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## LIFE & STYLE

# It's OK to Miss the Office During the Coronavirus Lockdown

Coronavirus has shattered any separation between job and home that workers were clinging to—for many, an essential part of life is now missing



ILLUSTRATION: RUTH GWILY

By [Rachel Feintzeig](#)

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Alicia Johnston couldn't take it anymore. She'd spent weeks trapped at home, juggling her full-time digital marketing job with caring for her children, ages 4 and 6. One day, holed up inside her daughter's closet, she called her manager and broke down.

"Everyone was everywhere," she says. Coloring supplies and computer monitors mingled on the dining room table. Children's screams and dogs' barks broke her concentration.

Ms. Johnston's manager offered her the Holy Grail: a chance to sneak back into some semblance of her old life for a few hours. Once a week, Ms. Johnston now drives to her empty St. Paul, Minn., office, donning a mask, grabbing a coffee and relishing the quiet.

"I'm finally not responsible for anyone in that moment of time besides myself," she says.



Alicia Johnston works at her dining room table, which has become the command center for the whole family, including her two young children.

PHOTO: REID JOHNSTON

Proponents of the physical workplace like to talk about how it promotes serendipitous run-ins, better communication and new ideas rooted in collaboration. But as the pandemic obliterates any hint of work-life balance, many are seeing the office for what it really was: an escape from domestic life that helped to more fully define them. Even if the actual work can be transferred to a home study—or the Murphy bed Ms. Johnston transforms into a desk—workers say they feel lost without the trappings of their office selves.

Gone are the suits and dresses—uniforms that helped workers step into their corporate personas and chase the next deal or nail a presentation. The energy of the office, powered by conversations with colleagues or just the buzz of background noise, has faded away too.

Even the things workers used to hate suddenly seem to reveal their purpose. Those stolen minutes spent waiting for an elevator were a brief chance to decompress between meetings, that trip downtown was a buffer between feeding the baby breakfast and having to face the boss. For many single people, the expectation now is all work, all the time. For parents, there's always a kid or computer on their lap—often both.

“You can’t get away from your family, can’t get away from your work,” says Leslie Perlow, a leadership professor at Harvard Business School who studies work-life boundaries. “You have no excuse ever. Where can you be?”

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Ms. Perlow has been interviewing employees at professional services firms. Many pine for a way to put some guardrails on the workday: an automated email that lists work hours, for instance. “But that’s so not accepted,” she says. Employees are worried about keeping their jobs in a hiring market that’s suddenly swung from bidding wars to layoffs.

And some employers have made clear they are loath to let workers log off. At Bank of America, management recently disabled the email system’s out-of-office function so that workers can’t send automated responses when they’re on vacation. (A company spokesman says the move was “not directly related to the pandemic.”)

Besides, no out-of-office message can keep the kids at bay when school and child care have evaporated.



Susan Walmesley, pictured with daughters Brooke, age 4, and Dylan, 2, misses the commute into her Chicago office and frequent business trips.

PHOTO: DAN WALMESLEY

“They don’t care about the schedule or what we planned for the day,” 40-year-old Susan Walmesley says of her new officemates, 4-year-old Brooke and 2-year-old Dylan. “They make their own agenda.”

The chief marketing officer for minigolf business Puttshack, Ms. Walmesley has taken to conducting video calls from her laundry room, where her team looks on as she folds towels. She's found herself fantasizing about her commute into Chicago from the suburbs, a 30-minute train ride she used to complain about, and her frequent plane rides for business trips. During that in-between time she could think and switch from mom mode to worker mode.

"You can walk out the door and kind of be somebody else at the office. Now you're just one person," says Matt Abramovitz, a 47-year-old vice president of programming at New York City classical radio station WQXR.



Matt Abramovitz's daughter Rose, 6, has a habit of rejecting important business calls that are routed to her iPad.

PHOTO: MATT ABRAMOVITZ

He placed a few photos of his children at the office but kept talk of them to a minimum. These days, Mr. Abramovitz is recording his radio show from a blanket fort in his basement in Brooklyn, N.Y. His daughter's iPad is connected to his phone number. She has a habit of rejecting calls from important business contacts.

The blur comes with some sweet moments. Mr. Abramovitz spent a recent weekday taking conference calls from the beach while watching his kids gather shells. Jon Stein, the chief



executive of New York City digital-investing company Betterment, has replaced his walks to the cafeteria with strolls to the mailbox with his young daughters.

Mr. Stein's wife, Polina Khentov, a stay-at-home parent, loves that he's home to eat dinner every night and assist with bedtime duties. But even she misses some of the separation inherent in his old life.

"We get in each other's territories a little," she says. Mr. Stein suddenly has opinions on things that were previously out of his domain, like how to "optimize" the packed fridge.

Just as work was once a respite from the responsibilities of home, home was also a respite from work. Buzzing smartphones and conference calls with Asia may have crept in, extending the workday, but there was still some chance to carve out a life away from one's laptop. Now there's no way to hide from the boss, especially for those who don't have children.

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"People know you can't really do anything else. You're there on the weekends. You're there every day," says Obi Eneli, a 23-year-old management consulting associate at PricewaterhouseCoopers. He spent about two months holed up alone in his small Manhattan apartment working from a makeshift standing desk cobbled together from stacked boxes before flying to his family home in Ohio this month.

Some are starting to worry about the ramifications of the boundary breakdown. At Snyk, a Boston-based cybersecurity startup, productivity has soared to record highs recently. Workers can't seem to resist popping onto their computers to do extra work at all hours, CEO Peter McKay says. But they look terrible. On Zoom calls, colleagues seem exhausted and irritable, as if on the verge of burnout, Mr. McKay has noticed.

“To be honest, I was feeling the same way,” he says. “I didn’t know what day it was.”

He decided to decree May 15 a companywide mental-health day for all employees to rest. He hopes the break gives people permission to re-erect some of the borders once inherent in their days.

“You had this routine where you could pace yourself. Now it’s all turned upside down,” he says. “It’s not sustainable.”

#### **Four Ways to Define Boundaries**

*How to separate work and everything else when it’s all under one roof.*

**Block your calendar:** After feeling guilty about locking his kids out of the room when he had to work, Chieh Huang, CEO of online bulk-shopping site Boxed, decided he needed to find a way to get back to his old schedule. He set up his calendar to reflect a break from 7:30 to 10:30 p.m., time that used to be reserved for home life back when he was commuting. He also blocks an hour for lunch to spend with his family.

**Create a ritual:** Laura Stack, a productivity consultant, hops from the carpet in her home office to the hardwood floors in the hallway to signify the end of the workday. “It is this celebration,” she says. “An actual physical act that I do to say, ‘I’m done working.’”

**Find a “third space”:** For some semblance of alone time, Ms. Stack recommends creating an area in your house where you can decamp to chill out, a domestic substitute for your favorite coffee shop or bar. She retreats to her bedroom, making sure to tell her family she’ll be unavailable for a bit and asking if there’s anything they need from her before she leaves.

**Try scheduling “on” times:** In her work with consulting employees, Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow often focused on helping teams carve out predictable time off so folks could get a break. Now, the more realistic expectation might be predictable time on, she says: designated windows where people are working. The shifts can be designed to coordinate between colleagues who need to collaborate. But they also lend flexibility to workers dealing with things like distance learning for their kids.

— *Ben Eisen contributed to this article.*

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