

The future of the publishing office

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US Book Show session considers: what now for the publishing workforce after a year of the home being the office?



Has the pandemic changed office life forever? asked John Maher, *Publishers Weekly* news and digital editor, of a distinguished panel that consisted of Thad McIllroy, principal of The Future of Publishing, Tsedal Neeley, author of the *Remote Work Revolution*, Lorraine Shanley, president of Market Partners International and Adrienne Vaughan, coo of Bloomsbury US – a question to which there does not yet appear to be an obvious answer, particularly with a reported disconnect between employees and employers.

At this US Book Show session held yesterday, Neeley reported that a recent survey showed 87% of employees wanting greater working flexibility in the future (with 30% wanting to work virtually full-time), while 68% of employers want staff back full-time in the office. Most obviously this is the large corporations such as Chase Manhattan and Goldman Sachs, who fear a loss of corporate culture and corp d'esprit, but so far in publishing, said Shanley, no-one is rushing to get staff back in, and as yet no there is no consensus as to what work practices will look like. "A hybrid model may seem like the obvious answer – but who's going to be the one in the office on Friday afternoons?" she asked.

One obvious downside of working from home more, said Neeley, is professional isolation. This may affect millennials in particular, but there are many others too who are increasingly feeling out of sight/sync/touch. Hyper-productivity has also become something of an issue, with people working 6.8 hours more on average per week over the past year or so – commuting time seems to have been replaced by more work rather than more down-time. Set against this is the fact that both productivity and job satisfaction seem to increase with working remotely, and any conflict with home and family is lessened. In addition, bias can also be reduced – there has been a reported reduction in micro aggressions in the workplace for black employees.

Vaughan pointed to the issues facing new hires looking to integrate. If we are to go on working virtually, even some of the time, managers will have to learn how to build empathy remotely, requiring an arsenal of new skills. Neeley agreed, citing a growing trend for having a Chief Well-Being Officer on the staff. Managers will, she said, need to check in on staff more and specifically ask how they're doing; it's much more difficult to assess how people are coping with their workload when working remotely, while there is a stress associated with people being visible to colleagues in their kitchens, bedrooms and sitting rooms. Shanley noted that there has been a real reliance on virtual therapy over the past year, with more surveys being done of



employees that include questions on mental health and with HR needing to deal with more of these types of issues.

There are, however, other plus points about remote working, pointed out McIlroy, including the ability to employ a more diverse work force where location doesn't play a vital role. For authors, too, the online model has offered scale, with the ability to do 3-4 events in a day, and 'appear' all round the world without leaving your house.

We are, said Vaughan, a creative industry, and can surely come up with creative ways in which to make the most of the benefits and minimise the drawbacks of a hybrid working model in the future, though Neeley noted that company policies about which roles and processes need to be done in the office, and which can be done remotely, must be clearly set out, so that it's a level playing field for all.

Pictured (clockwise from top left): Tsedal Neeley, Lorraine Shanley, PW news and digital editor John Maher, Thad McIlroy, and Adrienne Vaughan.

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