The God-Shaped Workplace

By Anders Torvill Bjorvand

What´s the future of the workplace, especially with the post-pandemic rise to glory of the home office and remote work? Will the future workplace merely be a loosely connected network of contracted remote workers? Will work in the future just be a contractual obligation in order to support the worker´s social life happening entirely outside of the workplace? Or should the workplace be a vital social fabric of society, providing psychological safety and well-being at the place where people spend the largest portion of their waking hours? I believe so, and I will attempt to outline both a why and a how.

Our Workplaces Organize the Cultural Mandate (Gen 1:28)

Many things can be said about the modern corporation and its one-sided focus on increasing the value for its owners. Being a Christian, the owner of the corporation is ultimately God—even when the earthly owners are not believers. As flawed as our societal structures are, they are still the human response to God´s command in Genesis to be many and to flourish. Our cities are but shadows of the promise of God´s city in the book of Revelation. Still, I believe that Christlikeness is not only the character of Christ shaping us as individuals, but it is also “on earth as it is in heaven.” One company at a time, one neighborhood at a time, one city at a time, one nation at a time, we strive to reflect God´s glory by what we build and in how we organize. Fellowship and community are integral to God´s very character, so building societal structures is both a means and an end.

The Worker As an Image Bearer of Christ

A person spends about half of his or her waking hours of any given week being at work or traveling to work. This has got to matter! If we as business leaders and owners see every one of our employees as image bearers of Christ, how will that affect how we treat them and the responsibilities we assign to them?

For a Christian leader, no matter how important your mission, an employee can never be a means to an end. I would argue that looking for the reflection of Christ in each individual is the starting point of what it´s all about. The well-being of your co-workers is an important end goal in and of itself. And I am not advocating a carefree job description void of challenges, struggles, and even some pain—quite the contrary. But through these challenges, help them thrive, reach their potential, and find joy and fulfillment in these daily tasks—small and big.

With that as a platform, we should establish measures that will continually transform that person toward even more Christlikeness. You might say, isn´t that the job of the local church and the responsibility of the pastor? Yes, indeed. And as a Christian businessperson, you are also the Church—the body of Christ. And as a Christian

business leader, you share in the pastoral responsibility of shepherding and discipling your co-workers.

Welcoming God´s Presence in the Workplace

These are my very personal perspectives and practices, not an attempt to establish doctrine. However, the following are some ideas that I´ve found helpful.

A workplace is an extended family. Boundaries are, of course, different in the workplace from that in a private setting, but I appreciate an atmosphere of vulnerability—where real-life struggles can be shared and where people can receive real care. When people dare to be vulnerable, they will also open up to the bigger questions in life.

Serve your people. Aim to give praise when people do good, and step in and give cover when they fail. Accountability and honesty are important to learn and improve, but never underestimate the power of affirmation and letting your people know that you´ve got their back.

Encouraging both individual and shared prayer practices is one of the most important things you can do to welcome God´s presence and to seek out what He is up to in your line of business. In prayer, you can seek His counsel for the challenges you face and His perspectives for the people you serve. How you organize this will depend on the mix of people you have. Never apologize for including prayer in the business practices, but do it without intruding on people. Make it clear what you are doing, and invite people in. And make sure that those who don´t opt-in don´t experience negative consequences due to that. Invitation to prayer should always feel safe. In our company, we have a shared prayer time before lunch every day at all our locations.

Following up on that, I would argue for an inclusive and merit-based hiring policy—not just for compliance or performance reasons but also because we are called to all nations. The cultural mandate covers all creation.

Welcoming God´s presence also includes providing a bigger meaning to all your people—something that goes beyond the everyday struggle. Ask God what giants He wants your team to slay for His kingdom, and find everyday words for it so that everyone can take ownership.

Bringing Forth the Peace of God in the Workplace

Psychological safety in a team is defined as “a shared belief held by members of a team that it’s OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes—all without fear of negative consequences.” [1]

Or as the Bible states it in Philippians 4:5–7:
"Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

God reconciling with His creation is all about bringing His peace to all areas and circumstances of life. The shalom of God (peace of God) will redeem His creation back to His purposes and back to His heart.

