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The Post COVID Water Cooler Effect The Meaning of Interpersonal Interactions of Peers for the Future of Work

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THE POST COVID WATER COOLER EFFECT – The Meaning of Interpersonal Interactions of Peers for the Future of Work

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ABSTRACT

We all need water to thrive. The 'water cooler' in the workspace, the device where employees meet to sip water to avoid dehydration and to informally chat with peers, provided employees with such a fountain. Further, the 'water cooler' can also be a catalyst for interpersonal living and enriching cultural encounters that turns into social capital within the organization. This might, still further, spark employee's innovation and, through that, lead to organizational success. A review of literature and current debate is conducted seeking understanding of the phenomenon 'water cooler', the serendipitous encounters between co-workers, its effects, status, and development. The intentions are to highlight the forces and circumstances at play, examining them from different perspectives while identifying challenges for leaders, organizations, and the workforce in the future of work. The paper enhances the discussion around the significant role of social interaction and its effect in the world of work, addressing both profound changes in external conditions and the remodelling of working arrangements, exploring the well-being of an emotionally turmoiled workforce and the new emphasis in the leaders' skillset, consequence of a power shift on the employment market. The paper recognizes the 'water cooler' as a catalyst for cultural prosperity, growth of social capital, innovation, and business success while unearthing the organizational and leadership responsibilities in protecting its effects. A spring for a new type of leadership and organizational flourishing.

Keywords: informal communication, social interaction, social capital, corporate culture, future of work.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A global pandemic, COVID-19, forced the workforce to work from home. But post-COVID, more and more people choose to keep working remotely instead of returning to the workplace; if that's not an option, they even resign. It is a trend that had already started pre-COVID but accelerated immensely because of it. The workforce demands more flexibility and are at least more content if the employer offers a hybrid option, part remote and part on-site. The remote working experience, along with the emotional turmoil of a global pandemic, seems to have triggered a re-evaluation of life for many people. The focus is shifting from the monetary and prestige values toward physical and emotional well-being and life fulfillment. Therefore, the employment market is in flux, where opportunities for both organizations and the workforce lie, resulting in a battle of retention and attraction.

Organizations are increasingly concerned that remote and hybrid work will dilute their culture and hamper innovation. Innovation that is sprung, among other factors, from their employees' daily run-ins and informal chatter during the workday. These daily run-ins are commonly referred to as 'Water cooler moments'. Such moments can inspire rewarding ideas for the business, improve productivity, relieve tension, enhance employee engagement, etc. New working arrangements and demands from the workforce raise a dilemma for leaders and organizations. Their workforce is less in habitual proximity with each other, thus decreasing socializing among the employees, unearthing questions on how to maintain relationships, build trust and safeguard the organization's culture to ensure business success. The paper is written with the following questions in mind.

- Is the '*water cooler*' and its effect dead?
- Is there a need or way to compensate for the '*water cooler*' in future work?
- What kind of leaders are needed to maintain the '*water cooler effect*' in this new reality?
- Is this a worry at all?

The paper unfolds as follows: first, the journey from pandemic to hybrid is addressed by factoring in the ramifications of COVID-19 and the 4th industrial revolution as catalysts toward hybrid work. Followed by a discussion about different ways of working, briefly examining what is gained and lost, shedding light on what leaders and organizations are dealing with. The paper then proceeds to explore the history of the workplace, debating different setups and teasing the '*water cooler effect*', ending in a discussion on their future role. Next, the needs and wants of the workforce are investigated, highlighting a key leadership challenge. The author then takes a humanized look at the worker, researching what makes him tick in the current climate to better understand what he's asking from the employer resulting in giving a leadership perspective on how to fulfil those needs.

The definition of the '*water cooler effect*' is explored, and the source explained along with reasoning for its necessity and benefits, substantiated by research. This is followed by a discussion of its cultural consequences implicating the phenomenon's strengths for both the organizational culture and its people while unearthing leadership challenges. Moving on in a discourse on communication between leaders and the workforce where the balance of power is touched upon. The paper then proceeds to contemplate the people's well-being if the positive effects do not exist. An examination of non-verbal communication is then conducted and followed by a look at differences in communication concerning different working arrangements, losses and gains, the proximity of the workforce, and suitability of work. A brief review of communication solutions in the virtual world, what's on offer, and the growth of the market segment

is summarized, where a potential key leadership competence is highlighted. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of important leadership skills and references to the current emphasis on soft skills. It ends with answering the aforementioned questions.

2. SETTING THE STAGE (MACRO LENS)

In the following four subchapters, the author addresses, through a review of literature and current debate, the status and development of work. Highlighting forces and circumstances at play, exploring them from different perspectives with the underlying theme of social interaction. Reading the chapter gives a comprehensive insight into the future of work and future working arrangements while calling attention to key leadership challenges.

2.1 From Pandemic to Hybrid

In December 2019, a highly contagious respiratory disease, termed COVID-19, broke out in Wuhan, China. A few months later, on March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic (Yuki et al., 2020). Only a few could have predicted the profound consequences of such a pro-longed outbreak on daily life worldwide. People and organizations all over the world were affected. Lives, livelihoods and the mere existence of organizations were at stake (Carroll & Conboy, 2020; Chriscaden, 2020), or so it seemed. The world as we knew it had turned upside down. Various government interventions were implemented to contain infections, such as travel restrictions, quarantines, lockdowns, and other forms of burdening social distancing and isolation (OECD, 2022). The pandemic put leaders and organizations in every sector around the world to the test. Its repercussions are long-term and provide more challenges than anybody could've imagined (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020).

The global workforce was having all sorts of problems contributing to work. As a result, many organizations struggled with staffing and consequently running their operations, while others were more prepared because of their structure. Eventually, as the pandemic progressed, organizations that survived the flurry of chaotic uncertainty started to regain normality. They began to be able to run their day-to-day business, with some modifications, for example, through distributed teams and employees working from their homes. Organizations that traditionally had their employees co-located were forced to send them home, with everything that entailed, to keep the operation going. This in return meant, e.g., that work processes, communication channels, teamwork, meetings, and decision-making processes needed revision fast. The complexity and uncertainty created by the environment were not without risks but therein lay opportunities for innovation and growth in many industries. Fast-adaptive organizations that executed with more efficiency than their competitors were set for both instant and future gains (Behrendt et al., 2021). And now, with better containment and experience, organizations are asking the workforce to come back, or are they?

COVID-19 is not the only variable at work; article writers at McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm, claim that even before the pandemic, organizations, pressured by business and technology forces, were more compelled than ever to manage change and speedier decision-making. They point out that agility is impor-

tant, adding that the pandemic has expedited digitization, globalization, automation, and analytics, to name a few, and there is real pressure to change business models to fit changing requirements. Leading organizations need to be adaptable in order to survive and thrive, reaping benefits by embracing agility at scale (Jadoul et al., 2020). These organizations are driving their operations with a collection of teams, and the structure allows them to quickly redirect their people and priorities if anything changes – they are flexible (Aghina et al., 2020). A volatile and unpredictable post-pandemic economy calls for smarter, faster, more agile business operations, requiring big changes and commitment from the very top of the organizations (Behrendt et al., 2021).

Even though we know of innovation drivers like automation and connectivity, the challenge is that we don't fully grasp the potential in both speed and extent. There are unlimited ways to connect billions of people through various devices, with unprecedented processing capabilities and information overload (Schwab, 2016, as referred to in Ivaldi et al., 2022). We are living in a world confronting tremendous changes in the economy, society, and culture. Hence, we are dwelling midst of a digital revolution (Ivaldi et al., 2022) strongly influenced by technological innovations in every aspect of both social and economic life (Schwab, 2016, as referred to in Ivaldi et al., 2022). The emergence of AI (Artificial Intelligence) and robotics alone will have a huge impact on how work is done, possibly automating and ending a lot of careers. Globalization has increased the use of virtual teams, further injected by the pandemic, which has led to a change in employment relationships and a change in corporate cultures. These complex developments, uncertain and unpredictable environments, demand flexible organizational structures, models of open innovation, a workforce that is more diverse, and leaders armed with different skills and behaviours (Bushuyev et al., 2021; APM, 2019).

