



The So What from BCG Podcast

Can Joy and Productivity Coexist in the Workplace?

GEORGIE FROST: Working from home, or back to the office? The debate continues, but the end could be nigh. Study after study shows companies promoting hybrid working have more productive, healthier and less stressed employees - and that can only be good for business. So is it time we threw “back to work” mandates in the bin, and instead start talking about how your workforce balances productivity and joy?

I'm Georgie Frost and this is The So What from BCG.

DEBBIE LOVICH: If you expand the definition of making work work beyond just work location, it opens up so many more avenues of joy and productivity delivery. We know people value flex in time more than they value flex in place.

GEORGIE: Today I'm talking to Debbie Lovich who leads BCG's thinking on this topic.

DEBBIE: You shouldn't be asking how do I get people back to the office. Is that a company goal that adds value for all your stakeholders? What you should be asking is how do I construct work in ways that deliver both productivity and joy. Productivity for the organization. That could be growth, innovation, cost savings, productivity...and joy. Joy for the employee, which is sense of accomplishment, feeling recognized, feeling rewarded, learning.

Not everything is joyful in every minute, but in aggregate, do you have joyful moments? Because that makes you feel like a million bucks and makes you want to stay there. And people think of those at odds. I let you stay home, that's joy, or I make you come in, that's productivity, but we can't have both together. There's so much data out there that shows employee engagement drives values, strong culture drives values, et cetera. So that's the first reason it's the wrong question.

The second reason it's the wrong question is because return to office is only for about 30% of the global workforce. 70% or more of the global workforce are in factories and distribution centers and hospitals and research facilities, retail stores, restaurants, trucks. They can't do their work with a laptop at home. And so just by focusing on that question, it just creates this divide between the haves and the have-nots and I'd like to work home two days a week too. So that ignores that question. But if you focus on productivity and joy for everyone, you will actually find a broader set of solutions.

GEORGIE: What do you mean by joy? How do you understand joy?

DEBBIE: Joy is a manager saying, "Oh my God," your boss saying, "You know what, Debbie? You really rocked it." I've been at BCG for 29 years. I still in my head sometimes go back to when I was a third year after a big meeting when the partner called me up in the car ride home and I thought he was going to give me more work to do and all he wanted to do was tell me how awesome I was. That's joy. It's these little things that can bring you joy.

And it's a broad term. What brings me joy may be different than what brings you joy, Georgie. But it could be sense of accomplishment. It could be a thank you. It could be I tackled something really hard. It could be I had fun today. I use joy as a broad word the same way, by the way, I use productivity. What drives value for one company may be productivity, but it could be innovation or growth or efficiency.

Think of it as two buckets, joy for employees and productivity for an organization. They shouldn't be at odds. It's not one or the other. And there's so much macro data out there that says engaged



employees drive higher value, strong culture drives higher value. Those are all proxies for joy.

So they shouldn't be, I let you stay at home forever, or I make you come in. If I let you stay at home, you won't deliver value for the company. If I make you come in, you'll be miserable. No. Orchestrate work around things that it's meaningful to be together for and don't make me schlep in for things that I'm actually more effective at at home.

And most importantly, don't tell me exactly the rhythms and routines I need to do, empower me and my team to figure it out. There's a whole lot of agency and trust that's disappearing right now with these edicts, and it's not as much the edicts as the agency and trust that's going away.

GEORGIE: Why do you think we've kind of got the question so wrong? Dig into that a little bit more deeply for me if you would.

DEBBIE: Yeah, I think people are focused on that question, one, because people are looking for policy. Am I allowed to stay working at home? Do I have to come into the office? So employees want to know what they should do. I think executives and senior executives and CEOs for that matter are focusing on it because they're going into these beautiful offices they've spent tons of money on where they're used to getting everything done and they're seeing them empty. And they're like, "What the heck's going on here? Where are all the people I'm paying? If I don't see you, I don't necessarily believe you're working."

And it's the way they're used to leading and running an organization, they can't do anymore. So they have two choices. They could go forward and learn how to run an organization in a distributed model, or they could go backwards to how it used to be in 2019, which by the way, feels very comfortable to them. And so they're choosing the latter.

GEORGIE: How do you go about asking the right questions to get to the right answer of how do you focus and bring productivity and joy to your workforce? What should leaders be asking themselves?

DEBBIE: Yeah. If you focus on office workers, they need a decision about where and when they should show up. The answer is hybrid for most organizations. And that is because there's lots of work that's better done in person. Our data tells us that both employees and managers agree that collaborative work, training, development, coaching, culture building, it's all better in person. They also agree admin work and focus work is better done alone, remotely.

And so the question is not how many days per week do you need, because that depends on how much focus work versus collaborative work you have and it's very different in very different types of jobs. People differ in what they need to be their best. And so what we should be asking is saying, given the work and given the needs of your diverse teams, how do we enable you to decide what work we do when we're together, what work we do when we're apart, what work do we do when we're synchronous, and what tools do you need to manage that and support that? And that's a new question. It's a new question.