Such a workplace will be characterized by the fruits of the spirit that Paul lists in Galatians 5: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” And who wouldn´t want that?

The Bible and new research on psychological safety go well together. And the research tells us that a high degree of psychological safety will give your team increased performance in learning, courage, creativity, and efficiency. [1,2]

In a God-shaped workplace:

- People can bring their all—personality, talents, and skills.
- People will feel safe enough to take risks.
- People will not fear honesty after a failure.

A God-shaped workplace seeks excellence but without pride and pretentiousness. Rather, it inhibits vulnerability and awareness of its inherent weakness.

The Physical Shape of a God-Shaped Workplace

As believers, we are often well-versed in the spiritual aspects and the underlying values of the workplace. But could it be that also the physical shape of the workplace matters? I would claim a hard yes.

To what extent can the physical workspace help people thrive? And how can it make people interact both creatively and efficiently?

In the ‘60s and ‘70s, the Scandinavian trade unions had a major legislative emphasis on physical factors for white collar workers—things like daylight and windows, number of square meters per office and per person, air quality, etc.

In the 2000s, for some reason, Big Tech in Silicon Valley led the way with workplace initiatives that encompassed more and more aspects of the life of their employees. This gave way to beautiful campuses with restaurant-quality food, room for play, and leisure and recreation, as well as practical solutions for dry-cleaning, child care, and whatever interest group imaginable. The campuses were also shaped with a high degree of freedom and choice for the individual. But all these liberties, contrary to what one might think, led to the workplace enslaving the workers—not too different from Pleasure Island in the story of Pinocchio, where all the kids were eventually transformed to donkeys. The modern campuses are defining and setting some pretty extended boundaries for the lives of the employees. This has, of course, not been void of intentionality. Sometimes, the worst options present themselves as pure goodness, and what seems like freedom can sometimes be the jail you don´t realize you´re in. You fail to see its walls and who is really guarding its watchtowers.

Neither technology nor the physical organization of work is neutral, and we need to pay attention.

Does the God-shaped Workplace Fit in a Cubicle World?

Saving space, cutting costs, and increasing collaboration and interaction—that´s the promise of the cubicle offices, cell offices, coworking spaces, and dynamic "book your desk for the day" offices. But the research is back on these open office spaces, and we need to take a hard, new look. There has been an elephant in the room with regards to this direction of office design—both with regard to health and efficiency.

A large study performed across a wide variety of industries involving white collar workers (post Covid) recently concluded that the average sick leave of a person with an assigned desk in an open landscape is 32% higher than that of a person with an assigned office with the possibility to close the door. [3]

There is no reason to believe that this was much better pre-Covid, but Covid has also changed how people relate to offices. That´s our next subject.

It has also been shown, contrary to intuition, that the amount of eye contact with co-workers in an open landscape is actually lower than what you would see in a setting with individual personal offices. [3] One reason for the surprising lack of basic social interaction in the cubicle world might be that people avoid staying in such offices, and another is that they try to do a virtual escape into their work and their noise-cancellation headphones in order to cope.

Not surprisingly then, researchers have found that remote work inhibits psychological safety because many behaviors and attitudes associated with psychological safety have proven to arise from spontaneous interaction and inclusion that happens when people meet. [4]

The God-Shaped Workplace in Light of the Home Office Revolution

During Covid, workers were forced to work from home. This led to a huge rise in competency and familiarity with online collaboration tools. People sat for hours at length on Teams, Zoom, and similar platforms. Having north of five such meetings per day became more the norm than the exception. People also invested in furniture and A/V equipment to make it convenient to work from home. Naturally, people got accustomed to the efficiency of meeting with no travel and the significantly shorter commute time.

So it was no surprise that quite a lot had changed when people finally returned to the office after Covid. Norwegian researchers visiting some of the most modern office facilities in the country gave the following observation in summary: "On our travels to observe workplaces, we see the stylish social zones that resemble state of the art

cafes, and they are mostly empty. There is too much noise there, while the tiny booths are always full. A lot of people choose to work from home instead."