According to Telenor's² CEO, Sigve Brekke, flexibility is the way forward. In a letter to his employees, he defined the next generation workday while adding that new challenges bring new opportunities; (1) *Availability regardless of physical presence* – He asks of his employees, availability no matter what, seeking active participation in all discussions and meetings, wherever they are. (2) *From open offices to social zones and meeting rooms* – asking employees to come to work for work-related meetings, brainstorming, and to get inspired by others, but not essentially being stuck behind a desk working like before. (3) *Trust and performance-based management* – Announcing decreased levels of hierarchy. Smoothing and synchronizing of work while eliminating silos. Declaring that flexibility at work calls for way more communication, collaboration and engagement between leaders and employees. Recognizing the need for more clarity on roles, what's expected, and guidance towards goals. (4) *Travel will not be the same again* – acknowledging while the need for socializing and meeting face-to-face was important, virtual meetings were increasing at the cost of physical meetings. Potentially resulting in better work-life balance and a definite decrease in climate emissions. He then signed off by stressing that they would learn as they went along, constantly improving and adapting and never losing sight of their aim (*Flexibility Is the Way Forward*, 2020).

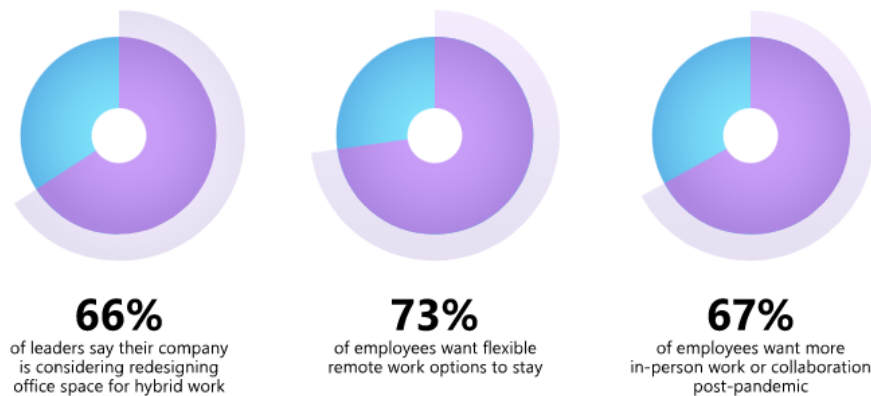
Telenor had previously found that whilst their employees worked remotely, there was an increase in both productivity and motivation, but many employees missed their co-workers and being part of a team. This was fundamental for them in the decision to go hybrid post-pandemic (Wood, 2020). The transition from co-location to forced remote, and now return to the office, has left its mark. According to *The Work Trend Index*, with 31,092 full-time employed or self-employed people surveyed across 31

² Telenor ASA is one of the world's largest mobile telecommunications company with operations worldwide.

markets, flexible work is here to stay. The way we work is transforming so rapidly that organizations are even considering redesigning their workplaces, their physical spaces to be exact, to better accommodate hybrid working environments. The data is pretty much straightforward (See Fig. 1); it is inevitable (Microsoft, 2021a), the 'Hybrid paradox' where employees want the best of both worlds; the flexibility to work from anywhere but simultaneously crave more in-person connection (Microsoft, 2021c). In fact, it's maintained that "face-to-face interactions are by far the most important activity in an office; creating chance encounters between knowledge workers, both inside and outside the organization, improves performance" (Waber et al., 2014). However, the positive experience with remote work during the pandemic has a strong operational appeal to it; it reduces the workspace organizations need, as fewer workers would come to the office each day (Lund et al., 2021).

"There are many benefits of remote working, as employers can save on real estate costs and tap into global talent flexibly. The degree of remote work will also depend upon how well firms manage the challenges that come with remote work: overcoming communication silos, particularly between the weak ties between workers, and across departments, as well as sharing non-codified information and knowledge." (Abhinav, 2021)

Figure 1 – Employees want the best of both worlds. (Microsoft, 2021a)



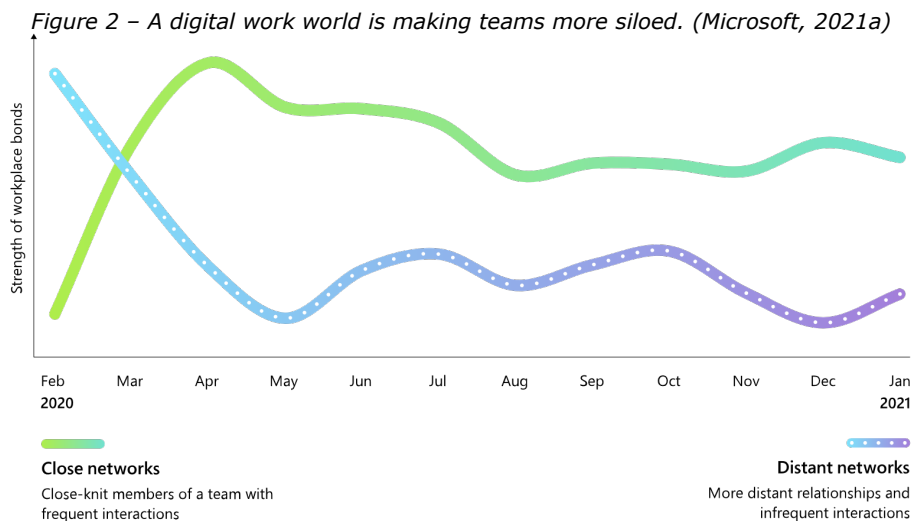
Organizations can now recruit from a much larger pool of candidates as workers want to be able to work from anywhere. This is an opportunity for organizations to amplify the diversity of their human capital by hiring the best candidate for the job, recruiting from anywhere rather than purely local (IWG, 2022). The talent pool has grown considerably as some of the reasons for not accepting work are eliminated, like, relocation issues, the commute, family reasons and more (Lund et al., 2021).

One of the challenges that arose during the pandemic was that while remote teams showed productivity, they also became more siloed in a digital world. The networks were shrinking; whilst interaction and collaboration grew with the immediate team (close network / strong ties), the interaction and collaborations outside of that team (distant networks / weak ties) diminished (See Fig 2). A senior researcher at Microsoft points out that when teams lose connections, they stop innovating. Groupthink becomes a serious possibility because new ideas have a harder time getting in. Indicating the need for leaders and organizations to be proactive in fostering the social capital, spontaneous idea-sharing and cross-team collaborations that's been driving workplace innovation for decades (Microsoft, 2021a). It might also be quite challenging for workers to develop cohesion and synergy when starting a new remote team (Ram, 2022). It's a cause for concern that even if the organization transitions to hybrid work,

the experience of remoteness could persist, seeing that not everyone would be at the office on the same day (Van Buggenhout et al., 2021). Physical distance might make it more difficult for team members to share experiences that people use to build relationships and trust. Leaders must devote time and effort to foster trust in virtual teams. (Citrin & DeRosa, 2021).

Establishing where there are flaws in communication and interaction only gets organizations so far. The next is strategizing and structuring solutions for the day-to-day problems that effective communication unearths. To avoid duplicating problem-solving efforts, innovation and collaboration are required. Overall, a move to a hybrid working arrangement means fewer spontaneous interactions between employees than when they spent five days a week at the workplace. Hence, organizations and leaders must find new methods for the creation of "virtual water cooler moments" that lead to collaborative innovation. For all team members and across the organization, this will necessitate new ways of working (Van Buggenhout et al., 2021).

Performance research on virtual teams clearly shows that both virtual and non-virtual teams always perform better when there is clarity on roles, tasks, and structure. This is imperative for the successful functioning of virtual teams (Abhinav, 2021).



The stone-cold reality of the pandemics' impact on people's livelihoods and the economy, in general, has forced organizations and their workforce to drastically change. Remote work has now become an unavoidable component of the changing nature of work, necessitating the rapid deployment and development of new working arrangements (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). Most organizations are reimagining themselves right now. Embracing speed, flexibility and agility whilst flattening their hierarchies in an effort to make faster and better decisions (Lund et al., 2021). Unfortunately, a one size fits all solution doesn't exist. Organizations need to help their workers with the transition to a hybrid. The leader's role becomes even more important in bridging the temporary gap between the old and the new. They must make special efforts to address the issues, questions, and interests of each audience. Thoughtful, frequent communication demonstrates that they are monitoring the situation and adapting their actions as they learn more, assuring stakeholders that they are on top of things while also understanding the personal and professional problems that workers and their families face (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020).

