THE BIG READ

The Cult of Company Culture Is Back. But Do Tech Workers Even Want Perks Anymore?

As tech workers return to offices post-pandemic, are they still interested in morale-boosting perks and team-building exercises or in... just working?

Art by Clark Miller.

By Flora Tsapovsky

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Just a couple of years ago, Jesse Ditson, then a software engineering architect at Quip, a subsidiary of Salesforce, was living in San Francisco. Every day he came into the office, where he'd enjoy spontaneous interactions with his colleagues and, sometimes, their adorable pets. He used to attend holiday parties at Foreign Cinema and participate in team-building pottery classes and happy hours. Now, with many tech companies making their first steps to return to in-person work, Ditson, who relocated to Joshua Tree during the pandemic and now works remotely for marketing chatbot company Qualified, won't be among them. In fact, he's never coming back to the office. "I miss elements of that life," he said, "but it's not a worthy trade at all."

Questioning the worth of office life is on many tech workers' minds these days. There's an uneasy vibe in the air as companies tiptoe into year three of the pandemic, some issuing strict back-to-office mandates, others announcing hybrid work policies that let employees choose between remote work and showing up in person, and still others doubling down on remote-first or distributed work philosophies that allow employees to live wherever they want and never commute again.

No matter what option companies choose, CEOs and their deputies—vice presidents of human resources, chief people officers, operations managers, recruiters and others—have to decide whether to coax workers back by making the workplace "fun" and "welcoming," planning off-sites and food truck parties, wine-tasting evenings and officewide health challenges, all while navigating a new labor reality of **talent shortages** and changed worker priorities. All of these leaders have to determine how much "company culture" their company can really take.

Then there are the employees who, like Ditson, have had a chance to live commute-free for two whole years, avoiding office small talk and imbibing strictly on their own schedules. Many are at best skeptical of team-building obligations and at worst defiant. Are the perks and amenities of pre-pandemic office life, the famous (and **sometimes infamous**) mores of tech office culture, still worth investing in? Does anyone care about company culture anymore? And should tech companies stop trying to treat their workers like one united, mission-driven family and instead think of them more as loosely-knit teams of individuals who may want different things from their work?

In recent months, tech companies in Silicon Valley and beyond have been grappling with these questions, pondering how to do right by the bottom line without doing wrong by the workforce. Microsoft, Apple, Netflix, Google and Meta Platforms, as well as many smaller companies, have announced **sweeping office reopenings** and mandated in-person presence anywhere from **three days a week** to **at least 50% of the time**. While the industry has enjoyed a near-unanimous work-from-home consensus since the beginning of the pandemic, the conversation on bringing workers back into campuses, which the Delta and Omicron strains of Covid-19 pushed well beyond summer 2021, is now causing indecision and agita for executives.

"It flipped from having to ask permission to work from home, to 'You have to tell me why I should go to the office. What am I getting out of going to this fun event?'" said Lenke Taylor, chief people officer for New York–based startup **Level**. Taylor joined Level last October amid the pandemic, after **a $27 million funding round** and an 88-person hiring spree. The company has a physical office in Manhattan, which Taylor calls a "touchdown space" for local employees who want to get together for whatever reason. But they are still doing the bulk of the work remotely—and it will remain that way for the foreseeable future. "I'm a firm believer that if I'm going to ask for everyone to get together in this fabulous location, there has to be a good reason," said Taylor. "If I'm thinking of bringing together the people in our company, the majority of our time will be spent in interpersonal connection and engagement."

At Twitter, even with the San Francisco office fully reopened since March, 95% of employees answered in a recent internal survey that they prefer a work-from-home option or a hybrid model. The office is currently open for teams who want to get together, but, said Tracy Hawkins, a vice president overseeing both workplace and remote experiences, "We want to get to the point where it's *just* work. We're not thinking where you're working from, just working in a collaborative fashion." This means Twitter leaves the choice to come into the office entirely up to its individual employees. "If we do events, the expectation is that we have an ability to join virtually," Hawkins said, and managers have been instructed to be empathetic and understanding about employees' preferences. "We're very aware that the world has changed."

