

What Makes Work Productive?

To BCG's network around the world,

Of the many colleagues who have shaped my thinking over the years, Yves Morieux—with his unique insights about “smart simplicity” and the connection between context and behavior—has been one of the most influential.

In addition to his two [TED talks](#), which together have garnered more than 6 million views, his writing has consistently shaken up established thinking about keeping employees engaged and running organizations more effectively. I think you'll find his latest article, [The Social Economics of Work and Productivity](#), particularly interesting at a time when there's so much talk about how to design the future of work. It's cowritten by BCG's Diana Dosik, whose TED talk about organizational behavior and the employee journey is another [must-watch video](#).

When COVID-19 lockdowns forced so many of us to work from home, the challenges, of course, were enormous—especially among the most vulnerable members of society. But as employees and their managers scrambled to figure out how to use technological tools in order to keep businesses up and running, “relational productivity”—the term Yves has coined to refer to the economic benefits of human connectedness—surged.

How could a lack of contact lead to greater connectedness and higher productivity?

The forced period of working from home removed the “container” we were used to: the shared workspace, the meetings with the highest-ranking member of the team at the head of the table, the potentially misleading notion that leaders are in touch with their teams because they are all physically together. Without the container, we were left with the authentic content of our connections—or lack thereof. A discovery by subtraction.

Yves and Diana liken this to replacing traffic lights with a roundabout. While the clarity of red, yellow, and green might seem like the safer option, drivers at roundabouts are forced to slow down and make decisions based on active observations. They tend to be more mindful—and, research shows, proceed more safely—than the passive driver responding to a signal.

As the pandemic took away our traffic lights overnight, we learned that intentional connectedness matters more than physical proximity and leads to greater productivity. We also learned the importance of three “relational complementarities” underlying relational productivity: vertical (manager to employee), horizontal (employee to employee), and radial (employee to organization). When strong, and enhanced by digital technologies, these complementarities can combine to improve leadership, cooperation, and engagement throughout the organization.

The point isn’t that moving everyone to fully remote work is the answer—for sure not. Instead, Yves and Diana suggest that we should be very careful not to ignore the lessons we have learned from this period. We have to invest in the relational dimensions of work, finding ways to design tasks—whatever “container” they’re taking place in (remote, in office, or hybrid)—so that they are engaging for everyone involved.

Please see below for more on this and related topics.

Until next week,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Rich", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rich Lesser
Chief Executive Officer

Further Reading



The Social Economics of Work and Productivity

The pandemic unleashed a global experiment in productivity and performance. Just as public health officials have much to learn from the crisis, so too do corporate executives.

[READ MORE →](#)



How the Lockdown Unlocked Real Work

The experience of work during a time of pandemic has revealed a hidden driver of organizational performance: relational productivity.

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How Too Many Rules at Work Keep You from Getting Things Done

Modern work is about solving brand-new problems every day, flexibly and collaboratively. But Yves Morieux explains how an overload of rules, processes, and metrics may be keeping us from doing our best work together.

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