2.2 WorkPlaces or rather...WorkSpaces

Workplace design has been a topic of discussion for a very long time, and there has been a lot of research, debate, and writing about what is best at any given time. There is evidence, for example, that medieval monks were likely the first to use cubicles. Professionals began working in individual workspaces (offices) between 1600 and 1800. The first modern offices, as well as the first open-plan offices, became known in the early twentieth century with the goal of maximizing productivity and providing employees with space for intellectual work without interruption. The open office movement really took off in the 1960s with the goal of increasing interaction. This had a small backlash in the 1970s when women started to enter the workforce, some men felt visually distracted by miniskirts, which led to the invention of modesty panels. Modesty panels allowed women to keep wearing skirts without being in view by covering the front of the desks. They even had the ingenuity to remove the middle drawer to make it easier for women to cross their legs.

Eventually, this led to mass production of fabric cubicles and made, as described by the designer (Robert Propst), barren rat-hole places (Dishman, 2021). As a result, the water cooler and the coffee machine became places of social gatherings for people from different departments. Those were the only spots they would meet during the day; usually, the water coolers and coffee machines were stored in the back so the customers couldn't see. Ultimately "*the humble water cooler made an unintentionally huge impact on work culture*" (Bronner, 2020).

"Apple is a very disciplined company, and we have great processes. But that's not what it's about. Process makes you more efficient. But innovation comes from people meeting up in the hallways or calling each other at 10.30 at night with a new idea..." –Steve Jobs, founder of Apple Inc. (Burrows, 2004)

In an article by Ben Waber et al. published in the Harvard Business Review (2014), it's emphasized that organizations should apply more focus on the design of workspaces because they affect performance. They concluded that face-to-face encounters are by far the most important activity in a workplace by gathering data that captures individuals' interactions, communication, and location information. Thus, maintaining that the fabrication of chance encounters between employees, both within and outside the organization, improves performance. Such thinking is evident when looking at Pixar's campus design in California, a workplace of 1.000 employees.

Steve Jobs brought in a designer to conduct his vision for an atrium³ to facilitate unplanned collaborations. This atrium was a central hub for three buildings with workers from different fields and the only building with restrooms. The atrium houses an attractive setting with plenty of seating and a host of entertainment. The thought process for Jobs was that by forcing people of different fields to mingle, even when going to the restroom, good things would materialize. Jobs was fanatic about unplanned collaboration and went to great lengths in helping those serendipitous encounters to happen. This was his vision to facilitate creativity and innovation whilst keeping employees engaged in inspiring surroundings (Searer, 2012).

In Silicon Valley, a lot of big players followed suit, like; Google, Meta (formerly Facebook) and Samsung by luring workers into public spaces by design to maximize chance encounters. A chief of HR at Yahoo claimed that "*some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions*". Samsung's vice president said that their design was not just to spark collaboration but that innovation you see

³ *Atrium* (noun): [Architecture] a large open central area in a public or commercial building, often with a glass roof, and sometimes containing plants and a pool.

when people collide (Waber et al., 2014). The role of these sought after campuses is to create and sustain a corporate culture, so people share the same spaces, common values, behaviours and habits, and social interaction to transmit rituals to each other (Geron, 2021).

It's no easy feat to create a setting to facilitate impromptu social interactions or chance encounters because some settings make such interactions impossible, whilst others foster, or even obligate them. It's a complicated construct because organizations need to factor in both the physical and social structure of a space to impact the pattern of the interaction they are trying to fabricate (Fayard & Weeks, 2007, p. 606).

If not carefully thought through, changing to open office spaces, for instance, can cause less face-to-face communication as the open architecture can induce co-workers to withdraw socially, causing them to rely only on interactions via email and instant messages, which is a natural human response (Bernstein & Turban, 2018). It might be tempting to simply build a big social space and expect momentous results; think again. Organizations must understand what they are trying to achieve; are they trying to escalate productivity, inspire more creativity or something else. According to Waber, spaces can be designed to produce specific outcomes. Workplaces can even have multipurpose spaces interchangeable, depending on their role at different times, with the strategic location of coffee machines or water coolers to maximize the chances of 'collisions' (2014).

As mentioned earlier in the paper, one of the many benefits of hybrid working for organizations is that they don't have to accommodate all the workers at the same time, leading to downsizing opportunities as office rent is typically one of the biggest costs. Thus, resulting in leaner corporate real estate (CRE) footprints and possibly increasing profit margins (IWG, 2022). The transition to a hybrid work model will presumably change the role of the workplace. Most likely becoming the heart of the organization's culture, a meeting place for recruitment and customers. A place for holding bootcamps to facilitate interpersonal exchanges between co-workers. This new makeup of the way to work requires a different leadership style and demands new skills from the workers (Abhinav, 2021).

Digitization is a huge factor as well; understanding how to best utilize digital and physical spaces to work together is both crucial and a complicated design challenge (Waber et al., 2014). A lot of experts believe the future workplaces will become social hubs, with bars, health facilities, large communal tables, and residential-style lounges all being suggested. The Hybrid work model enables workers to use these new facilities in ways that best fit their own lifestyles and working needs, adapted spaces to enhance e.g., creativity, face-to-face communication between co-workers, and relationship building (IWG, 2022).

Organizations need to "*recognize office space as not just an amortized asset but a strategic tool for growth*" (Waber et al., 2014). Smart organizations are intentional about bringing workers together to ideate around specific objectives and problem-solving, experimenting with those ideas and creating a culture where trust and failure are embraced (Leonardi, 2021). Failure to do so could result in less engagement between workers, gradually diluting the corporate culture (Geron, 2021).

As early as 2005, technologists, programmers and creative professionals in San Francisco, London, and Berlin, wished to work outside of constrained office surroundings but simultaneously avoid the solitude of home offices. Their solution was a side-by-side working arrangement, now known as "*co-working spaces*". These spaces were accessible to anyone and sometimes free. People working in those spaces purposefully sought out a variety of individuals for membership from different organizations, fostering a sense of community, social engagement, learning, and enthusiasm that is characteristic of their online work. With the beneficial addition of physical proximity

to others, they inadvertently generated spaces that enhanced creativity. People who chose to use co-working spaces started reporting several benefits, such as an increase in productivity (76%), an increase in the size of their business network (80%), an increase in the size of their social circle (92%), decrease in their sense of isolation (86%), and higher trust in others in their co-working spaces (83%). By 2013, several thousand co-working spaces were used by over 160.000 people in the U.S. and Europe. Eventually, large organizations started to implement co-working spaces alongside their offices, where their employees had the opportunity to collaborate with various stakeholders. Case in point, anyone in San Francisco can book one of the conference rooms at Airbnb's headquarters for free. (Waber et al., 2014). Here in Iceland, a well-known co-working space is Gróska – *Creative Community, House of ideas*; their introduction, off their webpage, is as follows:

"Gróska business growth center is a melting pot of innovation. Whether you work alone or in a corporate setting, you will find the perfect facilities in Gróska. Within our walls, prominent companies of all sizes can develop new ideas in an exciting environment. The location also encourages collaboration with universities in the field of technological development, research, and innovation."
(Creative Community, n.d.)

As people are getting fonder of the idea of working from anywhere, there is another development going on, the transformative concept of a 'metaverse'. The metaverse is the next evolution of social connection. A lot of the big tech companies, like Microsoft and Meta, are investing in an alternative universe via virtual reality headsets and augmented reality glasses. It's taking video conferencing to a whole new level, as avatars⁴ meet in a desired setting. They are relying on people's willingness to spend time effectively inside the screens, working, playing, or just hanging out, instead of in front of the screens. However, this will probably take a couple of more years to develop and mature, especially concerning building a user base (Geron, 2021; IWG, 2022; Williams, 2022).

In the coming year, according to the *Work Trend Index*, 52% of employees are willing to use digital immersive spaces in the metaverse for meetings or team activities, and 47% of employees are willing to represent themselves as an avatar in meetings. In the next two years, 51% of Gen Z (born 1997-2012) and 48% of Millennials (born 1981-96) expect to do some of their work in the metaverse, 16% of employees said they never intend to work in the metaverse, and 13% of employees don't understand what the term 'metaverse' means. When using an avatar in meetings, people who have tried it say they feel more engaged, present, and even more at ease. It intensifies feelings of togetherness when they are, in fact, physically apart and they are able to see and interpret body language. Conversations that are back and forth feel more natural. (Microsoft, 2022).