And so part of the reason people are getting it wrong is we've never had to think about this before. Now, in a hybrid world, which we're all in, for the first time we need to think about what happens, when, where, how, for whom. We've never had to think about that before. So that's a new muscle leaders, managers, and organizations need is to empower people to think that. And you can't set it from the top, here's my policy, because that's assuming every employee and every ounce of work every week is exactly the same. And it's not.

GEORGIE: Was the old way so bad? I mean, we had...

DEBBIE: Yes...

GEORGIE: ... a capitalist system built on the office. So is that not what some of the arguments that you're hearing now for trying to bring people back, obviously very expensive rent, but look, it worked before. Who didn't it work for?



DEBBIE: It didn't work before. We just accepted wasting hours in commutes to go in and dial into conference calls from our cubicles. I remember I would go to clients and we would have meetings and a couple of people would dial in, "But you're in the building." "Yeah, but it's just easier for me to dial in. I don't have to take the elevator, whatever." That's broken. It didn't work for caregivers. It didn't work for minority employees who felt microaggressions every minute of the day when they're the only person of color in a room or in a meeting or in their floor. It didn't work for everyone.

GEORGIE: So how do you make it a success for everyone? Because I mean, you mentioned it, there are introverts, extroverts, some people work well from the office, some people don't, et cetera. How can you focus on getting joint productivity from individuals but also as a team?

DEBBIE: Yeah. There is no room for a mediocre manager in a hybrid world because the skill of a manager is essential. And these are new muscles to say, "I, as a manager need to understand everyone on my team and I have to understand our work and I have to facilitate conversations knowing everyone's preferences to say, okay, what's the best way for us to get our work done?"

So for a technology team that's doing coding sprints, it could be one sprint together in a room and then three sprints apart remotely because we're all in Jira, or whatever tools collaborating, anyhow. And you could argue, well, why bring them together for one sprint? Well, you know what? Weak ties in an organization are important. Meeting people outside your team, bumping into them is important. What we saw in COVID is strong ties got stronger and weak ties got weaker. And so even if the team's like, "I could be as effective completely remote," it's important to come together and be with the rest of the organization, break down silos, et cetera.

So a technology team could do one sprint together, three apart. A finance team may say, "You know what? We only have to be together every quarter for a couple of weeks when the books close." A marketing team with all its creative work may say, "You know what? We need three days a week to be

in a room together brainstorming and testing things out." Sales teams need to be on the road with their customers if their customers want to see them in person. Otherwise, they've got to be at home in digital channels.

And so everyone needs to think about the work of the work and that varies team by team. A good manager needs to understand that and understand the tools and set the rhythms and routines. They also need to know their teams and what people need to be their best. And this is the hard work because let's say a team has one introvert and the rest are extroverts and people have different preferences.

So you have to find ways to accommodate both. So the introvert may need to come in a bit more than they'd prefer, and the extroverts may need to work remotely more than they prefer, which by the way, they could come in on remote days, they just have to work as if they were remote at a WeWork or something like that.

So this is the skill of the manager. And if people are feeling uncomfortable in the office, like minorities for microaggressions, well, guess what? We should be addressing that anyhow. So be aware of it and start to address it. This is why I said there's no room for weak managers in a hybrid work world.

GEORGIE: How do you train the managers of the future? What do they look like? What do they need to look like? Because this is a whole 'nother skill set.

DEBBIE: Well, the best way to build them is to find the people that are already doing that really well. And you won't find one unicorn that has it all really well, but you'll find someone who's just a really good remote relationship-builder. I actually think I am. I have clients I'm really personally very close with that I've worked with over COVID that I've never been in the same country as, let alone the same room.

GEORGIE: How have you managed that? Because it's difficult. It is more difficult than if you were to meet someone face to face, the whites of their eyes and all that.



DEBBIE: For sure. Yeah. Well, I think it's about being yourself even when you're on a Zoom. It's looking at people's facial reactions and saying, "Hey, wait, Georgie, I see a little skepticism there." Right? Like not being scared to put the issues on the table. I think it's also finding ways to personally connect. If we're in a meeting and, I don't know, someone says something that I think is really good, private messaging them in the Zoom chat, "Oh my God, Georgie, that was such a good comment. Do you mind if I get time to pick your brain on that topic afterwards?"

It's about forming texting relationships with people. Back in the pre-COVID world, man, it would take a long time to develop a texting relationship with a client, but now you could get there so much quicker. It's noticing what's behind you right now. I've been trying to figure it out, actually. You've got a great plant, but then you have got some shelf or something, right?

GEORGIE: I have a fan from Madrid, a fan from Florence.

DEBBIE: And are those baseballs? Yeah.

GEORGIE: Baseballs, golf balls, cricket balls, and I paint still life. So a lot of still life objects to paint.

DEBBIE: Oh my God, that's...

GEORGIE: And a picture of my grandma. So there you go.

