

Meet the Return-to-Office Whisperers

By Emma Goldberg *The New York Times*

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Being the boss doesn't mean you get exactly what you wish for. That's what Craig Knoblock discovered when he tried to get his employees to come back to the office in the fall of 2021.

The morning of his office's grand reopening, Knoblock was feeling energized. He traded out his hole-ridden jeans for nicer pants and happily raced along palm-tree-lined roads to the Information Sciences Institute (I.S.I.), a research organization connected to the University of Southern California that he has run since 2018. Knoblock — who is 61 and radiates the kind of bronzed, healthy glow that might seem out of place at an academic institution, were it not in Los Angeles — rode the elevator to the 10th floor, where his executive assistant greeted him with one of the gift bags she had assembled for returning workers. An entire conference room had been set aside for them: 250 bags filled with KN95 masks, hand sanitizer, pretzels, nuts and Welch's fruit snacks.

But as the week drew to a close, dozens of those bags sat untouched, and the office remained far emptier than Knoblock had expected. He realized with dismay that many people didn't want to return to the office. When he surveyed his roughly 400 employees and student

researchers that month, Knoblock found that nearly 30 percent of them preferred to work from home — forever.

I.S.I. happens to be the very place where in 1981 scientists invented “packet video,” the software technology that enables video meetings, but Knoblock was determined that at least some old-fashioned office work would prevail there. “We’ve got to fix this,” he told himself. “We need to convince people to come back.”

Knoblock sought the advice of his senior leadership team, but some managers were as perplexed as he was about why certain members of the staff so ardently wanted to work from home. After all, for quite a few people, remote work had been a mess. Terry Benzel, a 66-year-old associate director at the institute, spent the early months of the pandemic at a desk next to her husband’s model train set, which punctuated her workday with whistles and a toy conductor blaring out: “Now boarding at Gate 8! All aboard!” Fred Morstatter, a 34-year-old artificial-intelligence expert, worked from a one-bedroom apartment with his girlfriend, who taught elementary-school trumpet lessons from their closet. Jonathan May, a 44-year-old computer scientist, realized at home that his happiness had been partly

reliant on joking around with his colleagues; far from the office, who could tease him, as Benzel had, for turning “Dry January” into “Tie January” by spiffing up the first 31 days of the year with a necktie?

“I kind of wanted it to be five days in, in my heart of hearts,” May says. “I’m like, Why wouldn’t you want to come in?”

But then there were employees, like Alefiya Hussain, a computer-science researcher, who realized how much time they gained from remote work. Hussain estimates that at one point, before the pandemic, she spent 400 minutes a week commuting from Palos Verdes to I.S.I. Once she started working from home, she could have longer meals with her children, exercise on Zoom with her sister and write more papers for the institute. “It lets me control and define my time,” she says.

As Knoblock was wrestling with the fate of his office, a colleague sent him a video of a talk by Gleb Tsipursky, a behavioral scientist who promised to help chief executives in Knoblock’s precise situation. Tsipursky, the 42-year-old head of the boutique consultancy Disaster Avoidance Experts, appeared in the video wearing a black headset and rimless rectangular

glasses, his every blond hair in order. In his talk, Tsipursky acknowledged the tough spot that employers like I.S.I. were in, citing a statistic that 40 percent of workers say they would quit their jobs if forced to come in full time. He told the cautionary tale of Apple, which he said had recently mishandled its return-to-office process and was now facing an employee uprising and several high-profile departures. But Tsipursky claimed that, with his guidance, it was possible to avoid Apple's predicament.

Knoblock reached out to Tsipursky and described to him what was happening at I.S.I. "You can't just snap your fingers and get people to change their behaviors," Tsipursky said. He told Knoblock that most business leaders were thinking about the problem of hybrid work all wrong. Tsipursky's philosophy is that hybrid work isn't a logistical dilemma; it's psychological.

