

## **4 Myths About In-Person Work, Dispelled**

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**Summary.** The ability to work remotely has become more valued than ever before, and that's not going away, particularly among younger workers. Even in organizations that remain committed to offering employees significant remote or hybrid work, there is often a... [more](#)

Employee engagement has reached frightening lows in just about every industry, which understandably has leaders deeply worried and looking for answers to see them through the Great Reshuffle. All of this trouble started, so the logic often goes, when the pandemic forced many into remote work and we stopped *being*

*together*. Surely bringing people back to working side by side and returning to in-person gatherings like learning events is the magical solution. Right?

Not quite. For starters, surveys consistently show that people are looking for *more* flexibility and choice about where they work, not less. The ability to work remotely has become more valued than ever before, and that's not going away, particularly given that these trends are significantly stronger among younger workers.

Even in organizations that remain committed to offering employees significant remote or hybrid work, there is often a desire among leaders to foster togetherness with a return to in-person learning events.

But as learning professionals, we hear many myths when it comes to what in-person learning — or in-person experiences more generally — can actually achieve. Here, we'll dispel the ones we hear most often and show you how to maximize connection from in-person learning events.

### **Myth #1: In-person learning is more effective**

There is something sneaky about this one. If they were being honest, most people who repeat this myth don't care all that much about learning effectiveness — they just want to bring people physically together, and “learning” seems like a solid justification. However, the idea that learning is more effective in person is demonstrably false. In fact, because it rarely affords opportunities for meaningful practice and feedback, in-person learning often is *less* impactful than well-designed virtual live learning and eLearning.

### **Myth #2: In-person events help create (or strengthen) culture**

Increasingly, we hear leaders argue that in-person learning events are necessary because they're significant contributors to organizational culture. It's worthwhile to consider, for a moment, whether that can even be true. After all, culture is the shared

beliefs, values, norms, and habits that are held and practiced regularly. Culture is about how we work together, how we're expected to behave with one another, the goals we collectively pursue, and the way we respond to challenges and setbacks. In other words, culture is what we experience *all day, every day* working at a particular company — it is decidedly *not* what we experience when we step away from the “normal” routine for various workshops and keynotes with nice buffet dinners and drinks.

People often recall fond memories of attending social and community events away from their desks, but then fall victim to a kind of halo effect, believing that because the experience was fun and rewarding it must also have been impactful in lots of other ways. Such events can be visible and memorable opportunities to celebrate a culture, sure. However, they certainly aren't where culture is built.

### **Myth #3: People need a break from their screens**

There is no question that people are feeling burned out and overworked. Staring at our screens all day and enduring back-to-back virtual meetings does not help. However, the idea that we can solve for the significant work/life balance and mental health issues employees experience by sending them to a conference center for three days to sit in a ballroom and learn about “executive presence” is frankly absurd. If your people are spending too much time staring at their screens every day, then you should encourage them to step away, *frequently* and *daily*, from them. In fact, when attending multiday learning programs and events, many people experience greater stress from the backlog of work and emails that pile up. The solution must be a long-term approach to employee well-being, not a single shot of in-person workshops.

### **Myth #4: Networking and connection can only be done in person**

This myth is the direct result of a particular flavor of risk aversion: If I don't know *how* to do something, it's easier to just say *it can't be done* and call it a day. When we operated mostly in person, we had clear norms and cognitive schemas that provided us with implicit "scripts" for how to interact with people we didn't already know well. Throughout our lives, we watched other people do it, and we absorbed this information. Admittedly, in the early days of the pandemic, trying to get to know people virtually felt very, very weird for those of us who were trying to do it for the first time. We felt lost. Do I keep my camera on? Am I supposed to look at the person speaking...and will they notice if I don't? How do I excuse myself if a conversation gets awkward? Should I be raising my "hand" to speak, or is it okay to just come off mute? Is it okay that my kid keeps running around in the background?