Hybrid work—the buzzword of the year (and maybe the decade)—can mean different things to different companies. For the leaders of work-for-hire site **Thumbtack**, hybrid means rebranding the existing offices as "libraries" where people can experience the nearly forgotten sensation of going to work, said Marco Zappacosta, co-founder and CEO. There are areas for socializing and dedicated Zoom rooms, with sofas and plants contributing to the informal vibe. Teams gather remotely, and coming to the office isn't mandatory. Culture-building activities are reserved for quarterly company events. A few overnight get-togethers are currently underway for different divisions, and the company is planning a multi-day event in Q3 called Camp Thumbtack, taking place somewhere in nature and bringing together all of its employees at once. "Events are really this major investment that we're making," said Jelena Djordjevic, Thumbtack's vice president of people.

This is a big departure compared to before the pandemic, when Thumbtack didn't have an off-site program to speak of. Now it's the office itself that is treated as an add-on, somewhere to go when your roommates or children become too distracting, where you can comfortably collaborate with your team. "The aim is to foster connection and a sense of belonging, and I think those two things are key for building a culture," said Djordjevic. "We're not here just to do work."

T his question—are we here just to work, or to do something more than work—is at the heart of the back-to-office conundrum. While some companies like Shopify, Brex and **Dropbox** have embraced a remote-first approach, others are trying to anchor company culture in at least some mandatory in-person happenings.

At **Credit Karma**, Colleen McCreary, chief people, places and publicity officer, said, "We were very adamant from the very first email we sent out that we were coming back to the office." Individual managers decide on what that looks like for their teams, but the expected, uniform requirement is three days a week in the office. Credit Karma has had job candidates "who opt out of the process" due to this mandate, but McCreary said, "We're not having an issue filling our roles relative to before."

The mandate comes with something tech office culture is well known for—perks. At the company's offices in Charlotte, N.C., Wine Down Wednesdays have been a successful icebreaker for new employees. Since returning to the office in February, the Oakland, Calif., location has offered workers new headshots, with hair and makeup teams on site, as well as Thursday terrace hangouts. According to McCreary, only 10 employees out of 1,500 opted out of the in-person plan and quit. "I'm not afraid of hard decisions," McCreary said. "Unlike a lot of [tech] companies, this company really impacts the lives of people. It's a free product that helps people make great financial decisions. And we have employees who really love to be a part of that."

If this ethos sounds familiar, it's because it's reminiscent of tech's pre-pandemic narrative: an all-encompassing and collectively driven culture, "very familial," as Qualified's Ditson put it. But for the past two years, the idea of the workplace as an identity-anchoring, ideal-fulfilling place of higher purpose and family-like relationships has been rapidly fading. What if you are, shockingly, "just here to work?" What if you want to do your job, get paid and call it a day?

Historically, if you had to define tech company culture, it would be "the ephemeral, intangible experience that a group of employees both shapes and is shaped by in a professional office environment," said Maggie Spicer. The founder of **Whisk,** a creative agency that, pre-pandemic, planned team-building offsites for the likes of eBay, Airbnb and Square, Spicer has retooled her agency to focus more on advising and strategy now. She believes that tech culture has always been predicated on "shared values, expressed and honored collectively."

However, such ephemeral intangibles as group runs, yoga classes, happy hours, team meals and recognition for birthdays no longer impress some employees. "The pandemic has allowed us to see what's bells and whistles and what's effective," said Leiroy Abueg, a consultant for a large tech recruiting firm. "Almost all my candidates are making sure that they have remote capabilities, and I've seen a lot more inquiries about health benefits and online therapy availability."

Or as Ditson put it, "I think we're seeing the replacement of an infinitely homogenized culture, born out of trying to make people feel like their work family is more important than the rest of your life." Ditson believes the new question tech CEOs should be asking themselves is, "What if you work here because you're an individual, and we amplify your existing talents?"

Some chief people officers are taking notice. "Now it's a deeper *me* and what's right for *me*, rather than 'I'm going to be vowed by the micro-kitchen and the pingpong table,'" said Level's Taylor. Or, as Caroline, a creative director at a fin-tech startup who preferred to remain anonymous, asked: "Do I need pingpong tables and kombucha on tap? No, that doesn't do anything to make my life better." Caroline has also had enough of her company's biweekly group lunches, which she

admitted she used to enjoy. "Let me work from home, let me not commute two hours a day," she said. "If we want to talk about work utopia, personal freedom is that. I can find my own food."