Tsipursky's doctoral research was on the Soviet Union's policing of music in the 1940s and 1950s. The Kremlin didn't want Russian teenagers to be influenced by American artists like Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. But the government found that the more heavy-handed its messaging on radio stations and at youth-group meetings, the more the youth flocked to

forbidden artists. If you tell people what to do, they'll rebel, Tsipursky told I.S.I. Give them reasons to act a certain way, and they'll be more inclined to do so.

In other words, you shouldn't forcibly change people's schedules — but sometimes you can change their minds.



What began as a soft war over in-person work after cities around the country reopened from pandemic shutdowns has started to harden. Bosses across the country are tiring of remote work and mandating a return to the office, citing the desire for more teamwork and mentorship, as well as concerns about lost productivity at home. Tom Siebel, chief executive of the software company C3 AI, who [boasted](#) last summer about having “the only full parking lot in Silicon Valley,” told his 800 employees that if they wanted flexibility, they should work somewhere else. Some managers at [Goldman Sachs](#) checked badge swipes to track office attendance. Even Marc Benioff, head of Salesforce, which promised most of its employees that they could go remote permanently, began to wax nostalgic about the office this year. “We don’t have the same level of performance and productivity that we had in 2020 before the pandemic,” Benioff said recently. “We do not.”

But workers whose professional and personal lives have been transformed by remote work are ready to fight to keep their newfound freedoms. More than 90 percent of workers who can do their jobs remotely want at least some flexibility in where they work now, according to [Gallup](#), and the [ADP Research Institute](#)

found in a survey that nearly two-thirds of employees said they would consider looking for another job if asked to return full time. In February, when [Amazon](#) told all employees they would have to be in the office three days a week by May, more than 29,000 joined a “remote advocacy” [Slack channel](#) to protest the new rule. Starbucks’s announcement that corporate staff would be expected to come in three days a week was met with a [letter](#) of complaint signed by dozens of employees.

Normally when companies confront a conundrum of this scale and complexity, they rely on a traditional cast of consulting characters like McKinsey, Deloitte and Bain. But because mass hybrid work is novel — a sweeping workplace change that is only three years old — new consultancies have emerged to provide advice on navigating return-to-office debates. Companies are turning to office whisperers like Tsipursky: hybrid experts who claim that if companies follow their advice, mandates won’t be necessary. Workers will want to come to their desks (at least some of the time).

Once hired at I.S.I., Tsipursky started speaking to Knoblock via Zoom about every other week. He would log on from his home office in Ohio, his book “Never Go

With Your Gut” displayed prominently behind him on a set of shelves. Tsipursky taught Knoblock to consider the psychological reasons people want to work remotely. Tsipursky divides those who resist going back to the office into four categories, which he calls “the four horsemen” of return-to-office mandates. He started using the phrase back in 2021 after a conversation he had with a company executive, an avid churchgoer who invoked those apocalyptic figures from Christian Scripture in describing her own attempts to get workers back to the office. To most ordinary people, the apocalypse is a far cry from the demise of the office. But to Tsipursky, the imagery was resonant.

The first of Tsipursky’s horsemen is the resistor. Resistors are typically senior-level employees and high performers, workers who aren’t worried that defying return-to-office rules will yield professional consequences. They’ve proved that they can be productive at home. They don’t understand why they’re being forced back into routines they refashioned. So they simply keep working remotely, skirting employer policies and hoping they aren’t disciplined. And their assumptions are often safe, given that just 3 percent of companies said they would fire employees who didn’t

show up in the office, according to a 2022 survey from Gartner.

The second of the horsemen is the defector. Those are the employees who when pushed to return to the office will quit — either on the spot or in the months after R.T.O. rules are put in place. The employees most likely to leave, according to Tsipursky, are those whose skills are in high demand, like artificial-intelligence researchers in the tech industry or highly performing traders at financial firms. “We had a midlevel manager tell us that three of her workers quit,” Tsipursky said of one of his tech clients, “because they were headhunted away by a place that offered them full-time remote work.” The phenomenon is all the more pervasive amid the pandemic’s churning labor market, or what is sometimes called the [Great Resignation](#), in which some 47 million people left their jobs in 2021, and 50 million did so in 2022.

