Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Go to the Office to Sit on Teams

How to Organize Hybrid Work, Protect Your Focus, and Decide What's Actually Worth Doing in the Office and What You Don't Need to Haul Across Half the City



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

I Go to the Office to Sit on Teams

How to Organize Hybrid Work, Protect Your Focus, and Decide What’s Actually Worth Doing in the Office and What You Don’t Need to Haul Across Half the City

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INTRO

At 8:37 on a Tuesday morning, you have already completed a small expedition before doing a single useful piece of work. You found something presentable to wear, packed your laptop, checked for the charger twice, located the building pass that somehow migrates between coats when unsupervised, navigated traffic, paid for parking, carried your mobile office through the lobby, and finally reached a desk. At 8:58 you open your calendar. Your first meeting is on Teams. So is the second. The third includes one person sitting somewhere else on the same floor, although neither of you knows exactly where. By lunchtime you have spoken to nine colleagues, all through headphones, while physically surrounded by several hundred thousand pounds' worth of office infrastructure whose main contribution to your day has been a chair and slightly better coffee than you make at home. This is not necessarily a disaster. But it is reasonable to wonder why your laptop needed the commute.

Hybrid work was supposed to combine the best parts of two worlds. Instead, in many workplaces it has combined the travel requirements of office life with the meeting habits of remote work and then proudly presented the result as flexibility. You can now commute specifically to attend video calls, work from home specifically to spend six uninterrupted hours in meetings, and carry the same charger back and forth often enough to develop a relationship with it. None of this means the office is pointless, nor that working from home is automatically superior. Sometimes being in the same room solves in twenty minutes what would otherwise require forty messages, three misunderstandings and a

meeting titled "Quick Alignment." Sometimes the office is exactly where you need to be. The problem begins when location becomes a rule before anyone asks what the work actually requires. Then "hybrid" stops being a method and becomes a timetable.

The usual conversation about hybrid work starts in the wrong place. People argue about two days versus three, office versus home, collaboration versus flexibility, as though the entire future of knowledge work can be solved by choosing the correct number between zero and five. Managers worry about culture, employees worry about commuting, facilities teams worry about empty desks, and everyone uses the same words while often meaning completely different things. "Collaboration" may mean a workshop where people genuinely build something together, or it may mean twelve adults silently reading slides in one room. "Flexibility" may mean meaningful control over how work gets done, or it may mean you may choose which room of your home to sit in while attending meetings scheduled by everyone else. Counting days is easy. Designing work is harder, which is probably why counting days has enjoyed such a successful career.

A better starting point is embarrassingly simple: what are you actually trying to accomplish? Some work improves when people share a physical space. Ambiguous problems, difficult conversations, relationship building, fast back-and-forth decisions, collaborative design and certain kinds of learning can all benefit from the extra information and spontaneity that come from being together. Other work improves when nobody speaks to you for ninety minutes. Writing, analysis, preparation, planning and complex problem solving often need continuity more than proximity.

Then there is a large middle category that can happen almost anywhere as long as the technology works and somebody has not scheduled a "quick catch-up" directly through the middle of it. Once you start looking at work this way, location becomes a tool rather than an identity. You are no longer defending home or defending the office. You are choosing conditions.

That sounds obvious until you look at how many working weeks are built in the opposite direction. First come the required office days. Then recurring meetings. Then other people's meetings. Then the new meeting created because the previous meeting did not produce a decision. Only after all of that does the actual work try to find somewhere to live, usually in the spaces between calendar blocks or after dinner. This is how perfectly competent people end a day exhausted, having been busy for nine hours while still feeling that the important thing did not move. They are not necessarily disorganized. Their work environment may simply be optimized for availability rather than completion. Hybrid arrangements make this easier to miss because activity is highly visible: calls, messages, travel, office attendance, documents opening and closing. A day can look extraordinarily productive from a distance while the main task remains exactly where it was at breakfast.

The hidden cost is not only time. It is attention. Every move between home and office creates logistics. Every move between a conversation and a difficult task creates a mental restart. Every "got a sec?" has a second half that nobody includes in the estimate: the time required to remember what you were doing before somebody borrowed your brain. Remote work has its own version. The doorbell rings, the laundry becomes visually persuasive, a family

member asks a reasonable question at an unreasonable moment, and the laptop remains available long after the official day has ended. Neither location is naturally focused. Neither is naturally collaborative. Both need some design. Otherwise the office becomes a noisy remote-work station and the home becomes an office with a refrigerator close enough to conduct performance reviews.

