

BEYOND THE PERK

The Workplace We Furnished, the Work They Lived

The distance between the experience we designed and the one our people actually lived — and why it took a crisis to expose it

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"It took a virus, not a plan, to deliver the largest change to employee experience in a generation."

1. Executive Summary

For most of the preceding decade, employee experience had been the discipline every organisation endorsed and none truly owned. It was the vocabulary of the annual engagement survey and the refurbished headquarters — borrowed wholesale from the customer-experience movement and softened into something that sat comfortably inside an HR strategy pack. Then, across a single weekend in the spring, the entire physical apparatus of that experience — the building, the commute, the assigned desk, the corridor conversation, the induction breakfast — was withdrawn from millions of people at once. No business case was written. No steering committee convened. No benefits map was drawn. And in that involuntary experiment, organisations began to discover how little of what they had been calling experience had ever been the experience itself.

The argument of this essay is that the events of this year did not create a transformation in employee experience so much as expose one that had been quietly failing for years. When the office was removed, it stopped concealing the real texture of working life: the tools that did or did not work, the manager who did or did not know how to lead at a distance, the clarity or confusion of the actual task. What remained when the building fell away was the experience that had been there all along — and for many organisations it was thinner than the glossy programme had implied.

We should be honest that this is an uncomfortable lesson, because it was delivered by a crisis rather than a strategy. It took a virus, not a plan, to deliver the largest change to employee experience in a generation. This essay sits with that discomfort: what the forced transformation revealed about the difference between designed experience and lived experience, why the structural forces that had held the discipline in place dissolved so suddenly, and what all of it tells us — while the outcome is still unsettled and a second wave still only a forecast — about the gap between the transformations we intend and the ones we actually deliver.

2. The morning the building emptied

There is a particular image many of us will carry from this year: the office on the last ordinary day. The half-finished coffees left on desks. The monitors still glowing. The wall of lever-arch files nobody would touch for months. The instruction, delivered in a tone that tried to sound calm, to take your laptop home tonight, just in case. Most people expected to be back within a fortnight.

Consider a composite organisation, recognisable to anyone who has worked in a large one. Eighteen months earlier it had completed a workplace-experience programme it was proud of. The refurbished headquarters had breakout zones and soft seating, a barista three mornings a week, a wellbeing room, and a set of design principles about collaboration and serendipity printed on the glass. The programme had cost the better part of a year's discretionary capital and had been signed off as a flagship investment in "our people." In February its engagement survey scored the workplace highly.

By the last week of March, every pound of that investment was sitting behind a locked door. The barista, the breakout zones, the serendipity — all of it irrelevant overnight. What actually determined whether people could work that week was none of the things the experience programme had touched. It was whether the corporate network could carry the load when the whole company logged in remotely at once. It was whether people had ever been issued a laptop rather than a desktop. It was whether the applications they needed would run over a domestic broadband connection. It was whether a manager knew how to run a team he could no longer see.

The service desk told the real story. In that composite organisation the volume of support tickets in the fortnight after the shutdown ran to several times a normal month's, and the largest single category was not anything exotic — it was people who had never once used the remote-access system discovering that they did not know how. The experience that mattered was not the one on the glass walls. It was the one in the ticket queue.

The refurbished floor and the barista were not employee experience. They were facilities. The experience was in the ticket queue, the broadband connection, and the manager's first attempt to lead a team he could no longer see — and none of it had been on the programme's plan.

3. What we had called experience

To understand why the exposure was so sharp, it helps to remember what the discipline had become. Employee experience arrived as an idea by analogy. Customer experience had spent years maturing into something serious — journey maps, moments that matter, the deliberate design of how it feels to be on the receiving end of an organisation. Someone, reasonably, observed that employees are on the receiving end too, and that the same discipline might be turned inward. It was a good instinct.

But in the translation, something was lost. Customer experience, for all its faults, was tethered to a number that leadership could not ignore: the customer could leave, and the revenue left with them. Employee experience had no such tether. And so, lacking a hard measure of its own, it drifted toward the measures that were available — and those were

the engagement survey and the visible, physical, photographable improvements to the workplace.