Third, in Tsipursky’s view, are the so-called quiet quitters. Like the Great Resignation, “quiet quitting” is a term as disputed as it has been deployed, with many describing it as a way for managers to put a label on unfounded worries that workers at home are slacking off. Tsipursky, though, turned the term on its head. It’s

not about remote workers detaching from work, but instead about people resisting when pushed toward working conditions they don't like. They don't want to go back to the office, but they also don't feel they can defy the rules outright. Instead, Tsipursky explained, many of these employees express frustration with return-to-office mandates in subtler ways, sometimes by spending their hours in the office avoiding work. "We had a client who noticed after people came back to the office that there was a substantial drop-off in productivity," Tsipursky said. "The people who are least engaged and least productive are people who can work remotely but have to work in the office Monday through Friday from 9 to 5."

Lastly there are the skeptics: people who, when they return to the office, bring with them an often justified sense of frustration and resentment. Workers of color, who can feel marginalized within corporate work structures, tend to bristle at return-to-office mandates, Tsipursky said. Surveys show that 81 percent of Black and Asian knowledge workers prefer remote or hybrid work, compared with 75 percent of white workers, in part because they feel that the office is best suited to the needs of white men, and returning to in-person work means returning to [microaggressions](#). Parents,

particularly mothers of young children, also tend to be skeptics because they're better able to juggle professional responsibilities with child care when they're home. A survey from [FlexJobs](#), a remote-employment search site, found that 80 percent of women ranked remote work as a top job benefit, compared with 69 percent of men. Workers with disabilities and long-Covid symptoms, such as fatigue, might also fall into this category, according to Tsipursky, because while working at home they're better able to meet their own physical needs.

What Tsipursky's version of Scripture teaches, in other words, is that return-to-office resistance doesn't always manifest in identical ways. Workers have distinct reasons for wanting to stay home and different ways of expressing that desire. Tsipursky told Knoblock that a mandate wasn't the right way to deal with the nearly 30 percent of his workers who didn't want to come back to the office. The heavy-handedness would worsen resistance and drive potential defectors toward competing employers.

“The key is not to have a command-and-control structure — that's what so many bosses get wrong,”

Tsipursky said. “People will take up invitations to come to the office because they want to.”

“We are so focused on the destination, the final destination,” said Nina Siemaszko, facing two researchers at the Information Sciences Institute seated on the office’s fifth floor, as she prepared to lead their free yoga session on a recent Thursday. Sunlight flooded into the space, as the researchers settled onto mats surrounded by foam blocks, bolsters, straps and blankets. “It’s the journey,” Siemaszko continued.

She launched into a sermon that could have applied to any number of things — the institute’s bumpy path out of remote work, the lengthy commutes that most of its employees had undertaken to get to the office that day — but for her purpose it was about the head, the heart and the breath. “We are really getting nowhere fast. We are always on a journey.”

Workers and students at the Information Sciences Institute could fill up their schedules attending the events hosted as incentives for coming to the office. Knoblock, embracing Tsipursky’s advice, has instituted “cookie hours” on Mondays and Tuesdays, when workers are invited to the fifth-floor lounge for desserts

from the local superstore and chitchat. There's lunch on Wednesdays and Thursdays, when people descend in their hoodies and lanyards for free turkey-breast sandwiches and chicken-teriyaki bowls. And there's yoga with Siemaszko, who reminds them the midday interruption is worth it for refocusing the body: "Yoga teaches that the brain is the ego, the heart is the intellect."

Some of these social events were Tsipursky's ideas for ensuring that if workers commute, they'll be certain to see their colleagues. They won't be shut up in offices all day on Zoom speaking with teammates who stayed home. The events have often turned up sizable crowds, so much so that the institute had to start scrawling people's names on boxed lunches to prevent colleagues from taking one another's lunch orders.

