

Google wants people in office, despite productivity gains at home

July 16 2021, by Mark Bergen



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Google software engineers reported something in a recent survey that surprised higher-ups: they felt as productive working from home as they did before the pandemic.

Internal research at the Alphabet Inc. unit also showed that employees want more "collaboration and social connections" at work, according to Brian Welle, a human resources vice president. Welle declined to provide exact figures but said "more than 75%" of surveyed employees answered this way. Most [staff](#) also specifically craved physical proximity when working on new projects.

"There's something about innovative work—when you need that spark," Welle said in an interview. "Our employees feel like those moments happen better when they're together."

That's partially why, despite the rebound in productivity, the technology giant is sticking with its plan to bring most employees back to offices this fall. As Google deliberates which individual employees will get to continue working full time from home and who will need to come in, some staff are increasingly frustrated by the lack of clear direction and uneven enforcement of the policy. Internal message boards lit up this month when a senior Google executive announced he was going to work from New Zealand. Meanwhile, most lower-level staff are waiting to learn if they can relocate, or have to come into the office.

Google's transition back to office life is being closely watched. The search giant practically invented the luxurious Silicon Valley campus, with its abundant free food, nap pods and other perks. Google is saving around a billion dollars a year on expenses thanks to remote work, yet the company has invested far more on recent real estate expansions in San Jose, California; New York City; and elsewhere. And even Google must contend with personnel unwilling to surrender the comforts or economic benefits of remote work—especially with a white-collar workforce that has had no qualms rebelling against management.

Workers in many industries have decided to quit their jobs rather than give up virtual work. While some [tech companies](#) went fully remote

during the pandemic, others that haven't, like Apple Inc., have also dealt with staff resisting a return. A new cottage industry sprung up around remote work as smaller cities try to lure rich tech employees from the coasts. "Google and Apple have some of the best offices," said Evan Hock, a co-founder of MakeMyMove.com, an online directory for remote work. "If they're dealing with it, it's safe to assume that everyone else will be too."

Welle runs Google's People Analytics, a division that tracks staff performance and opinion, and shared findings this week as Google opened its Mountain View headquarters to staff on a voluntary basis. In September, Google will ask most of its workforce to return three days a week. When the pandemic struck, overall measures of productivity quickly "plummeted," Welle said. It was only this May that those productivity figures, tracked in self-reported [employee](#) surveys, bounced back—a pleasant surprise for Welle's division. Google only shared survey figures from its engineers; the company employs thousands of non-engineers as well.

Also in May, the company relaxed its return-to-work policy. Chief Executive Officer Sundar Pichai told staff about a new plan for a "hybrid" work model—60% of the company would return to their old offices three days a week; a fifth could apply to relocate to other offices; and another fifth could apply to work remotely full-time. Google said it would notify staff of those decisions in August, and the company set up an internal tool for employees to submit and track these requests.

But that messaging, on occasion, has been clumsy.

That latest internal spark set off in June, when Urs Hölzle, a powerful executive overseeing Google's technical infrastructure, emailed staff about his plans to move from California to New Zealand for at least a year. For many underlings waiting on approvals to change their work

situations, this unexpected news felt flippant and unfair. Under Google's policies, a transfer to cheaper cities can mean a pay cut.

Several employees complained about Hölzle's decision in text threads and on memegen, the company's internal messaging board. The email was "very tone deaf," said Laura de Vesine, a senior engineer who works under Hölzle. "Obviously there's an enormous double standard."

It was even the subject of a cartoon from Manu Cornet, a veteran Google software engineer with renown inside the company for his comics spoofing its culture. Cornet recently left Google for Twitter Inc.

A Google spokesperson said that Hölzle's relocation request was approved last year but was delayed because of the pandemic. In his email, Hölzle said he would continue to work on California hours. The spokesperson said that Hölzle is supportive of remote work and that there will be employees "across all levels" of his division who will be approved to relocate or work remotely.

Hölzle, Google's eighth employee, is known internally for building the teams managing its sprawling data centers and server farms. "I'm not retiring, just changing my location!" Hölzle wrote in an email to staff, which was reviewed by Bloomberg News. In an earlier email from May, Hölzle had noted that remote employees might be left out of impromptu office conversations "where we know collaboration happens." CNET reported earlier on Hölzle's email and staff reactions.

In internal messages about Hölzle's move, some frustrated Google staff resurfaced an email from an ex-colleague native to New Zealand. That person wrote that they were leaving the company in April 2020, after being unable to get authorization to work remotely from the country, according to a copy reviewed by Bloomberg News.

Welle declined to comment specifically on Hölzle, but said Google will be flexible with certain requests. "There is an opportunity for exceptions," he said.

In recent years, Google employees have gone to war with management over a number of issues. Staff have complained that, in response, company brass has put up barriers to communication and made decisions with less transparency. Meanwhile, executives have complained that a more activist employee base has forced them to withhold information.

Google pays lavish salaries to many employees and isn't at risk of a mass exodus over an office return. Still, some are departing. De Vesine, the Google engineer, considered moving from the pricey Bay Area during the pandemic but did not have management sign-off. "The uncertainty about what Google's policies will be has left me stuck," she said. "And I got tired of waiting." She is planning to leave Google for a remote position at another company. De Vesine said she was not speaking on behalf of the employee labor group, the Alphabet Workers Union, of which she is a member.

Welle stressed that Google's guidelines around remote work may still change. The proportion of employees it expects to return to the office is still an estimate. Google isn't sharing how many employee [remote work](#) requests have been approved so far. But Welle called the overall employee reception to the transition positive.

"So far, so good," he said. "Let's see how it unfolds."

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Citation: Google wants people in office, despite productivity gains at home (2021, July 16)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2021-07-google-people-office-productivity-gains.html>

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