Where are we at when pods the size of a small shower cabinet are considered suitable workspaces?
Where are we at when people choose to work from home because the office is simply not suitable?

So not only do a lot of people choose to work from home, but in many situations, the office layout actually forces them to do so. You simply cannot have online meetings in open spaces due to noise and privacy.

The flexibility of the home office is a great addition to the kinds of workplaces where work can be performed remotely. But there´s an elephant in the room with regard to the home office, and we need to talk about it.

The fellowship of the workplace has intrinsic value, which is more significant than the preferences of any individual. It´s difficult to stand up as an employer and restrict the use of home offices. Why say no to what people prefer, right? And as stated, flexibility is an obvious benefit to everyone. Now people can work from home when they feel a little under the weather instead of calling in for a full sick day just to avoid infecting co-workers. People can now handle emergencies or family issues while still holding on to the basic requirements from work. That is obviously beneficial, so I am not talking about that. I am talking about those who argue that one office day per month or two per week is sufficient—or even more so, those who argue for the 100% remote office for everyone. I strongly disagree and will share some arguments here.

On October 4th, 2021, Meta (Facebook) had a major global service disruption. Just a few months earlier, the company had made some pretty bold statements about letting any worker operate from home as much as they´d like. It was the woke thing to say at the moment, and Silicon Valley CEOs had long been lining up to be perceived as liberty-loving modern leaders—giving their coworkers their freedom. Four days after the outage, the company announced that remote work at that scale was ending

immediately. The lack of accountability and coordination that led to the major downtime was attributed to the dynamics of remote work.

Norwegian researchers discovered upon assessing work life during Covid that the two groups in the workplace that had experienced the forced home office as the most stressful were: [5]

- The young and newly recruited.
- Managers with a lot of personell responsibilities.

For both these groups, the social fabric was no longer tangible, and it became difficult to cope. So what do we do when we lose the young and those who are tasked to care for the people of the organization—if the mission remains the only fabric holding the organization together?

My industry (IT) has led the way in remote working—not only because we can but also due to the scarcity of workers, making it difficult for an employer to set some demands on the individuals to take social responsibility for colleagues. Also, the vast amount of outsourcing and offshoring has made the boundaries of the physical workplace very blurry—especially after Covid. I would like to be very clear: the seemingly idyllic image of a worker permanently sitting all alone on a beach in Bali working remotely represents an influence of the Anti-Christ in our world. This model is simply taking away from the fellowship and highlighting the hedonistic and separatist inclination of man.

In my business, we have worked cross culturally and from multiple locations for close to two decades. Used in appropriate ways, online collaboration tools are wonderful. When Covid hit, a lot of it was business as usual for us. But having lived with this for more than just a couple of years, we had already come to appreciate the necessity to build culture, to invest in deep relations, and to make sure that everyone had one physical primary location that they work out of—even though teams are put together across several of our locations.

Make Fellowship Great Again!

In conclusion, I believe the workplace is a major arena for human flourishing. People meeting and collaborating holds intrinsic value, and in some small way, it reflects a significant trait of God. So to you business leaders: pastor your flock, and make fellowship great again!

Sources:

[1] https://hbr.org/2023/02/what-is-psychological-safety

[2] Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams, 350/Administrative Science Quarterly, 44 (1999): 350-383, Amy Edmondson, Harvard University.

[3] Office design, telework from home, and self-certified sickness absence: A cross-sectional study of main and moderating effects in a nationally representative sample, Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health, January 167th 2023, Borge RH, Johannessen HA, Fostervold KI, Nielsen MB.

[4] What Happens to Psychological Safety When Going Remote?, IEEE Software, December 9th 2022, A. Tkalich, D. Šmite, N. H. Andersen and N. B. Moe.

[5] Digitalt samarbeid i en hybrid hverdag: Work from X, Ela Sjølie og Nils Brede Moe, NTNU/Sintef, Trondheim, Norway.