Networking and strengthening new relationships virtually still aren't fully natural to many of us, though the initial panic of the unfamiliar does seem to have faded. Both of us have spent many years working almost exclusively virtually, building many lasting and close friendships with colleagues along the way. With time and a little more practice, we'll do what human beings have always done when new ways of communicating emerged (think of the telephone, emailing, texting, and social media): We'll get the hang of it.

### **When (and how) is it still important to be together?**

All that being said, people *do* want opportunities for in-person connection. A recent survey found that two-thirds of employees want some in-person work or collaboration opportunities post-pandemic. It also found that they want to be a part of a *caring* culture, and the natural expressions of warmth and empathy that give the impression of caring in humans can be clearer and more powerful when we're physically together. That's because we have all of the communication cues at our disposal: words, vocal tone, facial expressions, gestures, and body language. It can even be possible (if appropriate and welcome) to touch hands or hug.

To make the most of those in-person opportunities for connection, we need to make them voluntary, strategic, and intentional:

### **Voluntary**

You may be tempted to think you know what's best for your people, but don't force them to come together if they don't want to. Respect your employees' sense of what's best for them and allow them to decide when and where they will return to in-person gathering as a function of their comfort level and circumstances. Autonomy and the feeling of choice have long been recognized as fundamental human motivators, and the companies that offer more of that can have an advantage in the competition for talent. Our own experience with our learners post-pandemic is that roughly half or more don't want to return to in-person learning when given the opportunity. Leaders should ask themselves: *Am I so sure that being in person is what's needed that I'm willing to risk alienating half of my workforce?*

### **Strategic**

People with little in common apart from the company they work for don't usually do a lot of "connecting" with new people at events. What they do, overwhelmingly, is hang around the people they already know. Yes, new connections *can* happen when unfamiliar groups of people convene for short, episodic experiences; however, in our experience, these interactions tend to be cordial but lacking in substance.

The real value of in-person events lies in deepening existing connections, particularly for teams of people who work together. That's where the opportunity to send "social signals" — signals that convey our respect, liking, and empathy for others — benefit from our ability to amplify them through our physical presence (e.g., through smiles, lasting eye contact, gestures, etc.). These signals matter most for people whose connection is substantive — who have meaningful things in common, work together frequently, or share common goals.

## Intentional

The benefits of in-person connection don't just "happen." Conditions need to be created that encourage something beyond surface-level conversation and small talk, in both structured and unstructured ways. Decades of research have identified the kinds of activities that tend to enhance social bonding, which include:

- **Game playing and creative problem solving:** Creates opportunities for cooperation, coordination, and synchronization. Recent research suggests that teams are more creative when physically together because the relatively narrow cognitive focus induced by video conferencing technology curbs creative idea generation.
- **Storytelling and perspective sharing:** Allows self-expression, the discovery of shared experiences, and the opportunity for affirmation and empathy.
- **Engaging in rituals:** Creates the opportunity to co-experience meaningful shared behaviors that signal a common identity or group membership.
- **Having fun:** Humor and laughter, music, natural movement (e.g., dance), fantasy, anticipation, surprise and, of course, delicious food and drink are universally human sources of pleasure. We feel more connected to those with whom we share moments of joy and delight.

It's worth noting that while being physically together can amplify the impact of these activities, you can absolutely still utilize them virtually to powerful effect. The challenge is often finding ones that work well in a virtual environment. At Ernst & Young LLP, we recently built an online repository of dozens of fun games that teams can play virtually *or* in-person to enhance their connectedness. The games can be filtered by time, team size, and ease of facilitating to help teams find the activity that best suits their needs.

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Our ways of working have been permanently disrupted. We aren't going back, and that isn't at all a bad thing. Sure, we have some things to figure out. Getting to a better tomorrow means being willing to critically question our assumptions about what people need to be engaged, fulfilled, and productive. It means not trying to grasp at what feel like "easy" answers, and instead accepting change and the hard choices that sometimes come with it. It means really listening to our people, trusting their judgment, and using the science of human behavior to create the optimal conditions under which they can connect and thrive. Don't worry...we'll get the hang of it.

*The views reflected in this article are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Ernst & Young LLP or other members of the global EY organization.*

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