



Endgame by Jonathan Dahl
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Your Move

As I learned the hard way more than once, in a game of chess there's a fluke way to be on the verge of winning but still end up in a draw. That's typically when your opponent's only piece is the king and you mistakenly corner it into having no legal move. "Stalemate!" your opponent happily exclaims.

These days, I can't help but wonder if a lot of corporations find themselves in a stalemate of the worst kind. As we all know, many companies that were forced to create remote workforces last year are gradually trying to coax a sizable portion of people back to offices—without much luck. Surveys on this vary, but according to one of the most recent, more than eight in 10 CEOs say they want employees to return in person. How many workers want to come back fully? Only 10 percent.

Nobody wins in these situations. Though some like the idea of coming back to work face-to-face with colleagues, most employees obviously feel strongly that they can perform well from home or in a hybrid model. Certainly, many have in this pandemic. But whether CEOs are saying it publicly or not, there's no doubt the corner office worries whether innovation and productivity will suffer in a fully remote dynamic. They're also keenly aware that ordering workers to return can backfire. After all, many staffers still struggle with

childcare issues or worry about COVID closeness, vaccinated or not.

To some degree, different sectors seem to be coming up with different answers. As early as last summer, many firms in finance recalled some workers back to the office, and today, while a small minority will remain remote permanently, the vast majority are expected back in. Even summer internships will be in person. In a shocking stroke, the mayor of New York ordered the city's 80,000 employees back to the office on fairly short notice. Yet talk to leaders in some other industries, and they will say that recalls don't work in their office culture, and that even hybrid setups have run into complications. It has gotten to the point where, according to some human resources specialists, a significant number of out-of-work people are turning down jobs that require being in the office.

Which is why Melissa Swift, Korn Ferry's global leader for workforce transformation, likes to call all this a "tug-of-war"—perhaps one of the greatest challenges that leaders will face when the pandemic ends. They're aware that they can't allow any stalemate to last long and that the sooner their plans are communicated, the better. You can hear that chess clock ticking: if not now, it will be time soon for the next move. ▀

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