- The survey gave the appearance of measurement. It produced a score, a trend line, and a heat map, and it allowed the experience to be reported on without ever being felt.
- The refurbishment gave the appearance of investment. It was concrete, it could be toured, and it photographed well for the annual report.
- Between them, they let organisations believe they were managing the experience while touching almost none of the things that actually constituted it.

The daily texture of work – whether the systems were quick or slow, whether a decision took an hour or a fortnight, whether a new joiner understood what was expected, whether a manager gave useful attention or none – sat largely outside the discipline's remit. Those things belonged to IT, or to the operating model, or to individual managers, or to no one. Employee experience, as practised, was the part of working life that could be furnished. The rest was somebody else's problem.

4. The forced transformation

What the shutdown did was strip away the furnished part and leave only the rest. And this is why it deserves to be called a transformation rather than merely a disruption: the lived experience of work changed more, for more people, in a shorter time, than any deliberate programme had ever achieved.

Onboarding is the clearest example. For years, induction had leaned heavily on the building to do its work – the tour, the desk-drop, the being-taken-to-lunch, the ambient learning of watching how the place behaved. Remove the building and every one of those mechanisms fails at once, and organisations discovered how much of their culture had in fact been a property of the premises rather than of anything written down or deliberately taught. Some responded by rebuilding induction as something explicit and designed; many simply left new joiners to drift, alone in a spare room, forming their impression of the organisation from a laptop and a sequence of video calls that nobody had thought to structure.

The manager relationship was exposed just as sharply. In the office, a weak manager could be carried by proximity; presence created the impression of leadership. At a distance, presence is gone, and what remains is whether the manager can set clear expectations, trust people to meet them, and offer attention that is about the work rather than about surveillance. The good ones were suddenly, visibly better. The weak ones had nowhere to hide. The same was true of the organisation's appetite for control: some reached immediately for monitoring software that counted keystrokes and logged activity, and in doing so told their people exactly how much they had been trusted all along.

“The office had been carrying a great deal that we credited to culture, to leadership, and to experience.”

*When it was withdrawn, we learned how much of each
had been genuine and how much had been the
building standing in for the thing.”*

Even the boundary of the working day, that most personal element of experience, was transformed without anyone designing it. The commute, for all its indignities, had marked the edges of work; without it, work bled into the kitchen and the evening. The organisations that noticed this began, tentatively, to treat the shape of the day as something they were responsible for. Most did not, and discovered by the late summer that a workforce can be simultaneously more productive on paper and quietly closer to exhaustion than it has ever been.

5. Why it had been stuck

If a fortnight of necessity could move what a decade of intent could not, we are obliged to ask why the discipline had been so immovable in the first place. The honest answer is that several structural forces had held it in place, and the crisis happened to dissolve all of them at once.

1. No single owner. The lived experience of work was distributed across HR, IT, facilities, the operating model, and line management, and no one of them was accountable for the whole. Each optimised its own part; the experience fell through the gaps between them. The crisis, briefly, forced them into the same room because nothing else would keep the organisation running.
2. No hard measure. Without a number that leadership feared, the discipline defaulted to the survey, and the survey rewarded sentiment over friction. The crisis supplied a brutal, undeniable measure overnight: either people could work from home or they could not, and everyone could see which.
3. No urgency. Improving the daily texture of work was always important and never urgent, and so it lost, every planning cycle, to the things that carried a deadline. The crisis supplied the deadline the discipline had never had.
4. The office as an alibi. Above all, the building let organisations believe the experience was handled. A pleasant office is a standing reassurance that you are looking after your people, and it quietly absolved leaders of examining the parts of the experience that were not pleasant at all.

Seen this way, the transformation was less a burst of new capability than the removal of a set of excuses. The forces that had kept employee experience trivial did not so much fail as become impossible to sustain when the premises they depended on — quite literally, the premises — were shut.

6. The strongest objection

It would be too neat to leave the argument there, and the honest reader will already be forming the objection. So let me put it in its strongest form rather than a convenient one.