There is another complication: most people do not have complete freedom to redesign their work. You may be required in the office on certain days. Your manager may prefer fast responses. Your team may span locations or time zones. Your home may be a terrible place for concentration, while someone else's is ideal. You may have clients, equipment, family responsibilities, a long commute, limited space or simply a company policy written by people you will never meet. Useful hybrid work therefore cannot depend on the fantasy that everyone controls their calendar, environment and coworkers. The goal is not to create an immaculate week protected from reality. It is to identify where you have leverage, where you do not, and how to stop surrendering the first just because the second exists. Sometimes you can redesign the week. Sometimes you can only rescue one hour from it. Both count.

This book is about building that kind of practical control. You will learn to distinguish presence from useful collaboration, make office days worth the journey, protect concentration without becoming professionally unreachable, choose when synchronous conversation is genuinely valuable, and stop using meetings as storage containers for problems nobody has defined yet. You will also look at the less glamorous machinery underneath hybrid work: expectations, handoffs, decision rights, information flow,

logistics, visibility, fairness and the slow accumulation of habits that turn a flexible system into a complicated one. None of this requires becoming a productivity monk or owning a color-coded calendar that resembles airport radar. The useful changes are often much less impressive: a clearer rule, a better-timed conversation, one protected stretch of attention, one meeting removed, one decision written down properly.

Start with one observation. The next time you are preparing to work from somewhere - home, office, coworking space, client site or anywhere else - ask what that location is supposed to help you do. Not where you are "meant" to be. Not what day of the week it is. Not whether someone might notice your chair is empty. What advantage are you trying to get from being there? If you have a clear answer, good. If you do not, you have found something worth examining. Hybrid work becomes much easier once you stop treating movement as productivity and start treating location as a choice with a cost and a purpose. Sometimes the correct answer will still be, "I have to go to the office." Fine. At least then you can decide what to do once you arrive, instead of hauling yourself across town simply to discover that your headphones had the best day of anyone involved.

Chapter 1 - The Office Is Not the Task

At 9:06 on Monday morning, you sit down at your desk in the office and open the calendar that has apparently been designing your life without supervision. There is a team call at 9:30, a customer call at 10:30, forty-five minutes reserved for preparing a proposal, another online meeting after lunch, and a block labelled simply "Work on numbers," which has the optimistic confidence of a note written by a person who has never met your actual Monday. You glance around. The colleague you need for the proposal is working from home. Your manager is on another floor in a meeting. The customer is in another country. The numbers are in a cloud system accessible from anywhere with an internet connection and enough patience for multi-factor authentication. Yet here you are, physically present, professionally equipped and functionally doing remote work with a better ceiling. This is the first trap of hybrid work: confusing the place where work happens with the work itself.

The distinction matters because once a location becomes a habit, it stops being questioned. Monday is an office day, therefore you go to the office. Wednesday is remote, therefore you stay home. The schedule may be perfectly consistent while the work inside it is badly matched to the conditions. You can spend an office day writing alone, analysing alone and attending online meetings alone, then use your remote day for workshops, brainstorming sessions and rapid back-and-forth conversations with six people. Nothing has technically gone wrong. You followed the hybrid policy. The calendar is satisfied. The only small issue is that the supposedly flexible system has managed to put the

wrong work in the wrong environment with impressive regularity.

A useful correction is to stop treating "office" and "home" as categories of work. They are environments. The task still needs to be understood separately. Some tasks benefit from fast interaction, informal questions, shared physical context or being able to point at the same thing without saying, "Can you see my screen?" five times. Other tasks benefit from continuity, low interruption and enough mental space to hold a complicated idea for longer than the lifespan of a notification. Then there are tasks that barely care where you are: routine administration, reading, simple updates, straightforward calls. If you begin with the task rather than the address, hybrid work immediately becomes less ideological and more practical. You are not deciding whether the office is good or bad. You are deciding whether this particular environment gives this particular task an advantage.

That advantage has to be real, not ceremonial. Being physically near colleagues is useful when proximity changes the quality or speed of the work. A messy project kickoff, a difficult discussion, a collaborative review, mentoring a new colleague or solving a problem with several dependencies can all benefit from people being together. But six people sitting around a conference table while one person reads a deck aloud is not automatically superior to six people on a video call. Physical presence does not sprinkle collaboration dust over a meeting. If everybody spends the session staring at the same shared screen, typing private messages and waiting for their slide, the building has mostly supplied furniture. The office earns its value when people actually use what the office uniquely offers: quick exchange, richer

conversation, relationship, shared attention and easy movement between formal and informal interaction.