2.3 May the workForce be with you!

"Working 9 to 5, what a way to make a living..." –Dolly Parton⁵

It's like the workforce just woke up from a bad dream. *"...Barely gettin' by it's all taking and no giving..."* – well, the workforce wants something back. They want flexibility, a sense of purpose and meaning, work-life balance, inclusiveness, to reach their full

⁴ *Avatar* (noun): an icon or figure representing a particular person in video games, internet forums, etc.

⁵ ('9 to 5, a Dolly Parton Song, Composed in 1981', 2022)

potential, and to feel valued and cared for. But don't forget they still want fair wages, increased benefits offering and competitive compensation packages (Miles, 2022).

It's like the workforce just realized that a job is a temporary contract, it's not marriage, there is no life commitment, and leaders and organizations cannot expect that (Cope, 2012, p. 4). A couple of months working remotely could've been a glitch, but this was way more than that; people have proved they can both be great employees and still have a life (Microsoft, 2022). The *PwC's Future of Work and Skills Survey* shows that while remote and hybrid work boosted productivity, people want to work for employers that show they care. They want support for their long-term employability and commitment to an inclusive organizational culture. If organizations don't institute supportive policies, open clear channels of communication and offer opportunities for upskilling, they risk losing their workers (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2022). This is confirmed by *the Work Trend Index*, where positive culture (46%), mental health/well-being benefits (42%), a sense of purpose/meaning (40%), flexible work hours (38%), as well as more than the usual two weeks of paid vacation per year (36%), are the top five aspects of work that employees view as 'very important for an employer to provide (Microsoft, 2022).

The transition to hybrid is a complex change, change is about people, and people need it to be personal; they want involvement and social contact. There needs to be human contact, and it needs time, not just a hallway conversation (Cope, 2012, p. 4). Even before the pandemic, surveys showed that, an overwhelming majority of knowledge workers preferred to work remotely, and they would even consider resignation if that were not on offer. This phenomenon has been coined 'The Great Resignation' and is descriptive of the record numbers of people willingly leaving their employment during the pandemic (Abhinav, 2021).

The pandemic launched a rethink among the workforce contemplating their worth, how they spend their time, how they are valued, and what work means to them. The migration to remote work changed hearts and minds; the power is shifting from the employer to the employee. In a remote or hybrid work world, talent is everywhere. While potentially good news for the organizations, as previously mentioned, it's also great news for the workers. It empowers them to take a leap as remote vacancies on LinkedIn grew by more than fivefold during the pandemic (Hsu, 2021; Microsoft, 2021a).

Post pandemic, following a period of unprecedented uncertainty and disruption, the employment market has morphed into something more nuanced. It's coined the 'Great Reshuffle'; now, people are changing jobs in search of roles with better work-life balance and a workplace more aligned with their values. They are finding jobs that give the right pay, benefits, and work arrangements in the longer term. Possessing a greater ability to fit work into their lives rather than squeezing their lives into their work (Edmond, 2022). Employees seek out and remain with organizations with exceptional workplace cultures. And while these cultures have many components, they are often defined by sentiments of trust, belonging, and inclusion (Mann, 2018).

Retention of employees is fast becoming a key leadership challenge for several reasons; the search for new recruits costs time and money, it creates a temporary load on existing employees, and it's a loss of knowledge and culture. Long-serving employees have a deep understanding of the organization, and they know what is expected of them. But, what's perhaps most worrying, a sudden departure of an employee might influence others to follow suit. It's simple but not easy; employees are more likely to stay if their needs are met. A healthy employee retention rate should mean increased productivity and morale, indicating that employees are highly engaged and fostering meaningful relationships and social connections at work (Miles, 2022).

According to Gallup, concentrating on employee engagement can help organizations withstand and possibly thrive in tough times – it drives growth (Sorenson, 2013). Leaders that make a serious effort to better understand why people leave and take concrete steps to retain them could gain an advantage in the fight to attract, develop, and retain the talent needed to build a thriving post-pandemic organization. Employees are actively withdrawing from traditional forms of full-time employment due to a lack of investment in a more meaningful experience and a failure to meet new demands for autonomy and flexibility at work (De Smet et al., 2021). Employees without purpose and autonomy live in a world where they come to work, do their little bit, and go home but have no idea where that fits into the big scheme of things. If given a broader perspective and clarity on roles and expectations, their jobs become richer, and employee engagement goes through the roof. They won't feel like hamsters – they'll feel like being part of a team that's on a mission (Aghina et al., 2020).

Trust is a foundation for building a strong culture. When trust is present, people take ownership of their responsibilities, help each other, and communicate more often, thus, spiking productivity. Formation of trust among the workforce demands relationships being built (Manning, 2021). Many leaders (43%) believe that the most difficult aspect of hybrid and remote work is relationship building. Crucially stressing that organizational success relies on building the social capital. Employees that have thriving relationships with their strong ties report higher levels of well-being (76%), higher productivity (50%), and are less likely to switch employment in the coming year (61%). Employees that have thriving relationships with their weak ties report feelings of more satisfaction with their employer (76%), more fulfilment by work (79%), and a more upbeat attitude about workplace stress (40%). Having a large network at work can also advance careers within organizations, and according to data from LinkedIn, employees that move internally stay almost twice as long. *“When people trust one another and have... [social] capital, you get a willingness to take risks; you get more innovation and creativity and less groupthink”* (Microsoft, 2022).

2.4 The Worker is Human; after all

“When you ask people what their number one concern is about coming back to the office, it's work-life balance. It's the commute. And at the same time, you ask people what the number one worry about staying at home is, and it's work-life balance because there's no boundary between home and the office.”

–Bryan Hancock, partner at McKinsey. (Hancock & Shaninger, n.d.)

In a crisis such as the pandemic, employment seems insignificant, and people's thoughts start to revolve around their own survival and other basic needs (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). It got people thinking, some experienced an existential crisis and others took a deep dive into the meaning of life (Roncero, 2021; Miles, 2022).

According to *the Work Trend Index*, 53% of employees are more likely to prioritize health and well-being over work than before the pandemic. It has left an ever-present impression, through shared experiences, fundamentally altering people's perceptions about the significance of work in their lives. Priorities, identities, and the worldview has reshaped what is important: health, family, time, and purpose. People's expectations of work and their willingness to provide in exchange have shifted. 47 % said they are more likely than before the pandemic to prioritize family and personal life over work. The perspective of life has changed, people identify themselves less with their work and feel work should only be a part of life, not their whole life (Microsoft, 2022).

People had to deal with substantial stress during the pandemic, balancing childcare and home schooling, working from living rooms, shoving nosy cats away and quieting barking dogs (Microsoft, 2021a). Travel bans and quarantine requirements prevented people from assisting friends and relatives or even pursuing solace through community groupings. School closures placed a significant burden on working parents, people were struggling, and now they are asking the employer to take corresponding measures to support them (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020).

Before the pandemic, a lot of people felt emptiness and stagnation, deteriorating in their jobs (Cooks-Campell, 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic, they felt relief at having a job, but as the pandemic progressed and time flew, juggling all these different facets of life made them wonder, is it all worth it?

McKinsey surveyed (2021) more than 35,000 US working parents to better understand how they coped with the pandemic. They found that 20% experienced an inability to concentrate, 37% felt less effective, 27% experienced chronic stress, 33% exhaustion, and 32% felt more negative. A staggering 73% reported feelings of burnout at work (sometimes or often/almost always), and 26% missed days from work due to burnout, stress, and/or health issues. In general, mental health is worse; people are already worried about the blurred line between life and work because of the expectancy of being available 24/7 when working from home. In some cases, organizations have even managed to hit the worst of both worlds: demanding people at the office, making them deal with the added stress of the commute, whilst simultaneously expecting 24/7 availability, completely disregarding the benefit of a break between work and life. This is not sustainable; people were barely holding on during the pandemic (Hancock & Shaninger, n.d.).

