



Career Planning

Anxious About Hybrid Work? Ask Yourself These 4 Questions.

by Morra Aarons-Mele

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I love my job. I also love working from home.

You may feel the same, especially after over a year of fewer commutes and the ability to get serious tasks done in your own environment. But you may also be feeling pressure or anxiety about jumping right back into full-time office work.

Some of the pressure is outright and clearly stated. For example, Sandeep Mathrani, the CEO of WeWork, claimed that “those who are überly engaged with the company want to go to the office two-thirds of the time, at least” and “those who are least engaged are very comfortable working from home.” He’s joined by JPMorgan Chase’s Jamie Dimon, who wants his people back in their seats because “clients told him that in cases where JPMorgan lost business to rivals, it was because “bankers from the other guys visited, and ours didn’t. Well, that’s a lesson.”

Tom Montag, COO of Bank of America, literally kept score of his employees during the pandemic, measuring performance of his employees who showed up in person versus those who worked at home. The (brave? foolish?) souls who showed up in the office during the pandemic to work for Montag called themselves “warriors.”

Some of the pressure is unsaid, however, or communicated via passive aggressive comments like “I miss seeing you in person,” or “Guess you just didn’t feel like putting on real pants today.”

It’s natural that, when some of the team is remote and some of the team is in the office, bosses who aren’t accustomed to hybrid work get nervous. And it can be challenging to manage remote teams, especially for leaders who have never done so before.

But I also believe that you don’t have to go back to the old ways of working to prove your worth. Work can be done productively *and* remotely, at least some of the time. Many companies have reported higher levels of employee engagement even as teams went remote almost overnight, with no planning or strategy in place. And the majority of knowledge workers want a hybrid approach to their post pandemic worklife in order to take advantage of what both the office and remote spaces have to offer.

So, amidst all of these changes and differing opinions, how can you deal with the anxiety and mixed emotions that come with your boss either hinting or saying outright, “It’s time to come back”?

My work (and experience) with anxiety suggests that it’s important to start by naming what you’re feeling, and then to play detective around possible sources and solutions. This, along with conversations with both employees and leaders over the past few months has led me to four key questions to answer as you consider the next few months, and beyond:

- What do I want my days to look like?
- What stresses me out?
- How does my boss define success right now?
- What do I value most?

I’ll walk you through how to approach each question. Your answers will help you identify what you’re truly feeling and what you need from work (both remotely and in the office) in the future.

What do I want my days to look like?

Before ruminating on what the future might look like, or how to approach your boss, take a step back and get a firm grasp of what’s going well in your WFH life, and why. The easiest way to start, particularly if you’re feeling overwhelmed, is to think less about your big picture career goals and more about what your days look like. What’s great about your remote day? Maybe you love being able to take a break and eat lunch with your spouse, or you like going to the grocery store at 2 PM. Maybe you just love never having coworkers lean into your personal space to ask a random question.

Then ask yourself what you cannot stand one more minute doing. (I never want to have the plumber ring the doorbell when I’m presenting to an important client on Zoom).

Another strategy is to consider the basic structure of your workday. You might prefer a steady pace — sitting down to work 9 to 5, and then being done and offline. After going through this exercise, I discovered I work better in short bursts; I like to do a big morning work session, take some time to exercise or cook or go grocery shopping around lunch, get back online and stop when my kids come home at 3, and then work after they are in bed. In addition, I try to chunk my days so that I have “on” days where I wear makeup and am ready to look professional on Zoom, and then have some days where it’s just me and the screen.

In this way, pacing is really important — think of it in terms of managing the interactions that tax your energy versus those that recharge you. And consider whether there are bad habits you developed during the pandemic that you can change — for example, promising to “catch up at night” if you need to turn to something else during the day. Maybe you don’t need to catch up at night! Look at your workday in terms of making the most of your productive hours, not in terms of being logged on.

What stresses me out?

Once you’ve played detective the ideal structure of your days, you can move on to interrogate your major stressors and how they might play out working from home vs. heading back to the office. Though these will look different for everyone, I want to talk through two I hear frequently in my work: role confusion and facetime anxiety.