And with those communal perks in place for those who commute, Knoblock decided to give up on requiring workers to come into the office three days a week in favor of a more flexible approach. The institute's return-to-office schedule now differs by team. The communications team comes in at least one day a week; an engineering research team does three days; and some employees don't have any requirement to

come into the office at all. That has been affirming for some workers, who are able to maintain the control over their time that remote work afforded them. Hussain, for example, usually comes in just once a week. “It’s been transformational,” she says.

Most return-to-office experts share Tsipursky’s antipathy toward mandates, especially ones requiring workers to come into the office five days a week. “Mandates are a nuke,” Zach Dunn, a founder of the hybrid-work-technology company Robin, told me, “when a much less severe thing will work.” Top-down rules from executives make employees feel disempowered, and as the labor market remains strong — with nearly two job openings for every unemployed person — white-collar workers know they don’t have to accept conditions that don’t suit their needs. Business leaders have also tended to struggle with enforcing mandates because they don’t know whether to actually discipline people for defying them. “I don’t think the mandates have power,” Dunn says. “No one knows if they’re working or not.”

Many companies have doubled down on mandates anyway: Disney, Amazon, Apple, Starbucks, much of Wall Street. Nearly 70 percent of large and midsize

employers say they require workers who can do their jobs remotely to be in the office a specific number of days per week, according to Gartner. To Tsipursky, these mandates are reflective of employers that don't know how to lead their teams any differently than they did before the pandemic, so they're falling back on outdated forms of control. "The old dog doesn't want to learn new tricks," he says. But the hybrid experts also assure executives that it's possible to bring workers back into the office without a dictate. It just requires understanding what offices are really for.

Many chief executives assume that being in an office makes workers more productive. But research shows that hybrid work doesn't typically harm productivity. More likely, it helps, as a recent paper indicated that people put **40 percent** of the time they saved from cutting their commutes back into work. There's also pre-pandemic research suggesting that remote workers take fewer breaks. Nick Bloom, a Stanford economist and hybrid-work expert, who has been studying work-from-home data since long before the pandemic, tends to emphasize this data on hybrid productivity when meeting with business leaders. "Companies have this idealized vision that when people are in the office they're working all the time," Bloom says. "It's a mirage.

They're not really working that hard in the office, and they're working pretty hard at home.”

What the office enables, hybrid experts say, is relationship-building. A forthcoming study from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York suggests that when people work remotely, they receive less feedback on their work. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, researchers found that remote work at M.I.T. led to a [38 percent](#) decline in “weak ties,” meaning people had fewer of the casual professional relationships that help advance their careers. And a study in [Nature](#) last year found that virtual communication can curb creativity. Data on office attendance from Robin showed that when people see their teammates in the office, they are more than twice as likely to come back.

Hybrid experts tend to believe that return-to-office planning is about moderation — some time at home and some time in the office, with a policy that workers help shape. And they argue that it's not impossible for employers to find a return-to-office approach striking that balance. They often recommend that workers get to choose which days they come in, with the exception of an “anchor day” when everybody is expected to

overlap. They think it's best if employees set attendance expectations in conversation with their teams and managers. For these hybrid experts, the "four horsemen" resisting rigid return-to-office plans might not actually portend disaster. Instead, they're foretelling a new world of work: one in which workers get the value of the office and the benefits of flexibility at home. "The pandemic is the largest change to hit the labor market since World War II," Bloom says. "It turns out we've opened Pandora's box, and what's in Pandora's box is pretty good. It's a new way of working and living."

Companies, they say, are simply in denial of the new reality. Many in-person activities have returned to prepandemic norms. OpenTable found that in-person dining late last summer exceeded its 2019 numbers. Air travel over Labor Day surpassed prepandemic levels, too. Only offices have remained far below their baseline — meaning workers have voted with their feet to demand that the workplace's future will not resemble its past.

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