W hile upscale amenities and piles of free food may no longer capture employee hearts and minds, tech workers are also taking other, less materialistic tropes of office culture—the spontaneous brainstorming opportunities, the on-the-spot creativity, the serendipity of free-flowing collaboration—with a grain of salt. Employees have settled into a different pace, with a deeper focus on personal productivity, said Valerie Demicheva, a startup communications executive who has worked at startups including YourMechanic and Phrame. "The one thing that was driving me nuts in the shared office space was that every five minutes, somebody would interrupt my work," she said. "That setup is good for team bonding, but I have to hide in closets or go outside to actually get my work done."

In the calculus of live collaboration versus remote work, many workers prefer collaborating on their own terms now: "I am a proponent of orderly team-building events where it's not about work. I think that's great," Caroline, the creative director, said. "Other than that, I don't feel like I need to see people in person to be good at my job."

It's not that people are unwilling to mix socially with their colleagues after two long years of isolation and Zoom calls—but many no longer want to mix head-down, concentration-heavy work with social interaction. Caroline recently had to meet her team at the office, according to her company's plan to have four quarterly meetings: "My team was like...I'm exhausted, and I didn't get anything done." Said Demicheva, "I'd love to be back to seeing people in person, but I would want the office to change, not only for Covid reasons because I can be a hypochondriac, but also for everyone's sanity, because I don't think we're accustomed to being interrupted midfocus anymore."

Splashy parties may be the middle ground between what some companies want—to heighten morale and bring people together in positive fashion—and what some employees crave: to have fun with peers, to feel special and taken care of. Harper, an operations manager for a tech company she prefers not to name, has had an overwhelmingly positive response to an upcoming big-budget, companywide gathering she's been planning for months. Close to 92% of employees have RSVPed that they are coming, she said, and the rest didn't need to give a reason for not attending. The party, part of a weeklong marathon of team-building festivities and hacking marathons, is meant as a replacement for the pre-pandemic events that regularly took place in different regions on a team level.

A return to office isn't mandatory at Harper's company. "It's mostly up to the individual, but it's very much done in tandem with what your manager thinks is also good for you," she said. That, she thinks, is the key to the positive response to culture-building events: "If my company was saying to me, you have to commute and come back to the office, and we're gonna try to soften the blow by putting a cupcake on your desk, I would absolutely be like, screw you. No thank you," Harper said. "But if you don't have to come into the office, and we're gonna have a party and swag? To me that feels like the best of both worlds."

Furthermore, said Harper, tech's former cultural norms may now be at odds with any sort of back-to-office demands: "If you're asking people to come back to the office for reasons that seem unclear to the employee, other than you want to micromanage them, then everything that company does is going to feel kind of like insidious or gross. Why are you sending me a coffee mug? Are you just trying to control my personal life as well?"

Some companies are trying to align their offerings of perks with these changes in attitude. They are cutting a number of amenities, newly deemed wasteful and unnecessary: **Meta announced** the discontinuation of on-site laundry services; **Google has bid adieu to bidets;** and at Credit Karma there will be no more lunch buffets. The new perk of company culture can emphasize connection, but it focuses on fostering relationships between individuals, instead of cultivating and celebrating the relationship between the employee and the company. A recent online activity at Level included a Zoom

contest in which employees had to guess what their colleagues' children drew—personal bonding with work-from-home convenience.

Other companies have taken the care to redesign offices around employees' more compartmentalized attitudes towards office life. Since opening its reconfigured office in March, Twitter found that on average, 55% of employees chose to

book desks in so-called collaboration zones, while 38% chose focus zones and only 7% chose zones intended for socializing. In its internal communications, the company is leaning more heavily into words like "flexibility" and "autonomy," and trumpeting individuality more loudly. "We are not mandating anything at all, and building in practices on ensuring [that we are] leveling the playing field," said Hawkins, the vice president. One relatively new addition to company culture is the playfully named Twitter AF—asynchronicity first. "We're embracing communication or collaboration that allows for people not to all be available at the same time, spending less time in meetings," she said.

Even at Google, one of the tech giants to recently announce a three-day-a-week office schedule, employees can apply to remain remote. Yun Miao, a software engineer based in Oakland, Calif., did not, but many of her colleagues have opted for remote status—often because they moved to other locations during the pandemic. Going back to the office, Miao said, allows her to spend time with colleagues she enjoys. She also appreciates the perks, like free barista coffee. "Those are the monetary things," she said. "But there's also the nonmonetary side of it, which is the social aspect." But she adds, "Maybe ask me in a month and my answer may be different."

