they contribute to the company's bottom line.

As the surveys cited earlier show, many employees do feel concerned about the possibility that working remotely might undermine their career growth, compared to those who come to the office. Top leaders also feel [some concerns](#) about this potential problem. A focus on contribution to the company in performance evaluation, combined with regularly scheduled evaluations, will allay such concerns.

Your employee performance evaluation system needs to move away completely from relying on

time worked. Instead, it has to focus on employee productivity. On the one hand, that involves their performance on individual tasks. On the other, that involves their contribution to collaborative projects, mostly in their own team, but also in temporary cross-functional project teams and ad-hoc committees.

The companies I helped guide transitioned to regular, ideally weekly or at least every 2 weeks, performance evaluations of team members by team leaders. Some also added an occasional [360-degree](#) evaluation component by one's teammates and other stakeholders once every month or couple of months.

The weekly performance evaluation takes place during brief check-in and review meetings of 15-30 minutes of each team member with their team leader. These should be in-person for hybrid workers and virtual for fully remote workers. 24 hours before each meeting, the employee submits a concise report, containing:

- Their top three accomplishments - whether individual or collaborative - for the past week, and any other relevant accomplishments, compared to what they planned to accomplish
- Any challenges, anticipated or unanticipated, that they experienced in achieving their goals for the week
- How they addressed these challenges and/or how they plan to address these challenges going forward
- Their efforts to improve their professional development against goals that the employee agreed to with the team leader on their quarterly review
- A numerical self-evaluation of their performance for the week on all of these areas, typically on a range of 0 to 4 (0 = greatly below expectation, 1 = somewhat below expectations, 2 = meeting expectations, 3 = somewhat exceeding expectations, 4 = greatly exceeding expectations)
- Their plans for next week's top three accomplishments, addressing challenges, professional growth, and any other relevant plans for next week

The supervisor then responds to the report in writing at least two hours before the meeting. That involves:

- Comparing and assessing the accomplishments for this week against the plan from the prior week
- Evaluating how the team member addressed any challenges remaining from the past week, as well as new ones arising this week
- Assessing their professional growth against previously-set goals for the quarter
- Approving or suggesting revisions to the employee's plans for next week
- Either approves the employee's self-evaluation or suggests they discuss it at the weekly meeting

During the check-in meeting, the team leader and member discuss anything that needs to be clarified from the report. There, the leader coaches the employee as needed on improving their ability to accomplish weekly goals, address challenges, and grow professionally. The supervisor also addresses any issues surrounding the self-evaluation, revising it up or down. They explain their reasoning, give the employee a chance to respond, and then the supervisor makes the final call.

This rating is important, as it gets fed into the team member's quarterly performance report. That report is largely determined by the weekly evaluations, which make up anywhere from 60-80% of the employee's final score for the quarter. If you have team evaluations, they should make up about 20%. The supervisor also gives an overall score for the quarter, which makes up

the remaining 20%.

With this task-based performance evaluation system, each employee knows, very clearly, how they're doing at all times. They know what they need to do to improve, both in their tasks and in their professional growth. Problems can be caught and addressed early, rather than blindsiding team members in their quarterly review. This system minimizes concerns about career growth via proximity to supervisors by team members who come to the office a couple of days per week vs. those working remotely.

Adapt Your Culture

Culture refers to that social and emotional glue that bonds your employees together into a community of belonging, motivates employees, and protects against burnout. Culture centers on the norms, habits, and practices that determine how you collaborate together, and the values that guide your community into the increasingly-disrupted future.

In the emergency of the lockdowns, companies transposed their office culture-style of collaboration to remote work. That's like forcing a square peg into a round hole. You can do it if you push hard enough, but you'll break off the corners. In this case, the pegs mean much of the sense of connection that integrates your employees into your company culture. That peg will do in an emergency, but in the longer run will wobble and eventually break.

No wonder so many suffered from [work-from-home burnout](#) and [Zoom fatigue](#), and felt increasingly disconnected from their employers. Unfortunately, the large majority of companies tried to address culture-related problems through day-to-day tactics borrowed from in-office practices, such as through Zoom happy hours. Only a select few took the strategic approach of [revising their company culture](#) to fit the needs of remote work. Such companies had [much better](#) retention.