The opposite mistake is assuming that individual work automatically belongs at home. For many people, home is the quieter environment. For others, home contains children, a partner on calls, construction next door, unreliable internet, no proper desk and a kitchen that somehow becomes fascinating precisely when a difficult spreadsheet appears. An office may be the best place for concentration if you have a quiet room, good equipment and fewer domestic interruptions there. The point is not to replace one simplistic rule with another. "Office equals collaboration, home equals focus" is a useful starting hypothesis, not a law of nature. Your actual conditions matter more than the motivational poster version of hybrid work.

A simple way to see the mismatch is to classify the major blocks in your day before worrying about where you are. You do not need a complex productivity taxonomy with seventeen colours and a certification course. Three categories are enough: interaction-heavy work, focus-heavy work and location-neutral work. Interaction-heavy means the work improves because the right people can exchange information quickly. Focus-heavy means interruption carries a meaningful cost because you need continuity of thought. Location-neutral means either environment is probably fine. Once you mark a day this way, the absurdities become visible. A supposedly collaborative office day may contain six hours of focus-heavy work. A remote day may be wall-to-wall conversation. At that point the problem is no longer mysterious. It has a shape.

Consider Dana, who goes into the office every Tuesday because that is the team's expected day. Her morning

contains a project review with three colleagues, followed by two hours preparing a pricing recommendation, lunch, then a video call with a regional team and another hour of writing. Previously she treated the whole thing as "Tuesday in the office." Once she looks at the work itself, the day separates naturally. The project review can benefit from being together. The pricing recommendation needs concentration. The regional call is location-neutral because nobody else is local anyway. The writing also needs quiet. She does not need to challenge company policy or request a constitutional amendment. She can simply protect a quiet workspace after the project review, use the team presence for two short questions she would otherwise send by message, and avoid leaving the analytical work exposed to a parade of interruptions.

That small redesign illustrates an important principle: the office day itself is not a goal. Showing up is an input. What matters is what the presence enables. If your organisation requires attendance, you may not control the input, but you can often improve the output. Ask yourself what you want to leave the office with that would have been harder to achieve elsewhere. A resolved disagreement? A clearer decision? Better understanding with a colleague? A finished workshop? A set of quick conversations that would otherwise become ten separate calls? If you cannot name anything, that does not necessarily mean you should leave. It means the day needs a purpose beyond occupying a chair.

One reason this is difficult is that office presence creates a powerful illusion of productivity. You arrive, move around, talk to people, answer quick questions, attend meetings, solve small problems and repeatedly say, "I'll send that over." The day feels full because it is full. The missing

question is what kind of fullness you created. A bucket can be completely full of very small stones and still contain no lunch, which is an unnecessarily geological way of saying that activity and progress are not the same thing. A socially intense day may be extremely valuable if the work needs it. It may also consume all available energy while leaving every individual deliverable untouched. The danger appears when busyness itself becomes proof that the office day was worthwhile.

This is why trying to "make the most" of an office day can backfire. Because you travelled in, you schedule every possible conversation. Because people are nearby, you agree to quick catch-ups. Because you can see your manager, you raise that topic now. Because the expert you need is present, you grab fifteen minutes before lunch. By 4:00 p.m. you have interacted with half the organisation and generated a beautiful collection of follow-up work for yourself. Then you go home and complete the work that resulted from being so effectively collaborative. The office has not failed. You simply spent the entire day producing obligations and no time processing them.

A better approach is to give the office day one or two primary functions. Maybe Tuesday is the day for cross-team decisions and relationship-heavy work. Maybe Thursday is useful for mentoring and project coordination. The functions can change with the project, but naming them creates a filter. When another activity appears, you can ask whether it belongs there or whether it is simply occupying available space. This does not mean rejecting every spontaneous conversation. Those conversations are often exactly why being together is valuable. It means leaving enough

structure that spontaneity remains a benefit rather than becoming the entire operating system.

If you have control over office days, choose them partly according to the people and work you need, not only personal convenience. There is little value in selecting Wednesday because the commute is slightly better if every key collaborator comes on Thursday. Conversely, there may be no reason to follow the crowd if your role has almost no dependency on those people. Hybrid work becomes genuinely flexible when the choice has a purpose. Otherwise flexibility can become random distribution: everyone chooses whatever suits them individually, then wonders why collaboration still happens online.

If you do not control the days, the principle still works. Suppose your company requires Monday, Tuesday and Thursday in the office regardless of task. You can still ask what each day should contain. Maybe Monday becomes the best day for coordination, Tuesday for concentrated work in a quiet room and Thursday for cross-functional conversations. You may not have chosen the addresses, but you can stop treating all three office days as identical containers. A rigid rule about location does not require a rigid rule about how you use the location.