Role confusion. Right now you probably feel your roles as worker, parent, partner, and housekeeper have been unforgivably mashed together. But the truth is, if you’re working from home even some of the time, you probably will pick up more of the daily tasks required to keep a household running. Yes, you might be the one to answer the door to the UPS and manage tidying up during the day. The key is to identify what annoys you versus what’s making you anxious, and then decide whether working from home or at the office can help alleviate both.

For example, if your home workspace is also your kitchen and laundry room, consider what actions you could take to make it work better for you. You might have to train your brain that when you're sitting at the table, it's not the time to fold the laundry. This is a practice and it takes time. You can literally train your brain that it's time to work by using sensory cues, like a scented candle or certain music or lighting, or you can make a schedule and build in 10 minute "home breaks" in between calls. It can feel really satisfying to putter around the house in the middle of the workday.

If you're constantly anxious trying to juggle the kids' homework while you're on an afternoon call with clients in another time zone, ask yourself whether you could experiment structuring your day the same way you would if you were in an office, particularly once kids are back to school. Would this lower or increase your stress?

Facetime anxiety. In a perfect world, our boss and our colleagues would leave us alone and let us manage our time and expectations. Unfortunately, even after a year of WFH, some organizations still equate facetime with commitment. And for many of us, it's equally stressful to always be digitally present to our colleagues.

So, if you're feeling anxious because you're *not* back in the office, try to understand where those feelings are coming from.

Ask yourself: Is my anxiety about my boss's expectations? Then consider the motivations behind these expectations. Does your manager come from a work culture where everyone showed up on time and stayed late? Is it more challenging for them to manage a remote team, and are they passing along their stress and anxiety to you? Is your manager also anxious about pressure to come back to the office full-time? It might not be appropriate to ask your boss these questions, but with some smart detective work you might be able to gain insight into what's motivating their attitude. (More on how to manage your boss's potential anxieties later.)

Another possibility is that your anxiety is coming from your own expectations. Do you worry that you're not as committed as you should be? In your past, did you get negative messages from someone you respected if you didn't show up somewhere? Did your parents raise you with an attitude that equates going to work as commitment? If many people are back in the office and you are not, do you sometimes feel that everyone else is at the party and you're not invited? FOMO is natural!

Don't be afraid to dig deep here — it can be challenging, but you'll learn a lot about what's causing your anxiety deep down. When I began working from home, for example, I felt that I had to prove my commitment to my work to my husband. At the time he was running a startup, traveling all the time and rarely home. There was an intense dichotomy between our work styles — he was up and out of the house by 7 AM while I stayed in my pajamas often until 11 AM. For a while, I felt like the fact that I was home all the time meant I was not working equally hard or contributing enough to our household. It was only when I compared our paychecks that I realized my commitment to working from home had nothing to do with how successful I was!

How does my boss define success right now?

Once you've done some detective work for yourself, do the same for your manager and organization. Let's revisit the fact that managing a remote team is challenging for most people because it requires more communication, more forethought, more planning, and more emotional intelligence. And before this year, many managers had never done it before, and many have still received little training from their organization about how to do it well.

Here's where you may need to manage your boss a bit, particularly as you learn more about what you need at home and in the office. This will help them feel secure, and it will also help lessen your anxiety because expectations will be clear. People get anxious when they are uncertain. And so, if you're working remotely and your boss is uncertain about what

you're doing with your time and what your goals are, of course they're more likely to hover around you.

First, ask yourself what's important to your boss. Cali Yost, who's been helping companies build successful flexible cultures for decades, always stresses that a manager wants to know two things: where you are and whether you get the work done. They also prefer that your flexible schedule doesn't create more work for them or the team. So when you present a case for flexibility, assure your manager you will be reachable, you will copiously communicate with your peers or clients to make sure the transition is seamless, and, of course, that you'll get the work done. Then prove it.

I also suggest taking it a step further during this confusing and anxious time. Explicitly state and agree on what near-term success looks like with your boss. Productivity expert and former President of Fidelity Investments Bob Pozen says now is the time for organizations to move away from hours and presenteeism to results. He suggests that remote workers think deeply about the results that really matter and create success metrics they can agree on with their boss and team. Managers can also talk with the group and agree on a set of boundaries, and then explicitly agree on a set of goals and outcomes within a clear timeframe.