As you're returning to the office, you need to make a strategic adaptation of your culture for your new hybrid model. To do so, you need to recognize the problems inherent in the emergency switch to remote work that harm company culture and facilitate burnout and disengagement. Namely, remote work, when approached un-strategically, leads to a deprivation of our basic human need for connection.

At heart, we human beings are tribal creatures and long to feel connected and belong to a community. Our work community offers a [key source of fulfillment](#) for many of us. We work together, we support each other, we celebrate each other's triumphs and support each other through losses, we connect to something much [bigger than ourselves](#). Work-from-home cuts us off from much of our ability to connect effectively to our colleagues as human beings, rather than little squares on a screen.

Many companies try to replace the office culture glue of social and emotional connection through endless work meetings with your team. On top of that are the semi-forced socializations of Zoom happy hours and similar activities that transpose in-person bonding events into virtual formats. Unfortunately, such activities [don't work well](#).

Have you ever started your remote work day at 9 AM sitting in your home office chair, had a series of meetings, and finished it at 5 PM feeling much more exhausted than if you'd had a

similar series of meetings at work? This experience has grown to be called “Zoom fatigue.” It’s a real experience, but it’s not about Zoom itself, or any other videoconference software.

The big challenge stems from our intuitive expectations about such meetings bringing us energy through connecting to people, but failing to get our basic need for connection met. In-person meetings, even if they’re strictly professional, still get us to connect on a human-to-human level. And of course, most meetings have some social components.

By contrast, our emotions just don’t process videoconference meetings as truly connecting us on a human-to-human gut level. Yet our gut, usually without our conscious awareness, still intuitively anticipates videoconference meetings to bring us energy and connection. It’s inevitably disappointing, resulting in a feeling of drain, exhaustion, and stress. Zoom happy hours are even worse than regular work meetings in this regard. They’re supposed to make us feel connected, and our gut has even more elevated expectations. That results in more of a feeling of let-down than regular work meetings. No wonder employees are [demanding fewer virtual meetings](#).

The hybrid model of coming in once or more per week will help address this issue for most employees. Still, it would be helpful for there to be effective virtual connecting activities on non-office days. These activities are far more important for those employees who work remotely full-time, only coming in for quarterly team-building and strategic planning activities.

You need to replace bonding activities from office culture with native virtual bonding activities. These activities should be specifically distinct from office culture-based ones, so that our gut reactions don’t have elevated expectations and they should also take advantage of digital technology.

For instance, here’s an activity that almost all of my clients implement, namely a “Morning Update” for each 4-8 people team inside their company. They establish a separate space in their collaboration software dedicated to personal, non-work discussions by team members. Every morning - whether they come to the office or work at home - all team members send a message answering the following questions: 1) How are you doing overall? 2) How are you feeling right now? 3) What’s been interesting in your life recently outside of work? 4) What’s going on in your work: what’s going well, and what are some challenges? 5) What is one thing about you that most other team members do not know about?

Employees are encouraged to post photos or videos as part of their answers. They are also asked to respond to at least three other employees who made an update that day.

Note that most of these questions are about life outside of work, and aim to help people get to know each other. They humanize team members to each other, helping them get to know each other as human beings. There’s also one work question, focusing on helping team members learn what others are working on right now. That question helps them collaborate together more effectively.

Then, during the day, team members use that same channel for personal sharing. Anyone who feels inspired can share about what’s going in their life and respond to others who do so. The combination of mandated morning updates combined with the autonomy of the personal sharing provides a good balance for building relationships and cultivating trust that fits the different preferences and personalities of the company’s employees.

Encourage all members of a team to spend an hour or more per day coworking digitally with their teammates when they're not in the office. What this means is getting on a Zoom or Microsoft Teams call, turning microphones off but leaving speakers on with video optional, and then working on your own tasks. This experience replicates the benefit of a shared cubicle space, where you work alongside your team members, but on your own work. You get to bond with each other, chat about how things are going in work and life, ask and answer quick clarifying questions, and mentor each other as needed.