The minimum version is almost embarrassingly easy. Before your next office day, look at the calendar for five minutes and label each major block mentally as interaction-heavy, focus-heavy or neutral. Then choose one action that better matches the environment. If the day is dominated by focus-heavy work, find a quieter place or protect a chunk of time. If it is dominated by interaction, identify the two or three people you genuinely want to speak to while you are there. If it is mostly neutral, accept that the location may not

matter much and avoid inventing unnecessary collaboration just to justify the commute. That is enough to start.

Plan B applies when the office is chaotic, space is scarce and the day cannot be redesigned elegantly. In that case, stop aiming for an ideal office day. Protect one useful outcome. If you can secure one uninterrupted hour, do the most demanding task there. If you cannot, use the day intentionally for communication and move the demanding work to the next realistic opportunity rather than pretending you will somehow squeeze it between six interruptions. If the people you need are absent, handle what can be handled and make a note to coordinate better next time. A bad environment does not become good because you insist on using it for the wrong work.

The larger shift is psychological. Stop asking whether a day "counts" as office or remote and start asking whether its environment helped the work. That question is far more useful because it can produce a different answer tomorrow. The same office may be excellent for one day and terrible for another. The same home may be perfect in the morning and unusable by late afternoon. Work changes. People change. Projects move through different phases. A hybrid system worth having should be able to follow that reality instead of forcing reality to follow a repeating calendar pattern.

The office is not the task. Home is not the task either. They are places where tasks happen, each with advantages, costs and an astonishing ability to be misused. Once you separate the work from the location, you gain a much better question than "Where am I supposed to be?" You can ask, "What conditions does this work need, and how close can I get to them today?" Sometimes the answer will still be the

office. Sometimes it will be home. Sometimes the answer will be, "Neither is ideal, but at least now I know what problem I'm solving." That is already progress.

Chapter 2 - The Hidden Bill for Changing Places

The obvious cost of going to the office is easy to see. There is the commute, fuel or public transport, parking, perhaps lunch, perhaps coffee purchased at a price suggesting the beans were individually counselled before roasting. If the journey takes forty minutes each way, the arithmetic seems straightforward. Hybrid work therefore appears to have a simple cost model: office days include travel, home days do not. Unfortunately, the real bill is more inventive. Changing places also creates preparation, equipment management, schedule friction, context switching, recovery time and a collection of tiny decisions that are too small to complain about individually but remarkably effective as a group. By the time you sit down to start work, you may already have completed the administrative equivalent of a small wedding.

The cost often begins the night before. Is the laptop charged? Where is the badge? Did the charger stay in the office? Are the headphones in the work bag or next to the sofa because you used them last night? Do you need paperwork, gym clothes, lunch, an umbrella, medication, a cable, a different cable for the meeting room that apparently runs on technology from an archaeological site? Each question is trivial. That is precisely why the total cost hides so well. Nobody says, "Hybrid work is exhausting because I spent thirty-seven seconds looking for an adapter." But repeat enough thirty-seven-second irritations and you create a day that feels harder before the professional part has properly started.

Then there is the mental cost of moving between modes. You arrive, connect the equipment, open the files and begin a difficult task. Twenty-five minutes later someone asks a question. You answer, return to the task and spend several minutes rebuilding the thought you had before the interruption. Then a meeting begins. After the meeting, you have thirty-five minutes before another one, which looks like useful time until you account for notes, follow-ups, moving rooms and the strange five-minute period before a meeting when the human brain refuses to begin anything serious because it knows another interruption is coming. The calendar contains thirty-five minutes. The usable work interval may contain twelve.

This is one of the reasons people can finish a day feeling as though they worked continuously while still struggling to identify what they completed. Time exists on paper in neat blocks, but usable attention is more fragile. An hour between two meetings is not necessarily an hour of focused work. A ninety-minute commute is not merely ninety minutes if it forces earlier preparation, shifts family logistics and leaves you mentally tired before or after the day. A "quick" switch from one project to another may involve reopening documents, reconstructing decisions and remembering why somebody called a spreadsheet "FINAL_v3_NEW." The practical cost of hybrid work lives in these transitions.

The wrong response is usually to squeeze harder. People see fragmented time and decide to become more efficient inside every fragment. Emails on the train. Messages while walking between meeting rooms. One call from the car park, another while buying lunch. A document open during a meeting "just in case there is a quiet bit." The day becomes a demonstration of simultaneous activity that would impress