Flexibility doesn't mean always on call; when work becomes more flexible, there is added risk of digital overload. Organizations need to allow teams to build new norms around flexible work, trying to decrease meeting time and enable individuals the license to power off. People have complaints; about too many meetings, a lack of energy/focus due to back-to-back meetings, and a flurry of chats and emails from colleagues outside of working hours or during meetings (Microsoft, 2022). Being always on call is a recipe for burnout; research has shown breaks are essential to productivity and well-being (Microsoft, n.d., 2021b). Creativity and innovation require energy, peace of mind and perspective; burnout takes all those elements away. Mental exhaustion puts out creative sparks and makes problems look impossible to solve (Razzetti, 2020).

"We are all in this together" is nothing more than a catchphrase. It's a mantra, the optimism, the message that has kept individuals and societies together during the pandemic's tough periods (Ram, 2020). It's amazing how much work was done fully remotely. However, it has begun to exhibit some withering of the cultural links, social connectivity, simply being able to go grab a coffee or a meal and onboarding someone in a setting where individuals can't be seen. All people have are the written rules, which are almost certainly incorrect (Hancock & Shaninger, n.d.).

People are social animals, and their connection with others is critical. Cohesion is required. Increased cohesion is likely to lead to an increase in shared tacit knowledge, common attitudes and work habits, and social support. This is typically accomplished through office conversation about how to handle certain events, people, and problems, giving suggestions, discussing life-work balance, and so on. In other words, much of the critical knowledge about how to be successful and productive at work will be found around the water cooler rather than in a letter or an employee handbook. (Pentland, 2009). During the pandemic, people met their co-workers' families or even pets virtually, and during the most difficult periods some even cried with a colleague. The shared vulnerability of this period has provided organizations with a tremendous

opportunity to bring true authenticity to their culture and improve work for the better. (Microsoft, 2021a).

Gallup repeatedly asks if people have a best friend at work and the reason is performance. Their research has consistently shown a concrete link between having a best friend at work, and the amount of effort employees expend in their job (Mann, 2018). It has been proven when someone enjoys the people they work with, they're happier and are more productive—and that doesn't happen by accident (Manning, 2021). People spend a lot of time at work, and it's only natural they try building connections with co-workers. They want work to feel worthwhile, and having trusted confidants and supporters helps foster that feeling. They go to their work friends when they need to celebrate and commiserate about their personal and professional lives. In the absence of that outlet, work can seem lonely and isolating.

When people have affiliation with a co-worker, they are driven to take positive actions that benefit the business, actions they wouldn't take otherwise. Communication and collaboration are cornerstones of an inclusive culture, and they provide a natural pathway to friendship. Nobody is arguing that organizations force people to be friends; rather, they foster a culture where friendships can grow and blossom organically. (Mann, 2018). *The Work Trend Index* reports that hybrid (59%) and remote (56%) workers have fewer work 'friendships' since changing from full-time co-location likely contributing to increased feelings of loneliness, hybrid (55%)/remote (50%), and according to 66% of respondents, holding informal coffee conversations virtually felt more of a bother than getting together face-to-face. Loneliness, according to experts, causes health problems, decreased productivity, turnover, and burnout. Employee isolation and detachment will continue to rise in the absence of a new approach, regardless of whether full-time co-location is reinstated (Microsoft, 2022).

Many are familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1968), wherein order to develop, the individual needs to satisfy different levels of needs (See Fig. 3). Needs lower in the hierarchy must be met before attending to needs higher up. There are five-levels; at the bottom, you have levels 1) "*Physiological needs*" (Food, water, warmth, and rest are all basic requirements.), and 2) "*Safety needs*" (Security and safety are basic requirements.), then you have level 3) "*Love and belongingness needs*" (Interpersonal relationships, affiliating, interconnectedness, trust, and belonging to a group are all psychological needs.), and 4) "*Esteem needs*" (Self-worth, accomplishment, respect, independence, and prestige are all psychological needs.), and finally level 5) "*Self-actualization needs*" (Self-fulfilment is the desire to reach one's full potential, to grow personally, and to have peak experiences.).

At first, Maslow maintained to reach the next level; one needed to fulfil those needs; he later retracted (1987) and claimed it was about fulfilling them 'more or less' before meeting the next set of needs. Everyone has the ability and desire to progress up the hierarchy toward self-actualization. However, failing to address lower-level demands frequently impedes progress. He also mentioned that the order of demands could change depending on external factors or individual variances. (Jonasson & Ingason, 2019, pp. 16–17; McLeod, 2007).

Looking at the hierarchy from a leadership perspective while assessing their workforce regarding what they are asking for, one could argue that to help employees reach their full potential (level 5), which they want, they need to do their part to get them higher or risk losing them.

For level 1) the employer could do their utmost to ensure people get breathing space, look out for breaks and maintain a healthy work-life balance. For instance, regulating somehow when employees are on call and when they are not and securing

use of their vacation time to rest and refresh. Showing appreciation for the non-work obligations, responsibilities, and interests of employees.

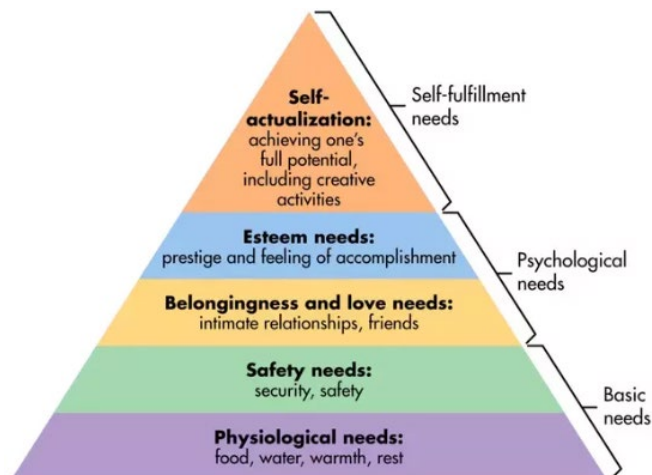
Level 2) By giving employees a sense of purpose and autonomy, clarity of tasks and real-time accountability, making them feel and understand the what's and why's of their role, empowering them to give feedback without dire consequences promoting a culture of trust and in doing so enhancing feelings of security, safety, longevity, and inclusiveness.

Level 3) organizations need to be sure they are cultivating relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, trust, collaboration, and healthy conflict by facilitating regular contact between employees. Demonstrating genuine care about the well-being of every employee by advocating mutual respect and seeking dedication from all employees to treat each other with fairness and respect. Thus, ensuring feelings of being part of something, celebrating friendships and show of concern. They need to invest in social capital.

Level 4) They need to create and foster a culture of appreciation and recognition, promoting opportunities for learning and hence, have a positive impact on employees' self-esteem.

Level 5) If the workforce is here, it can mean employees fulfil their fullest potential; they are engaged, productive, happy, and challenged – constantly learning to better themselves and, in turn, better the organization (McLeod, 2007; Dowling et al., 2022; Miles, 2022). Organizations and leaders alike can ask themselves at which level they want their workforce to be.

Figure 3 - Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. (McLeod, 2007)



3. THE WATER COOLER EFFECT

In the following four subchapters, the author explores, through literature and current debate, the definition, status, and evolution of the 'water cooler effect' elaborating on its role and benefits for employees, leaders, and organizations considering both developments in leadership and working arrangements. Reading the chapter gives an extensive insight into the phenomenon.

3.1 The Definition and Evolution of...

A definition of the 'Water cooler effect.'

"(business) The tendency of employees to gather informally around a water cooler in order to socialize and to share information". (Wiktionary, 2022)

The Cambridge dictionary defines the noun 'water cooler' as "a machine for cooling and providing drinking water, usually in an office or other public place". But if you use it as an adjective before a noun, the definition is "used to describe something that many people talk about at work, for example, when they stop work to drink something" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). By using it as an adjective, you can then add different words to it, thus, specifying more clearly the meaning in each context e.g. -effect, -moment, -talk, -conversation, -discussion, -chat, -gossip, -rumours, etc.

The terminology derives from employees leaving their designated workstations and, conceivably, gathering around the water cooler and engaging in casual interaction with each other. It may also apply if a co-worker stops by someone's workstation unannounced, when having lunch, or even when walking to the parking garage (Leonardi, 2021). "What's special about these 'water cooler moments' is that they just happen and aren't necessarily planned or scheduled. You simply run into someone and start talking – and boom, your water cooler moment has happened!" (Rhodes, 2020).