However, note that this isn't meant to be a work meeting, and you shouldn't intend to have any lengthy conversations during it; do a separate call with a teammate if you need to have a longer chat. If you have specific teammates with whom you're collaborating more intensely, you should do a coworking session with them daily in addition to the broader coworking with the team as a whole. Such digital coworking doesn't cause the drain of a typical Zoom meeting; team members typically find it energizing and bonding, helping them both get their work done while feeling more connected to fellow team members.

For working at home, there's an unhealthy expectation that once you start your workday in your home office chair, that you'll keep working for all the time you're sitting there (except for your lunch break). That's not how things work in the office, which has physical and mental breaks built in throughout the day. You took 5-10 minutes to walk from one meeting to another or you went to get your copies from the printer and chatted to a coworker on the way. Those and similar physical and mental breaks, [research shows](#), decrease burnout, improve productivity, and reduce mistakes. That's why you should strongly encourage your employees to take at least a 10-minute break every hour during remote work. At least half of those breaks should involve [physical activity](#), such as stretching or walking around, to counteract the [dangerous effects](#) of prolonged sitting.

A big challenge with telework relates to the loss of mentoring for junior staff from senior colleagues. To address the loss of mentoring support, pair up your junior and/or younger members with senior staff. That applies especially to the junior staff who stay working remotely, but will also benefit those who occasionally come to the office.

This will be good not just for the guidance that senior mentors can give. It will also help address the lack of social connection in a virtual workplace, for both senior and junior employees. Mentors and mentees should also do a co-working session with each other daily. Again, this session shouldn't be intended as a meeting, but a time to work on your own tasks, while asking clarifying questions as needed.

Make sure to have one senior staff member from the junior colleague's immediate team, but also one from a different team. One of the biggest challenges for company culture for remote workers, and to a lesser extent remote workers, is the decrease in cross-functional connections across staff. For instance, [research shows](#) that the number of connections made by new hires in the workplace decreased by 17% during the pandemic, compared to the period before the pandemic. Since the successful accomplishment of company goals often requires cross-functional collaboration, such loss of connections does not bode well for long-term company success.

Fortunately, [scholars found](#) that connecting junior staff working remotely to senior staff during the pandemic worked very effectively to expand the network of junior staff. You should follow this research to inform your mentoring program.

As you make your plans, prepare for cultural re-onboarding as part of your return to the office. That involves rebuilding a sense of connection and belonging among your employees, between each other and to the company culture - practices, habits, norms, and values - as a whole. Make sure to educate your employees on how the culture will be different in a hybrid-first model with some staff fully remote. Give your employees sufficient time to prepare themselves mentally, emotionally, and practically for a return to the office. Make sure to get their buy-in for reintegration into an office-based culture.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the New Normal

Surveys find that there's a much greater desire among minorities for a hybrid or fully remote model. A case in point: a [study by Slack](#) found that 79% of white knowledge workers wanted either a hybrid or fully remote model, but a whopping 97% of Black knowledge workers preferred such work. The study suggests that hybrid and especially fully remote work facilitates DEI concerns because it reduces instances of overt and covert discrimination.

Still, while overall remote work helps minorities, discrimination continues in the digital world, according to a [recent report](#) from the nonprofit Project Include. Technology-based forms of discrimination range from public bullying of minorities on group video calls to one-on-one harassment via chat and email and other issues.

Another problem relates to who gets to speak and who gets interrupted. [Surveys find](#) that women are harmed by moving all meetings to video calls, since men much more frequently interrupt or ignore women in virtual meetings than during in-person ones.

You should assume that some or all of these problems are happening in your company, unless you have a strong reason to believe otherwise. Survey your employees to find out what's happening in DEI and remote work. Institute appropriate policies, monitoring, and training to address these problems. You'll want to make a refresher in DEI-related training a part of your cultural re-onboarding.

Train Employees for the Hybrid-First Model

Hybrid work is a distinct third way, neither in-office nor fully remote work. You'll want to train your hybrid workers on how to work effectively in a hybrid-first model. For those who remain remote, you'll want to train them on how to collaborate successfully with their hybrid colleagues.

