

The future of work - Refuting remote work - Responding to Elon's return to work mandate

Written by Seth Corker on Benevolent Bytes

I've been a remote worker for a while now, I'm a Software Engineer working in London and did a mixture of remote work and on-site before the pandemic. During the pandemic, I continued to work remotely and still do today. So, this frustrating misconception that remote work is not as effective and everyone should be in an office is **absurd**.

I saw a tweet of an email Elon Musk sent out to his executive staff, I'd like to take about it from my perspective.

Here's the message:

Anyone who wishes to do remote work must be in the office for a minimum (and I mean *minimum*) of 40 hours per week or depart Tesla. This is less than we ask of factory workers.

If there are particularly exceptional contributors for whom this is impossible, I will review and approve those exceptions directly.

Moreover, the "office" must be a main Tesla office, not a remote branch office unrelated to the job duties, for example being responsible for Fremont factory human relations, but having your office be in another state.

Breaking down the email

Musk is forcing executive level employees to be go to the office for 40 hours a week with an ultimatum of come to the office or resign. Forty hours is already a lot, so to be a minimum for anyone is this toxic idea that more hours means more productivity; you're at the behest of the company that employees you. The phrase, "This is less than we ask of factory workers", is also telling. Musk is implying that workers on the factory floor exceed 40 hours a week — sounds like a recipe for overwork, dissatisfaction, and burnout.

Musk provides an escape hatch for some, "If there are particularly exceptional contributors for whom this is impossible, I will review and approve those exceptions directly.". Let's be honest, this feels like a way to provide the illusion of choice. You can bet he's unlikely to actually give exceptions, and most people probably won't even ask for fear of ramifications.

Why this attitude to remote work is ridiculous

This attitude to remote work is hostile without giving any reasons besides, some other employees do it, so should you. Obviously, it's not possible for everyone to work remotely, it depends on the role you're doing, but where possible remote work has many benefits for employees and employers. There is no reason to vilify flexibility. Proponents of returning to the office fail to give good reasons to do so, they may mention productivity, or they prefer to see people face to face but, neither of these are strong reasons to argue for everyone commuting too long for too little benefit.

You are a person

A job does not own you. You are not beholden to every whim of your employer, no matter how much it feels like it. As a society, we need to stand up against this American (USA) CEO mentality where overwork is desired, full dedication is demanded and productivity means spending 40+ hours a week at a specific physical location.

Working a job for 40 hours a week with a commute of 1h each way, you're really dedicating 50 hours a week to your employer. How much time does that leave you to actually live your life? You might have a few hours of usable time each day, time when you're not physically or mentally exhausted from work, or thinking about work. You're a person. Not a cog in a machine.

Does remote work always work?

No, there are cases where remote work isn't a good fit, where you're providing a service that is in a physical location, but there are countless jobs that don't require 100% of your time to be spent in an office.

My current employer and my previous employer are remote first companies. Yes, I'm in a privileged position because I'm a software engineer that allows to be 100% remote if I choose. Am I fully remote in practice? No. I go to the office once a week to meet with colleagues in my team, and I still live an hour away from the office. The difference is that's my choice, if I don't feel like commuting one week, then I don't. Could I be 100% remote? Yes.

The flexibility of remote means I can do the things that used to fall by the wayside pre-pandemic when I was commuting every weekday. I can take my cat to the vet in the middle of the day. I can go to a café, run errands and still get sh*t done. You get the idea. Before working remotely, it was a real pain to schedule things into my day. Need to go to the bank or post office? Good luck, you might try to finish 15 min early to beat the queue of everyone else doing the same thing and still be disappointed to see a queue out the door. Now, I can mould my schedule to fit me. Being in a physical location can actually be detrimental to how I work.

Downsides of the office

The office isn't where I'm most productive, it's actually the opposite due to distractions, and the commute doesn't help either.

Distractions

I don't get as much work done in the office. There are just more distractions. Open offices have become the norm, and they're loud environments. Even when I used to go in every workday, I'd wear noise-cancelling headphones the majority of my day just so I could focus. If you *were* lucky enough to have a separate office without interruptions, is there anything in the office that allows you to do your work better there than anywhere else? If I'm sitting in a room with my laptop, why does that room need to be loosely connected to other people sitting in separate rooms vs. being in a home office instead? It doesn't.

Another distraction is people. It can be a good distraction, a collaborative ad-hoc discussion or a bad distraction, a coworker chatting loudly across the room. Maybe a fire alarm drill for the building (happened last week when I was in the office). You don't really have much control over this. In a remote environment, you can set do not disturb and send messages asynchronously. You manage how *you* communicate. In an office, distractions are more abrupt and have an inherent sense of urgency.

Commute

My commute is an hour each way, could I live closer to the office? Sure. Will that double my London rent? Undoubtedly. I put up with it but, on the days I do commute, it's more stressful, and I have less time.

Usually, I like to read blogs, learn about new libraries and frameworks in the morning. On days that I commute, this isn't possible, there's no 4G/5G the whole way to the office, and it's indispersed with short periods spent walking, so it limits what I can do. These days are also inherently stressful, I have to set an alarm just in case I sleep in (though I never have), I have to figure out what the weather is like and dress appropriately. Pack my backpack with everything I need for the day, and then navigate public transport.

None of these things are hard individually, but it takes more time. I'm spending my mental energy on logistics in the morning and afternoon of days that I commute. Valuable mental capacity I could be better using elsewhere.

Benefits of an office

The biggest benefits I've experienced by going into the office is collaboration and time spent not strictly doing my usual role.

Face -to-face collaboration

Collaboration in person around a whiteboard is just easier in person. It's not as pretty, it's definitely worse to look back on because a low-contrast photo doesn't really do it justice but, in the moment it's great. This isn't to say it's impossible to collaborate effectively over video conferencing, but we've surely perfected in-person because we've been doing it much longer as a species longer.

There's also little moments of collaboration between individuals, maybe someone's working on a problem, and they need a hand – you can instantly pair with them. The only setup is pulling up a chair and bringing over your laptop. These little moments don't require any ceremony like they do working remotely. The same can be said about ad-hoc idea generation too. You can huddle around and generate ideas instantly.

Everything but work

The other benefit is team bonding. I don't usually get nearly as much done in the office as when I am at home. That's not to say time in the office isn't a total loss. Time spent chatting, those "watercooler moments", coffee breaks and lunches with the team are great. They bring you closer together and allow you to get to know your

team a different way, outside just a 2D video stream. This means you're more likely to empathise with your teammates. You get to know them better, and this is something that takes a lot more effort remotely.

The future is flexible

I believe in a flexibility is the future. It's the future I want to live in because for so long we've spent our working lives with a large imbalance. Every decision you make is constrained. Choosing where to live, for example: - How far is the commute? - Is there public transport nearby? - Do I live closer to reduce the commute, but pay more?

Remote work shifts that balance a little more towards the individual and away from enterprise. I think there should be more options when it comes to working. Some people work best in an office and willingly do so, others work better at home.

Currently, I like a hybrid approach. It gives me the best of both worlds, I can see colleagues at work and get into a deep focus state at home. I want a future where everyone can have this flexibility, and it's not impeded by the ideas of a select vocal few.

Photo by Chris Montgomery on Unsplash