The water cooler is obviously not pivotal per se; it's a metaphor for many different things; coffee machines, restrooms, printers, photocopiers, hallways or wherever you might casually bump into a co-worker whilst at work. An example of this would be while taking a break from your workstation; you bump into Ellen from the finance department as she is getting documents from the printer. You notice that she has brand new shoes on, and you comment, "hi Ellen, those are nice shoes", and she responds, "Why, thank you so much, I got them at..." and just like that, you had a water cooler moment.

What's interesting is the collaborations that might occur in such spontaneous encounters. The current ideas e.g., in the projects these employees are working on. A worker in marketing might have a great idea for the financial department, but never got around to sharing it – simply because it was never brought up and he was too busy in his own work. These moments happen because people are working in proximity with each other, or, at the very least, sharing some co-spaces and social interactions. These serendipitous encounters frequently yield some of the best ideas or concepts. (Eisenhauer, 2020; Leonardi, 2021; Rhodes, 2020).

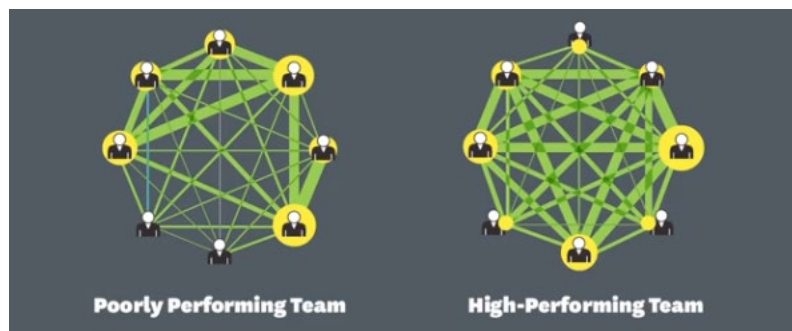
Everybody at some point needs moments like these. Workers are in fact, human beings, not machines. The chat by the water cooler provides a liberating casual break, for regrouping and enjoyment of others (Eisenhauer, 2020). It's a mental break from work, a time to catch up on people's personal stuff and current affairs (Leonardi, 2021).

Some leaders expect their employees to check their humanity at the door, frowning upon chitter-chatter and sharing of lunch breaks, seeing friendship as a detriment to

productivity (Mann, 2018). Although their motives are pure, most of the time they are not resulting in a more productive and engaged employee. In fact, they aggravate common workplace stressors, lowering morale and work quality. (Eisenhauer, 2020). According to the literature, it's a pretty dated point of view, considering it as a cause of inefficiency and distracting noise from actual work (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939 as referred to in Fayard & Weeks, 2007), even going as far as writing people up for wasting time. Being friendly at work can take on a powerful dynamic in which casual, friendly banter turns into innovative discussions about how the team or organization can thrive (Mann, 2018).

These breaks and informal gatherings can be highly beneficial for the organizations, as confirmed by an MIT⁶ research using sociometric badges⁷ on why some teams struggle while others, seemingly identical teams, consistently deliver high performance. The research reveals that informal communication is crucial in forming successful teams and that communication patterns are the most important indicator of a team's performance. Not only that, but they're more important than the sum of all the other components (individual intelligence, personality, skill, and the substance of discussion). Looking at the communication pattern (See Fig. 4) between teams, it is obvious the high-performing team had more communication.

Figure 4 - Comparison of communication patterns with identical teams. (Pentland, 2012)



Researchers recommended that all employees' coffee break schedules be revised so that everyone on a team may take a break at the same time. Allowing employees additional time away from their desks to engage with their co-workers yielded great results (Pentland, 2009, 2012). Further research reveals that the most effective form of interaction varies depending on the purpose but interacting in itself is significantly more valuable than people perceive. Circulation, exploration, engagement, and the expansion of the number of people's collisions are sometimes more essential than individual productivity or creativity. Think about it, if a worker discovers a more efficient way to execute a task but doesn't share that knowledge with others doing the same task. Then he's raised his own performance but not that of anyone else. If the said worker would make an effort and take the time to inform others of his discoveries, his productivity might suffer, but by doing so, he spikes theirs. In some circumstances, research reveals that a 5% fall in individual productivity might have a positive influence on collective performance (Waber et al., 2014).

The most productive teams are those in which people are encouraged to interact and engage. According to Alex 'Sandy' Pentland, Director of MIT's Human Dynamics

⁶ MIT, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

⁷ [A sociometric badge is a wearable electronic device capable of automatically measuring the amount of face-to-face interaction, conversational time, physical proximity to other people, and physical activity levels using social signals derived from vocal features, body motion, and relative location.] (Sociometric Badges - Home, n.d.)

Laboratory, this interaction is critical for a straightforward reason: while an individual might be great at coming up with ideas, they are meaningless if they aren't shared and discussed with colleagues who can help put them in action. For this reason, it's important that team members, or colleagues, have the opportunity to regularly come together and exchange ideas and information. When opinions are shared with others, they have a chance to comment on or develop them. It's through this process that an individual's good idea becomes a great idea (2014). At the end of the day, the idea may not look exactly like it did in the beginning at the water cooler, but it will be the seed that grows into a team, group, or organizational-wide innovation (Leonardi, 2021).

It would be stating the obvious to say that people are essential to success. As a result, people must work together in cohesion to complete the tasks at hand. A solid working synergy between leaders and employees, in particular, is critical to keeping things on track. (Ram, 2022). Water cooler conversations improve culture by bringing individuals together on a more personal level. A strong organizational culture is important, and it can be a more powerful motivator than the paycheck.

Employee engagement is essential for a culture to thrive. Encouraging employees to enjoy working, learning, and growing by supporting and empowering them to take breaks, converse and relax around the water cooler. Facilitating people to mingle can help those who are socially anxious and struggle with both opening up to and engaging in conversation with others. It's possibly a major step in getting those employees out of their corners (Eisenhauer, 2020). A strong culture is the glue that makes everything work together. If employees spend time getting to know one another, and building personal connections, they become more engaged in their daily work. Fun and joyous interactions in the hallways, by the coffee machines, or by the water cooler motivates and energize (Jadoul et al., 2020).

Getting to know management on a casual level breaks down barriers, and people could feel more at ease when in need, conversing professional matters with somebody with formal authority. In building personal relationships, where there is mutual trust and respect, collaboration becomes easier (Eisenhauer, 2020). *Trust is a foundation for building strong teams, creating a positive work culture, and producing results* (Manning, 2021). Authority is often based on the perception of people:

When team members are attracted to, respect, and identify with the person of authority, it gives that person an additional informal authority based on personal attributes. This authority is specific to the person on which it has been bestowed and can sometimes transcend their formally given status, or their legally bound authority. Within a team it is often the person who is the most popular, the one that others most want to please, or someone with particular personal charm or charisma to whom the team members give authority.

(Jonasson & Ingason, 2019, p. 114)

If workers do not feel comfortable, they might leave. Creating an environment that promotes productivity and employee happiness must be something to aim for. People need to converse, unwind, and take a break from their work from time to time, clear their heads and refresh. Tension is toxic, and it depletes productivity, workflows, and even top performers. If they have the chance to unwind and talk about their interests, stress starts to melt away. Furthermore, frequent conversation at the water cooler can spark a mental light bulb, benefiting the organization. (Eisenhauer, 2020).

3.2 Face-to-Face or not to Face

"The question facing companies today is not whether innovation is better done in-person or via remote teams, the real question now is how can leaders organize remote teams to be innovative." -Ravi Gajendran⁸

In the context of discussing the water cooler and a change from co-location to remote and then to hybrid it's well worth noting that human beings communicate not only in words. An anthropologist, Ray L. Birdwhistell, suggested that less than 35% of the message in conversations is conveyed verbally whilst the remaining 65% is communicated non-verbally. According to him, *"7% of the meaning is derived from the words spoken, 38% from tone of voice, loudness, and other aspects of how things are said, and 55% from facial expressions"*. So, it's clear people are making a lot of interpretations while conversing. Body language is something that everyone uses, and most people, which is completely normal, make assumptions about persons based on their personal appearance and mannerisms (De Mascia, 2012, pp. 90–96). Here are examples of non-verbal communication (see table 1).

