

The Memo – episode 16

Back to Work: What's next for post-lockdown workplaces ?

Masakatsu Yamamoto works in a real estate company with offices based in Tokyo. “I’ve been working from home for two months. And to be honest it was quite stressful at the start.” he told a journalist from Deutsche Welle. He says he and his wife fought over who got to use the living room table. But then at the start of the second month Mr Yamamoto started to find the situation “really comfortable”. He was getting used to it.

Recently his company has slowly been bringing employees back to work. And Mr. Yamamoto isn’t happy about it. “I’m a department manager, so I thought I should start going back, but I found it so hard to readjust to being in the office. It was like a reverse culture shock.”

Mr. Yamamoto isn’t the only one to experience this strange sensation of returning to offices transformed by strict sanitary rules. Above all, there’s the need to get back on public transport which is once again packed. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons putting pressure on more companies like Mr. Yamamoto’s to keep more employees working from home. Does this mean the pandemic will completely change the way we work- and where we work? What will post-lockdown work look like?

[Identité sonore]

- Joe :

Hello Chloé.

- Chloé :

Hello Joe...

Joe :

Welcome everyone to this new episode of the Memo, the podcast that decodes the digital news for you. Today, we’re looking at how we work in terms of our working spaces in a post-lockdown world. It’s a vast subject- and Chloé it looks like Japan is by no means the only place considering distance-working as a long term option.

- Chloe :

Yes, rather than talking about countries we should probably be talking about industries and companies. Among the most notable announcements were those of Twitter and Facebook back in May. The two companies announced they would be prioritising working from home over being at the office. So if employees don’t want to go back to the office after lockdown, they don’t have to.

- Joe :



Right but we're mainly talking about tech companies here.

- Chloe :

Well, obviously those are the ones that stand out. Working from home is far from a novelty for them. But these measures have also started appearing in other areas. If you look at the automobile sector, the PSA group has also announced that for economic reasons working from home is now the rule rather than the exception. That's with the aim of reducing the average on-site presence of its employees to one and a half days a week.

- Joe :

I assume that these are decisions that only concern those who can work from home using digital tools.

- Chloe :

Yes exactly. And as an aside to the listeners; for more details on that question, I invite you to listen to our episode on the digitalisation of work. PSA did not start from zero on this. To work outside the walls of the office, the company first had to double their computer capacity, taking the potential of their simultaneous connections from 18,000 to 38,000. You could say that, in a way, the fight against the pandemic has accelerated a definite trend within organisations, while also lowering certain managerial and social barriers preventing the majority from distance-working.

- Joe :

Barriers? What kind?

- Chloe :

Let's go back to your example of Mr Yamamoto in Japan. Later in the article, the journalist interviews a researcher at the Japan Institute for Labor Policy. This specialist says that according to tradition, "Traditionally, Japanese companies have considered 'work' to be something that only happened when their employees were physically in the building and that workers should put in long hours and lots of overtime." There needed to be a real change in working culture and even in the entire relationship with work.

- Joe :

And that doesn't only concern Japan, I read in the New York Times that for Twitter and Facebook it meant they had to challenge an abiding myth: That of Silicon Valley itself. Let me explain- to be at the cutting edge it was absolutely necessary to work in this exact region where the future was being created. But with these announcements of distance-working home, suddenly it was the opposite. And was all that really due to new habits learned under lockdown?

- Chloe :

Yes you're right, the lockdown and the protective measures have played a big role but it's not only that. Some businesses have realised that it's actually possible to work from home using digital tools. Employees have also taken a liking to distance working, which is considered a more secure option in these pandemic times. That's what I read in a Vox article. But there's another context to this which is a lot more ... budget orientated.



- Joe :

What do you mean?

- Chloe :

On one hand many companies have had to invest in remote working solutions - costs which they intend to recover. On the other hand, physical distance measures make returning to work expensive and complex to put in place. And finally offices, buildings... all of that has a significant cost! And in a period of economic crisis reducing costs is essential.

- **Joe :**

So the key is therefore the costs linked to workplaces?

- **Chloe :**

Yes and not only those of buildings! For example, Facebook was obliged to pay huge wages to its staff in Silicon Valley just so they could live there. Now they're spread across the United States or even the world, those costs will go down. This deconcentration is also an opportunity for certain communities that have been neglected by these tech workers until now.

- **Joe :**

I don't really understand- can you explain?

- **Chloe :**

Well in the same article I read that in the US some settlements or population centers like Tulsa or the State of Vermont have put in place programmes offering bonuses to all employees working from home full time. The goal was to attract new, well paid residents. In other words, they're trying to orchestrate a brain drain.

- **Joe :**

So as I understand it, working from the countryside is going to become the standard for office workers after the Covid crisis. But how do people keep links with their company? Working isn't just about producing reports, it's also about exchanging ideas and seeing colleagues...

- Chloe :

Well you're exaggerating a bit, not everybody wants to live in the countryside. But you're asking a good question. How do you rethink companies at a distance? An article by Wired talks about the risk of a business with 2 speeds. That's where you have some employees working at a distance and others working in offices, benefitting from direct contact with management and bigger opportunities. That's why it's important to completely rethink the company. For this the journalist cites the example of Gitlab, a completely decentralised company that counts 1200 employees in 65 countries and not a single office.

- Joe :

Right so no coffee machine, no leaving drinks, job interviews at a distance- but how do they do it?



- Chloe :

They've shared their rules on informal communication, which govern pretty much everything you just mentioned. How to create relations with colleagues, on virtual coffee machines. There are even DJ sets on Zoom. It's very detailed and we invite you to look at it, the link is in the description. What's interesting is that they consider that writing these rules is essential to maintain "natural" social situations at the office.

- Joe :

So what could happen to offices? You said that they might change function?

- Chloe :

Well personalised spaces in offices will probably disappear with the transition to what is known "clean desk" working. With teams who work mainly at a distance, keeping your own workspace becomes sort of illogical. Desks therefore become collective places that you have to leave empty after you've worked there. It goes without mentioning that it makes the task of office cleaners easier, who don't have to worry about touching the personal objects of workers.

- Joe :

So instead of a place to work, the office becomes a place to meet up?

- Chloe :

Exactly. Even if that means reorganising the culture of the company, as teacher/researcher Delphine Minchella points out in an article in the Conversation. Shifting the company from a workplace to a meeting place is going to be one of the main challenges of these offices of tomorrow.

- Joe :

Well thank you Chloe for all that- looking forward to bumping into you at a virtual watercooler! Thank you everyone for listening, and if you enjoyed this episode please go ahead and share it. See you in two weeks for another episode of the Memo.

Sources :

- [Coronavirus: Is home office becoming a new normal in Japan?](#) (Deutsche Welle)
- [Twitter is now letting employees work from home indefinitely](#) (The Verge)
- [Facebook Starts Planning for Permanent Remote Workers](#) (The New York Times)
- [PSA fait du télétravail la règle, pas l'exception](#) (Les Echos)
- [This is the end of the office as we know it](#) (Vox)
- [Remote Work Has Its Perks, Until You Want a Promotion](#) (Wired)
- [Informal Communication in an all-remote environment](#) (GitLab)
- [Covid-19 : après l'open space, l'ère du « clean desk » ?](#) (The Conversation)