DEBBIE: You see, that's awesome. And I want to ask you about your grandma and where she is and why do you have baseballs, you're British. And we could have real conversations about who you are and about your life. That takes a certain skill. And for some people like me, that just comes naturally. I have no filter and I'm curious and I like people, right?

But for some people it's really hard. It's really hard. So what do you do? You observe people who are good at that, who are good at developing, who are good at doing offline collaboration, asynchronous collaboration, and you say, "How did you learn to do

it?" And you pick up the little tips and tricks and you package them and you have them teach their peers. Don't get some Harvard course on hybrid work management because that's not going to work in your environment. Every company's different. Every culture is different.

So what you want to do is actually find the pockets of best practice in your own organization. Get those people together and have them share and prioritize what are the tips and tricks, the knowledge, the skills, the attitudes, the tools, the routines and rhythms that you use, and if you were to teach other people to do it, how could you teach them? And then if they start teaching their peers, it will take.

GEORGIE FROST: You've spoken about the people skills. What about the role of technology? Where do you see that fitting in? And I don't just mean the meetings over Zoom, I mean how it's going to work in the workplace in the future.

DEBBIE: Well, I think actually technology is a great asset to help build these muscles that I'm talking about. There are AI-driven tools that, there's a company called Scoop, for example. It's well-known for their flex index, but they're developing the apps that help teams coordinate when to be together and when to be apart. Upskilling. Generative AI and AI nudges in general have finally broken the equation to get learning at the point of need. I mean, if you think of things like Microsoft Copilot, can you imagine, it says, "Okay, you're in a meeting now, pause to see if anyone made a good comment and send them a little note saying thanks," or tell you, "You know what? That person there hasn't said anything. Three people haven't spoken up, Debbie. You may want to change your facilitation."

Listen, generative AI is going to change what work is. It's going to take some tedious tasks away so we could focus on more value-added tasks. But there's also a ton of things generative AI won't be able to do. So generative AI will change the work of the work, but separately on the topic we're talking about, which is how do you make work work in ways that drive productivity and joy, I think it's going to be a friend to help enable us to get it done in all the ways I'm talking about.



GEORGIE: Let's focus before we end this on that 70% that we spoke about that just can't simply take their laptop home and must be listening to all this conversation about hybrid working, working from home thinking, "Get back to the office? I have to work from wherever I work from. It's nothing's changed for me." How do we bring them joy? How do we get them to be creative and productive and make work work for them?

DEBBIE: If you expand the definition of making work work beyond just work location, it opens up so many more avenues of joy and productivity delivery.

We know people value flex in time more than they value flex in place. I'm happy to come into the office, but really does it have to be rush hour? Or things are going on in my life, it's not an every week, but I need to be able to move my son into college next week. I go to the school play. If there's a shift marketplace that I could just trade shifts, because what happens today, you ask for the time off, you don't get it, you take it off anyhow, and they lost productivity.

So many organizations for these, what I like to call deskless workers, I don't like white collar, blue collar or knowledge or what does that mean for the 70%, but anyhow, so many people are playing with shift marketplaces. Another thing people are doing are playing with, well, not every part of every job needs to be done in person.

So I spoke to a leader at Neiman Marcus Group, a big high-end US retailer, for their sales associates. It's a department store for goodness sake. They are giving them time to do work from home because part of their job is emailing their best customers, researching the up-and-coming trends. So there's a portion of their job, if you reorganize work, you could find half a day, a day, a week, or a couple of days a month that people could work from home and be efficient and effective and focus.

And if you start to look at what brings joy, then you'll also optimize for better managers. This conversation we just had, say thank you, recognize, coach. That matters on a factory floor as much as it matters anywhere else, right? That's not a capability everyone has. Again, broaden the question beyond

days per week and all of a sudden there are more levers to solve for what we're trying to solve for here.

GEORGIE: While, Debbie, a thank you, a pat on the back, all those sorts of things are free, how much investment do you need to get to where you're talking about?

DEBBIE: Yeah, it's a great point. So yes, saying thank you, a pat on the back are free. Doing things like shift marketplaces or alternate schedules are not free. Retrofitting an office for more collaboration space because that's why we're using it now, not free. But even for the free stuff, you still need to upskill everyone. Go through that process I talked to you about of find the best people, have the best teach the rest, codify what they have. That takes time and effort.



But the analogy I've been using with organizations that seems to resonate is when you upgraded all of your technology from mainframe to cloud or desktop to mobile first, you didn't just issue a memo and hope it happened. You actually had to spend money. It took years to build that capability, to rethink your processes, to invest in the technology. And guess what? People are more complicated than machines. We all react differently to stimulus as opposed to code that the computer reacts the same way. And so taking the time to understand that and build that muscle is a lot more than moving from mainframe to cloud. So don't approach it with a memo.

GEORGIE: Debbie, thank you so much, and to you for listening. We'd love to know your thoughts. To get in contact, leave us a message at thesowhat@bcg.com. And if you like this podcast, why not hit subscribe and leave a rating wherever you found us? It helps other people find us too.