Your hybrid workers must learn to divide their work activities. Previously, they spent their time either fully remotely or fully in-office. Now, they must learn to do different things at home and in the office.

The office will be, primarily, a place of collaboration: with their whole team, with individual colleagues, or with cross-functional teams. Secondly, it will serve as a place to work on tasks on which they anticipate a frequent need to consult with fellow team members. That might be tasks that are more complex or tasks with which they're less familiar than other team members.

Your staff must learn how to organize and plan their activities and communication differently than before to maximize their effectiveness both in the office and at home. At home, they'll work

on their own individual tasks. They'll also prepare for and communicate about collaborative tasks in preparation for coming to the office.

Given how infrequently they'll be coming to the office, each in-office hour will have more at stake. Failing to get ready for such office activities effectively will not only undermine their productivity, but also that of their team members.

Changing the way we work takes a great deal of energy and effort. The lockdowns caused an ad-hoc, emergency shift to remote work. As a result, many employees - and companies - developed suboptimal patterns of collaboration. By providing company-wide guidance on best practices for hybrid work, and training your employees on doing so, you'll help set them up for success for your new permanent set-up.

If you didn't do so yet, make sure to provide training in effective [virtual communication](#) and collaboration as part of doing so. Too few companies provided such training during the pandemic, perceiving remote work as a temporary emergency. Given that you'll be shifting to hybrid work permanently, with some workers remaining full-time remote, it's time to upskill your workers in this field.

It's notoriously hard to communicate and collaborate effectively even in-person. That's why many experts made a good living before the pandemic helping leaders and teams improve their communication. Effective communication becomes much more difficult when in-office teams become virtual teams. One of the biggest problems stems from much more communication shifting to text through collaboration apps such as Slack and Microsoft Teams. As a result, much of the nonverbal communication is lost, leading to a huge increase in miscommunication.

That's especially challenging since a key purpose of nonverbals is to communicate our emotions. That would seem to be intuitive, moving to virtual work has sorely endangered our emotional connection and mutual understanding. Phone calls and videoconferences help address these problems to some extent. Still, even videoconferencing doesn't convey nearly as much body language as in-person meetings. When you have 8 people in small boxes on your laptop screen it's hard to read their body language well. Also, you only get the body language of facial expressions, and miss the 90% of the body that's not on camera.

In the office, face-to-face interactions help employees notice problems and nip them in the bud. You pop into each other's office or run into each other in the hallway or share a meal in the cafeteria, talk briefly about the project you're working on together, and catch potential problems while getting on the same page about next steps to solving them. Unfortunately, this just doesn't happen in virtual settings. There's no natural way to have these casual interactions that are surprisingly vital to effective collaboration and teamwork. There are particular challenges around people-related problems. Body language and voice tone are especially important to noticing brewing people problems. Virtual communication provides us fewer opportunities to notice such issues.

Training in effective virtual communication and collaboration helps address these problems. For instance, training in emotional and social intelligence as adapted to virtual settings will help employees communicate and collaborate much more effectively. A case in point: they need to ask intentionally how other people feel, not think, about their proposed ideas. Previously, in the office, people's feelings came through easily through body language and tone of voice. Of course, that doesn't happen in virtual work environments. So you need to teach people to take deliberate steps that would evaluate the temperature of the room in order to improve virtual

collaboration. Many other techniques exist for effective virtual communication and collaboration.

Provide guidelines for and training in work/life balance, customized for hybrid and fully-remote employees. As the surveys cited above indicate, many staff feel overworked and burned out, unable to disconnect and obliged to respond to work messages outside of work hours. Unfortunately, some team leaders might be encouraging such behaviors. It falls to senior leaders, then, to reinforce the boundaries. That includes regular public reminders to employees to stick to preset hours and discouraging the sending of any form of communication after hours. It also includes communicating to mid- and lower-level managers that you're serious and won't tolerate them encouraging burnout to meet their goals. Ask them to speak privately with and discourage any employees who regularly work after hours. Establish a [wellness team](#) empowered to contact employees who regularly log on to your collaboration technology or send emails more than a couple of hours after the workday ends or begins. The only exception should be an unexpected emergency that shouldn't happen more often than once per month.