Table 1 - Types of non-verbal communication. (Keiling, 2021)

Type	Description	Example
Body language	The way a person positions their body in relation to the situation, the environment, and how they are feeling.	<i>When someone is angry or nervous, they may cross their arms.</i>
Movement	Moving one's arms and legs in different ways, such as walking rapidly or slowly, standing, sitting, or fidgeting, can all express different meanings.	<i>In a meeting, sitting still and paying attention conveys respect and attention.</i>
Posture	The manner someone sits, or stands can convey their level of comfort, professionalism, and general attitude toward a person or a topic.	<i>When someone is tired, frustrated, or dissatisfied, they may hunch their shoulders.</i>
Gestures	While gestures vary greatly between cultures, they are generally employed to transmit information to others, both consciously and unconsciously.	<i>Someone may give a 'thumbs up' to indicate approval or that they are pleased with something.</i>
Space	Distance between another person or persons might express information about comfort level, the importance of communication, desire to help, connect, and so on.	<i>To respect boundaries, someone may stand far away from a new contact.</i>
Paralanguage	Talking speed, pitch, intonation, loudness, and other non-language aspects of speech.	<i>When someone is enthusiastic about something, they may speak quickly.</i>
Facial expressions	It's possible to transmit emotion or information effectively by using the eyebrows, mouth, eyes, and facial muscles.	<i>If someone is surprised, they may lift their eyebrows and widely open their eyes.</i>
Eye contact	Using eye contact (or lack thereof) strategically to indicate attention and interest is incredibly effective.	<i>Disinterest or disdain is conveyed by looking away from someone and toward the ground or phone.</i>
Touch	Commonly used to communicate support or comfort and sometimes to gain attention.	<i>A hand on a friend's shoulder may express support or empathy.</i>

For sure, non-verbal communication somewhat gets lost in translation while working remotely. The paper has already covered that there is not much difference, in terms of performance, between remote and co-located teams against certain conditions being met.

Trust is a precondition for a team as when working remote or hybrid; teams encounter pitfalls, as previously mentioned in the paper, a tendency for silos, sporadic information exchange, poor communication, unsolved disagreements, and more, with casual chats becoming less common and context frequently lost via email and other

⁸ Associate professor of global leadership and management at Florida International University. (McKendrick, 2020)

digital channels. The decision-making can become less transparent. Takes its toll on morale and slows down progress (Citrin & DeRosa, 2021).

It's particularly crucial for virtual teams to develop collective goals and means of achieving outcomes, communication methods and skills, and leadership that balances getting input and making decisions so that work gets done. And here comes the kicker, *"virtual teams need to spend time together to build good working relationships"* (Scholtes et al., 2018, pp. 1–4). Isolation might amplify urges to go at it alone. If you think about it, the remote environment is like a workplace without breakrooms, lunchrooms, or hallways for serendipitous encounters. (Van Buggenhout et al., 2021).

Building trust and relationships take time, so creating opportunities for teams to meet face-to-face, whenever possible, helps a great deal. Supplying regular face-to-face sessions such as 'lunch and learn' or similar, where business topics are not necessarily on the agenda. *"By committing to open, frequent and transparent communication, providing opportunities to build intimacy and personal knowledge, and displaying a willingness to talk about wins and mistakes, leaders can help create a trusting environment and a successful team"* (Citrin & DeRosa, 2021).

Some work tasks, while theoretically possible to complete remotely, are better completed in person. Critical business decisions, brainstorming sessions, sensitive feedback, negotiations, and onboarding of new team members are all examples of activities that may lose efficiency when performed remotely. (Lund et al., 2021).

3.3 Virtual Water Coolers

Some maintain the casual and spontaneous conversation that comes from gathering around the water cooler is impossible to replicate online (Hill, 2020) and wonder how the enormous workers' wisdom gathered after decades of experience spread naturally through their organization. Telling and listening to stories, chatting, sharing a little gossip, and building trust and understanding between each other. the traditional way for the 'ground truth' (How things really work) to spread (Andrews, 2001). With cloud-based technology central to the success of hybrid working, organizations will try to compensate by adopting a variety of online tools for virtual collaboration (IWG, 2022). Most are experimenting with how to establish spontaneous interactions in a world where everything is scheduled, down to virtual coffees and Friday beer nights (Van Buggenhout et al., 2021). People are being creative to keeping those informal channels around the water cooler open, as Mark Decan's, CEO of Ringier Axel Springer Media AG, efforts prove:

"My own solution is the use of spontaneous micro-communications: using little 'fishing' chat messages, 'Anything we need to catch up on?', making unannounced mini 'Hi' calls to random contacts as I drive home, even a virtual coffee can be a great way to handle longer updates." (Dekan, 2021)

It seems everyone and their grandmothers are making digital water cooler solutions in an already growing raft of innovative digital platforms to help hybrid workers to be more creative and communicative. It's probably just the beginning (IWG, 2022).

According to *statista.com* the collaboration software market has grown rapid revenues since the start of the pandemic, going from approx. 11 billion U.S. dollars in 2018 to a forecasted 16,7 billion for the year 2022. Experts forecast the market to keep increasing, reaching about 17.9 billion in 2025. Popular examples include Slack and Microsoft Teams (Vailshery, 2022); both offer virtual water cooler solutions. Just to give an insight into various solutions and what they are about, a quick google search returned the following results (See *table 2*), and there are many more.

The underscore is that there is a market, and leaders are obviously thinking about how to digitally compensate for the serendipitous encounters by the water cooler. And don't forget the emerging and transformative 'Metaverse'. Could it actually be that in the future, engineering serendipity becomes a key leadership competence (Dekan, 2021).

Table 2 - Examples of virtual water cooler solutions.

Shuffl.ai (Add-on for Slack)	Voodle.com (App)	Water Cooler App (App for Microsoft Teams)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socialize in pairs or groups to meet meaningfully in fun and smart ways. • Increase the serendipitous chance to create new connections. • Welcome new team members with onboarding buddies and cohort Shuffls. • Create bridges between teams for camaraderie and knowledge flow. • Amplify, educate, empower, and execute transformational change. • Inspire inclusion and nurture morale with monthly leadership and team group shuffls. (Shuffl, n.d.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep Innovating, Moving, Growing, Evolving. Stay Human • Instantly build better relationships no matter where or when you work using async video communication. • Easily Connect People, Projects, and Possibilities – without all the typing. • Whether your work is remote, hybrid, or in-house, you need the right communications tools to build trust with the candidates, clients, colleagues, and collaborators who keep your business moving. (Voodle, n.d.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling teams to create, invite, and join casual conversations among teammates, like those that take place by the Water Cooler or break room. • A template for new non-project related announcements, topics of interest, current events, or conversations about hobbies. • An easy interface for anyone to find an existing conversation or start a new one. • Promoting interaction amongst co-workers (Water Cooler App Template, 2021/2022)
Mural.co (Visual collaboration platform)	Workplace.com (From Meta, Facebook for business)	Donut.com (Add-on for Slack)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connects teams with a digital white-board and collaboration features designed to inspire innovation. • Teams work together in real-time or asynchronously, taking insights and ideas from possibility to reality. • Providing guided methods and transformation expertise. • Stops teams being trapped in silos. • Brainstorming & Ideation. • Say goodbye to boring, unproductive meetings. • Visual teamwork for more productive and engaging sessions. (MURAL Is a Digital-First Visual Collaboration Platform, n.d.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business communication that's more than just video or chat. We'll keep your employees connected, engaged, and informed, wherever they are and whatever they do. • Whether you're looking to level-up company communication, grow employee engagement or create a great culture, Workplace tackles your most pressing problems. • The same technology that connects over 3 billion people on Facebook. • Some of the world's biggest brands use Workplace to build a community. (Collaboration Software for Business, n.d.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect around the water cooler anywhere for virtual coffee, peer learning, DEI discussions, and more. • Build meaningful human relationships. • Discover new rituals for teams that foster camaraderie, collaboration, and community. Launch them in 5 minutes or less. • Find a best friend at work. • Create dedicated channels and invite everyone to join. • Select winner(s) to grab a coffee and meet with the CEO periodically. • Human connection through biweekly virtual coffees. • Introduce people from different locations. (Donut, n.d.)

