

# Redefining the office: A look forward



**RICK  
BRIMEYER**  
Brimeyer  
LLC

He is president  
of the consulting  
business based  
in Ames, Iowa

Jim Autry is the former president of the Magazine Group for Meredith Corporation. Shortly after his 10-year tenure, he published an influential leadership book with the paradoxical title of “Love and Profit.”

During his book tour, he made the following statement:

“I’m talking about the kind of special treatment — if we really want to be globally competitive — we better pay attention to. If, by the end of this decade, we are not coming to grips with child care, day care, piggy-backing, job-sharing and work-at-home ... if we don’t come to grips with those things, we’re not going to be able to find and keep good people, and make them more productive. That’s the kind of special treatment I mean.”

Autry made that statement 28 years ago. Becoming less competitive is akin to being the lobster slowly boiled. No need to do anything drastic.

Necessity (aka, crisis) is the mother of invention. This past March, we made more progress toward remote work within one week than we made during the past quarter century as roughly half of the U.S. labor force transitioned to work from home.

Hats off to all the IT folks out there who enabled the largest work migration in human history. Consider yourself heroes in my book.

Now surveys are finding that more than half of those working from home want to continue the arrangement. It turns out a lot of us don’t find commuting especially rewarding.

Some, given the choice, would not choose to spend a significant portion of their waking hours with the cubicle-mates who their employer has chosen for them (especially that guy who keeps microwaving cauliflower).

Since everyone’s situation and desires are different, it makes sense to discuss, understand and brainstorm alternatives to creatively balance the needs of the business with the individual needs of the employee.

Discuss what-if scenarios required by inevitable disruptions to school and day care. Yes, this requires a one-on-one conversation with each employee who can feasibly work remotely. That’s really time consuming — but so is hiring replacements. If you don’t find

the time, they will — in a job interview with somebody else.

Agree and document on how the job is measured. This should include hard deliverables (e.g., number of phone calls to prospective customers, claims processed, etc.) as well as softer collaboration requirements (e.g., team meetings, mentoring zooms, etc.). Employees who want to continue to work from home will be motivated to show good results.

Continue to refine the tools and processes to support remote work. In March we were in triage mode. As we approach the half-year anniversary of the mass migration, positive changes should be continually occurring to address software/hardware tools, home office furniture and processes for staying connected.

One thing I learned when moving to a new town is that the onus for continuing relationships falls squarely on the party who moves away. Likewise, those working remotely need to be intentional about maintaining strong working relationships.

That includes regularly scheduling time (virtually or on-site) to pursue the softer collaboration goals established above. This is especially critical for remote managers.

Folks working remotely shouldn’t expect on-site teammates to accomplish tasks for them

that can only be done on-site. If needed, special arrangements can be made to allow off-hours building access to allow these tasks to be completed while providing maximum flexibility or limiting virus transmission risks.

Back in the early stages of the pandemic, I stated that “the times are a-changin’.” With each passing month those abrupt changes become embedded as new habits and even expectations.

Organizations that embrace the possibilities will find themselves with new loyal customers and employees. Organizations that fall back on the seven deadly words (“That’s the way we’ve always done it.”) will find themselves short on customers and talent.

Stay safe and be well.

## RICK SAYS

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