For those who don't feel like they need the office to fulfill social needs, what can in-person, spontaneous interactions offer when you've grown accustomed to solitude and concentration? "It's about the trust, the psychological safety, the knowing the person beyond what I see in that tiny box," said Taylor. "And not only will you know people, but other people are going to understand *you* better, and that will help you be more successful, more agile, faster."

Whatever the rationale, employers will have to work harder to convince the wariest in their workforce of the importance of in-person work to overall company culture. "As a leader, if I'm trying to retain my talent, I would help them understand, why am I asking them to come in? Is it because the CEO promised the mayor more people will be coming into the city centers? Is it because I, the leader, need them back?" said Rimma Boshernitsan, CEO of **Dialogue**, a strategy firm that advises tech executives. "And even if that's the case, help them see the bigger picture: What are the benefits of this?"

So what's to become of tech company culture in 2022 and in the years to come? Will the premise of deep, personal connections fostered in open spaces, off-sites or virtual activities—of seeing and being seen, understanding and being understood—replace the old maxims of disruption, innovation and all-in 24/7 commitment? Or is maximum individual freedom—including, perhaps, freedom *from* company culture—going to become the most attractive perk of all?

One thing is certain: Tech companies have always needed a culture of some kind to fall back upon. "If company culture is dead, what's the difference between what we're doing now and what we did during the Industrial Revolution, where we went to work at factories?" asked Boshernitsan.

Some tech workers still have high hopes of attaining that ideal of a company culture rooted in meaning and personal identity: "I dream of making the post-pandemic company identity to be a direct reflection of the individuals that work in the company, and to extend the type of person who can work in the company," said Ditson, gazing out at the cacti and Joshua trees growing in his front yard.

But others have a more pragmatic outlook, arguing that the biggest cultural impact companies can offer is a remunerative one: "If you're going to do any job, why not do that job at the place where you're going to benefit the most?" said Caroline. And "benefit the most" usually means one thing: higher compensation. "There's a lot of money to be made in tech," she said.

Flora Tsapovsky is a San Francisco-based culture, tech and food writer. Her work has appeared in Wired, Elle, the San Francisco Chronicle and Bon Appetit. Find her on Instagram at @bicoastalista and floratsapovsky.com.

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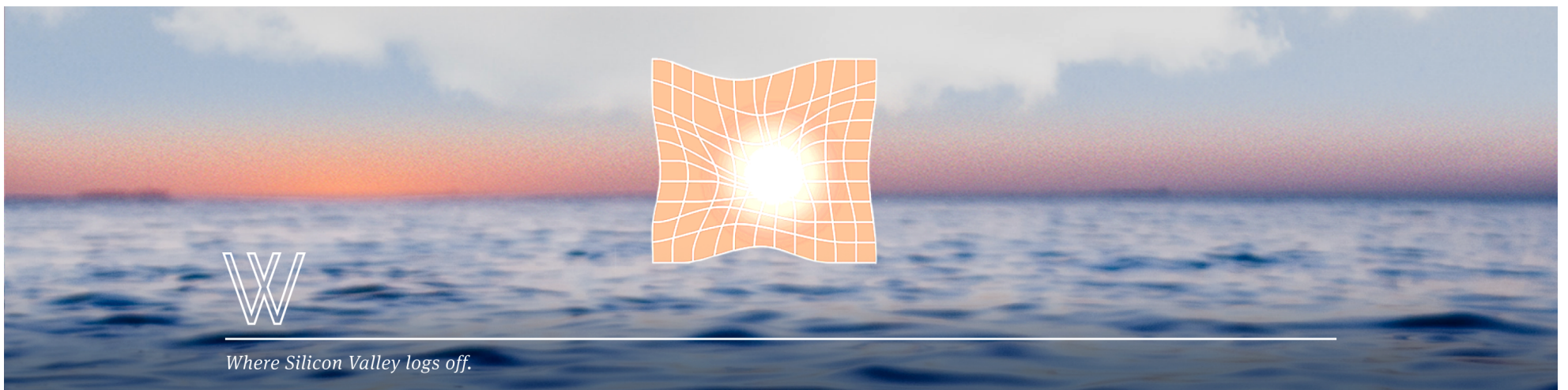
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