The objection is that none of this is transformation at all — it is business continuity, and we are dressing up a scramble as a strategy. Organisations did not reimagine the experience of work; they kept the lights on under duress, with improvised tools and exhausted people, and much of what looks like change is simply the temporary shape of an emergency. On this view the productivity some report is the adrenaline of a crisis and the goodwill of people afraid for their jobs, neither of which lasts. And the gains are unevenly distributed to the point of illusion: the senior manager with a study and a garden has had a very different year from the junior colleague at a kitchen table in a shared flat, and to call the aggregate an improvement in experience is to average away the people it has hurt most. When the threat recedes, the objection concludes, the building will refill, the old forces will reassert themselves, and this will be remembered not as a transformation but as an interruption.

This is a serious argument, and parts of it are simply correct. Much of what happened this year was continuity, not design. The distribution of the experience has been deeply unequal, and any honest account has to say so plainly. And the pull back toward the old arrangement, once it is safe, will be strong.

But the objection proves less than it claims. That a change was forced does not make it unreal; the most revealing experiments are the ones we would never have run voluntarily. Whether the productivity endures is beside the point being made here — the argument is not that remote work is better, but that the crisis exposed what the experience actually consisted of, and that exposure does not un-happen when people return. An organisation that has seen, unarguably, that its onboarding depended on a building, that its culture was partly a property of proximity, and that its managers varied enormously the moment presence was removed, cannot honestly un-see it. The interruption may end. The knowledge of what it revealed does not have to.

7. The gap between intent and reality

Which brings us to the most uncomfortable reflection, and the one that reaches beyond employee experience to the practice of transformation itself.

We are left to explain how a crisis achieved in a fortnight what a decade of deliberate programmes could not. The explanation is not that our programmes were badly run. It is that they were aimed at the furnished part — the visible, plannable, reportable surface — precisely because that was the part a programme knew how to touch. Transformation, as we usually practise it, gravitates toward what can be scoped, sequenced, and shown to a steering committee. The daily texture of work resists all three, and so it was, reliably, the thing our transformations left untouched while claiming to be about exactly it.

Designed experience	Lived experience
The refurbished floor and its design principles	Whether the systems are quick or slow
The engagement survey score	Whether a decision takes an hour or a fortnight

Designed experience	Lived experience
The published values	Whether a new joiner knows what is expected
The wellbeing room	Whether the working day has an edge
The programme's benefits map	The manager you actually report to

The gap between transformation intent and transformation reality, in other words, is not usually a gap of execution. It is a gap of aim. We intend to change how it feels to work here, and we deliver a better lobby, because the lobby is inside the scope and the feeling is not. The crisis was instructive precisely because it had no scope. It did not respect the boundary between what a programme could touch and what it could not; it changed everything at once, and in doing so it showed us how much of everything our programmes had been quietly declining to address.

There is a hard lesson available here for anyone willing to take it, and it is not run transformations like a crisis — crises are expensive teachers and cruel ones, and no one should wish for another. The lesson is that we should be suspicious, in the ordinary course, of any transformation whose deliverables are all things that photograph well. If the entire benefits map could survive the building being locked, the programme was probably aimed at the furniture.

8. What we do with the lesson

By the autumn, the question is no longer whether the experience of work has changed — it plainly has — but whether we will keep what the change taught us or file it away as an aberration. The honest forecast, from inside this uncertain moment, is that most organisations will do the latter. The forces that kept employee experience stuck have not been destroyed, only suspended; ownership will re-fragment, the survey will resume its comforting service, and the building, when it is safe again, will offer its old reassurance that everything is handled.

The organisations that make something lasting of this year will be the few that treat the exposure as information rather than as an emergency to be survived and forgotten. They will keep asking the questions the crisis asked for them: not is the office pleasant but does the work flow; not did we score well on the survey but where is the friction that people have simply stopped reporting; not have we furnished the experience but have we understood it. Those are not comfortable questions, and they do not produce a photograph for the annual report. That is precisely why they were never asked before, and precisely why they matter now.

We did not plan this transformation, and we would never have chosen it. But it has told us, with a clarity no strategy deck ever managed, what employee experience was actually made of all along. The waste would not be in the crisis itself, which was never ours to prevent. The waste would lie in living through the most revealing experiment our working lives have ever run — and then, the moment it was safe, deciding we had learned nothing.