3.4 Working or joking around the Water Cooler

"IQ and technical skills are important, but emotional intelligence is the sine qua non⁹ of leadership." -Daniel Goleman (2004)

In Daniel Goleman's well-known article 'What makes a Leader?' (2004), he maintains that "truly effective leaders are...distinguished by a high degree of emotional intelligence, [including] self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill". In his research he set out to discover which personal characteristics contributed to outstanding organizational performance. He grouped capabilities into three categories: "pure technical skills (accounting, business planning), cognitive abilities (analytical reasoning, [vision, seeing the 'big picture']), and competencies demonstrating

⁹ Sine qua non of leadership meaning there is no leadership without it.

emotional intelligence, such as the ability to work with others and effectiveness in leading change”.

What he found was “that emotional intelligence proved to be twice as important as the others”. Moreover, he found that “the higher the rank of a person, the more emotional intelligence capabilities showed up as the reason for effectiveness”. His findings as well as others, also point to a link between an organization’s “success and the emotional intelligence of its leaders”. According to Goleman there are five components to emotional intelligence at work (see table 3).

Table 3 - The five components of emotional intelligence at work. (Goleman, 2004)

Component	Definition	Hallmark
Self-Awareness	The ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others. <i>People with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather, they are honest – with themselves and with others.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-confidence • Realistic self-assessment • A self-deprecating sense of humour
Self-Regulation	The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods and the propensity to suspend judgment – to think before acting. <i>People with self-regulation are able to manage their bad moods and emotional impulses and find ways to control them and even channel them in useful ways.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trustworthiness and integrity • Comfort with ambiguity • Openness to change
Motivation	A passion for working for reasons that go beyond money or status and the propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence. <i>Highly motivated people seek out creative challenges, love to learn, and take great pride in a job well done while displaying unflagging energy to do things better.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong drive to achieve • Optimism, even in the face of failure • Organizational commitment
Empathy	The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people and skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions. <i>People who thoughtfully consider employees’ feelings – along with other factors – in the process of making intelligent decisions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expertise in building and retaining talent • Cross-cultural sensitivity • Service to clients and customers
Social Skill	Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks and the ability to find common ground and build rapport. <i>People with social skills have a knack for moving people in the direction they desire finding common ground with all kinds. They know that nothing important gets done alone.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectiveness in leading change • Persuasiveness • Expertise in building and leading teams

The first three components are skills concerning self-management, but the latter two are about how well a person manages relationships with others. *Empathy* is especially crucial today for at least three reasons: the expanding usage of teams, the transformative emergence of globalization and digitization, and the increasing need to retain people.

Social skill is the culmination of the other dimensions of emotional intelligence, that’s to say the other dimensions are needed to be socially skilled. Interestingly, the social skill might manifest itself in ways that the other components do not. For example, socially skilled individuals may appear to be idle at times. They appear to be casually schmoozing, chatting with co-workers at the water cooler, or joking around with colleagues who aren’t even tied to their ‘real’ work. However, it doesn’t make sense to them to unilaterally limit the extent of their relationship. Widely forming ties, aware that in these uncertain and challenging times, they may require assistance from people they are only getting to know today.

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of the paper was to conduct a review of the literature and current debate seeking an understanding of the phenomenon 'water cooler', whilst exploring its relevancy to leaders and organizations in future working arrangements, whether on-site, remote, or both (Hybrid). After reviewing the literature and current debate, the author's thoughts are reflected in the following answers.

Addressing the first research question, *is the water cooler and its effect dead.*

It would be harsh to agree that the 'water cooler' is dead or dying. It's perhaps more precise to say it's suffering from a temporary existential crisis surrounding the monumental changes and evolution of the world of work, and how it's performed. However, protecting its effect is certainly a key challenge for future leaders and organizations to figure out, and it's most definitely not a one-size-fits-all solution. For example, forcing informal communication with vague purposes is confusing to the workforce and can have the opposite effect. Similarly, it's challenging to come up with a solution, e.g., a virtual water cooler, which is supposed to control the natural behaviour of a group. Despite the will and dedication of leaders to a technological solution, that replaces the water cooler, there is no guarantee that it will work. Admittedly, planned social gatherings and face-to-face time certainly help, but they're probably no substitute for the natural, serendipitous encounters that might be facilitated by co-location and employee proximity.

The metaverse is an intriguing phenomenon; conducting work through an avatar, asking a kangaroo in leather pants, or a pink-haired ninja for advice on fiscal matters feels exotic. While the author appreciates its freedom of expression, it's an enhancement of the work-life balance debate; it's a matter of compartmentalization of life, work you vs. reality you, do we want the line to be blurred. Additionally, there is the question of the actual transferability of non-verbal communication via virtuality. Interesting research for a future MPM student – A study of the Metaverse, focusing on the transferability of non-verbal communication, or the emotional journey of asking a dinosaur for a raise.

The second research question *is there a need, or way, to compensate for the water cooler in the future of work.*

In an era of human relations, where all stakeholders are more invested in happiness, well-being, mental health, and improved communication for the sake of organizational success, the author sees a future of possible human water coolers, so to speak. A sort of water cooler facilitators, inner cultural ambassadors promoting the organizational values, strategy, goals, and ethos through fun and joyous informal channels. What once was considered voluntary work by the employee's committee, or a side gig for the HR department, could become a profession. A profession of emotional intelligence and considerable social skill. And here is another opportunity for research, the transferability of social skills via virtuality.

The third research question is *what kind of leaders are needed in this new reality to maintain the water cooler effect.*

Leaders who realize the benefits and purpose of the 'water cooler' and how much impact the interaction around the phenomenon can have for the benefit, or detriment, of the organization, the employees and themselves. Relationship builders, nourishers of the soul, advocates of breaks and a healthy work-life balance, champions of

cohesion, busters of communication silos, engineers of serendipity and matriarchs of cohabitation within the organization. Leaders armed with emotional intelligence and mental habits that support lifelong learning: willingness to push oneself out of comfort zones (*Risk-taking*), honest assessment of successes and especially failures (*Humble self-reflection*), aggressive collection of information and ideas from others (*Solicitation of opinions*), propensity to listen to others (*Careful listening*), and willingness to view life with an open mind (*Openness to new ideas*) (Kotter, 2012, pp. 190–192) are the perfect guardians of the ‘water cooler’, virtual or not, and should be [they probably are] doing everything in their power to safeguard the effects it’s capable of, one way or another, in a rapidly changing landscape of work, which is exactly what the workforce is demanding. One could argue that the ‘water cooler’ is a catalyst for: cultural prosperity, increased well-being, a sense of belonging, purpose/meaning, happiness, safe engagement, learning, sharing of knowledge, productivity, creativity, innovation, togetherness, etc.; and it’s descended from its effect – the water cooler effect.

The fourth and final research question *is this a worry at all*.

"Harnessing a flexible and remote work environment will not hurt the ability of corporations to innovate. In fact, it will give corporations a chance to imagine new means of authentically and purposefully bringing people together that are not bound by a certain office, time zone, or country." (Leonardi, 2021)

What’s needed is time; there are a lot of positive aspects in the world of work at the moment. More flexibility means more personalization and potentially better work-life balance; flatter organizational hierarchies mean more autonomy, more concern for mental health and well-being means, less stress, and less chance of burnout. The workforce wants the best of both worlds. Remote and hybrid work calls for more structure in order to be effective, which means that employees should have more clarity on their roles. Remote work opens opportunities both for the workforce and the organizations, attracting initiatives, and various retainment policies are being launched, including off-boarding (Zucker, 2022) policies in case workers want to come back. Then there is all the technical mumbo jumbo regarding the 4th industrial revolution; there is just so much going on. With structure comes guidelines; what’s happening now with the distributed workforce is the immediate teams, strong ties are growing stronger while the weak ties are withering, the weak ties need watering. For sure, we’ll see some sort of mentoring or benchmarking systems in place, where teams coach each other – temporarily dropping their productivity to enhance the whole. The development of organizations’ smaller branches as social hubs and co-working spaces here and there gives hope. It’s evolving, and it takes time; equilibrium is near.

As a final conclusion, a more extensive definition is in order. The ‘water cooler’ is a catalyst for cultural prosperity, growth of social capital, innovation, and business success.

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