If you have a boss who isn't a good communicator, take the initiative and propose the success metrics yourself. Bob suggests preparing a memo in which you detail and quantify the goals so your manager can react and respond. When you do that, you increase communication and lessen uncertainty. Creating a clarification of goals and better communication allows your manager not to micromanage and will lessen your own anxiety about being remote.

Once the goals are agreed upon, set up mechanisms for when people aren't in the office to have one-on-ones and stay aligned for success. I recommend doing this on the phone and not via email or Slack. It's good

to hear each other's voices and purely text-based communication can create anxiety, because there's no room for emotions or nuance.

What do I value?

At a recent session I facilitated, a dean at Harvard said, "I don't want to squander what we've learned this year. There's a once in a generation opportunity to change how we work." That struck me. Many organizations and their employees are eager to dive back into "normal work" because this year has been upsetting, disruptive, and so uncertain.

And yet we are full of mixed emotions. We're excited to reconnect with colleagues, have unfettered time to work, and to get out of the house — but nervous that things will just go back to the way they were before, as if this whole traumatic, transformative experience never happened.

Once you've moved from more focused questions around your ideal workday, your stressors, and your manager, you can move on to the bigger picture. How has the pandemic helped you realize what you want from your work life? No matter what your pandemic experience has been, it has shaped you. You are not the same person you were before. Amelia Ransom, Director of Engagement and Diversity at Avalara told me, "We're all going back changed. We're not going back the way that we were. And I don't want to, and I don't want us to."

Take the story of Max Mazur. During the pandemic, they quit a demanding tech job because they needed to help their child in remote school. Max also moved out of New York City to save money on rent, so they could work part time.

"I used to be anxious 24/7. I was working nonstop trying to prove myself and my body shut down." That was a learning experience for Max, who began to look at their values and how they meshed with their chosen field of work. Instead of changing themselves to fit the model of an ideal tech worker, Max decided to let their values drive the work they did and how

they did it. Max says, “I’m not scared of looking inside my own self and that’s part of my journey because I’m a trans person. I used to think, ‘Oh, I’m not good enough. Or, because I don’t fit in here, that means I need to change something about myself.’” Once Max understood their values around work, they left tech entirely to pursue a new career in nonprofit and civic engagement. Not only that, “the anxiety is less present because I know what works with me and what doesn’t.”

That’s why now is the time to reflect and be a bit selfish. Dive deep, think, and identify feelings now, before you can advocate and negotiate for what you want.

Further, if you’re also a manager, you have tremendous power right now in helping people understand these feelings. [Therapist Esther Perel recommends](#) that leaders bring teams together and ask questions that allow people to reflect on their own experience, and the shared experience of the team, as they navigated a tough time.

“A collective trauma, a collective event, a global pandemic like this demands collective resilience, not individual resilience,” she says. “That means that you tap into the collective resources that lift all boats....That degree of interdependence is what allowed us to continue to work as well as we have. Let’s not lose it.” Here are some questions Perel suggests managers can ask (or you can ask yourself on your own as part of this larger exercise):

- What was it for you this year that was challenging?
- What are some things that you learned about yourself this year?
- What were the ways that work supported you the best during the challenging months this year? What were the strong points that you experienced with your team that you think we absolutely should hone in more, foster, and develop further?
- What were the ways that you took care of yourself? Can we learn from those and keep them going?

Putting it all together

Think about it: in 2020, you probably learned how to work in an entirely new way almost overnight. You may have also done this while educating your children, taking care of other people, and negotiating a terrifying global pandemic. Your loved ones might have gotten sick and you took that on too. You rock. If you can do that, you can surely figure out how to successfully manage a hybrid schedule and work in the way that suits you.

Right now, however, many of us are nervous about taking the flexibility we need going forward; instead we're prepared to work in a style that hampers us. When it gets to be too much, we might disengage or even quit. And it's not because we don't like the work or we're not good at it; it's because we need a different environment to do it in or more control over our time and place.

If this sounds like you, remember your strength and do some prep work. Understand what you want from your work day. Try to uncover the feelings and anxieties motivating the behavior of colleagues and managers, and what will make them feel more certain and confident in your success. Once you've done that, ask for what you need. You deserve it.



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