Note: if employees are underperforming in their weekly reports, it doesn't mean they should simply work more and violate these boundaries. It might mean they need more professional development or better equipment for remote work. It might also mean that they're overloaded with tasks that should be handed off to someone else. It might even mean they're no longer the right fit for the job. What you don't want is someone burning out and resigning, and then have no one left to handle their mountain of tasks.

Funding for Home Offices

With the hybrid-first model, and some workers fully remote, the home office of your employees is now a permanent arrangement for your company. You'll want to make sure to help them avoid the situation too many still face: using their kitchen table for office space, relying on 5-year-old laptops, and having the basic broadband package with no backup options.

You need to provide a separate budget for your employees to address this problem. That can include funding a comfortable and well-equipped home office. It can mean paying for their membership in a coworking space if they have no adequate room in their home or if they feel unable to work effectively without others around them.

To mitigate risks of internet outages or slowdowns, consider providing them with [hotspot plans](#). You might also address potential issues by encouraging employees to and providing funding for taking a [variety of steps](#) on risk mitigation for their home. Remember, their home is now part of your company, and you bear some responsibility for managing such risks. Include such risk mitigation and backup planning in your business continuity planning and Enterprise Risk Management strategies.

Altogether, an initial fund of \$3,000 for the home office transition, plus an annual budget of \$2,000 for maintenance, should be sufficient for most employees. Add an additional \$500 per year for working parents of young children to address children's needs aimed at improving their home office environment.

Conclusion

The best approach to returning to the office involves a hybrid-first model with some limited full-time remote options. Doing so will enable you to excel in retention and recruitment, boost productivity, re-energize your company culture, offer substantial cost savings, and manage a wide variety of risks. In transitioning strategically to a hybrid-first model, you'll want to survey your employees to get both information and buy-in. Use that information to help your team leaders make decisions about what their team's schedule will look like. Based on that, downsize your office space and reshape it to focus on collaboration versus individual work. Revise your performance evaluation to focus on tasks, not time spent, and ensure a regular weekly evaluation process. Adapt your culture to the new hybrid-first model, including DEI-related issues. Train your staff to succeed in this model and offer appropriate funding for their home office needs. Taking these steps will maximize your competitive advantage in the most important resource: your people.

Bio: [Dr. Gleb Tsipursky](#) is an internationally-renowned thought leader in future-proofing and cognitive bias risk management. He serves as the CEO of the boutique future-proofing consultancy [Disaster Avoidance Experts](#), which specializes in helping forward-looking leaders avoid dangerous threats and missed opportunities. A best-selling author, he wrote [Never Go With Your Gut: How Pioneering Leaders Make the Best Decisions and Avoid Business Disasters](#) (Career Press, 2019), [The Blindspots Between Us: How to Overcome Unconscious Cognitive Bias and Build Better Relationships](#) (New Harbinger, 2020), and [Resilience: Adapt and Plan for the New Abnormal of the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic](#) (Changemakers Books, 2020). His cutting-edge thought leadership was featured in over 550 articles and 450 interviews in prominent venues such as [USA Today](#), [Inc. Magazine](#), [CBS News](#), [Time](#), [Business Insider](#), [Government Executive](#), [Fortune](#), [The Chronicle of Philanthropy](#), [Fast Company](#), and [elsewhere](#). His expertise stems from [his background](#) of over 20 years of [consulting, coaching, speaking, and training](#) on change management, decision making, and risk management strategy. It also comes from his [research background](#) as a behavioral scientist with over 15 years in academia, including 7 as a professor at Ohio State University. Contact him at [Gleb\[at\]DisasterAvoidanceExperts\[dot\]com](mailto:Gleb[at]DisasterAvoidanceExperts[dot]com), follow him on [LinkedIn](#), Twitter [@gleb_tsipursky](#), Instagram [@dr_gleb_tsipursky](#), Medium [@dr_gleb_tsipursky](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), and [RSS](#), and get a free copy of the [Assessment on Dangerous Judgment Errors in the Workplace](#) by signing up for his free [Wise Decision Maker Course](#).

Contact: For a free consultation, email Gleb@DisasterAvoidanceExperts.com, or call 614-407-4016.