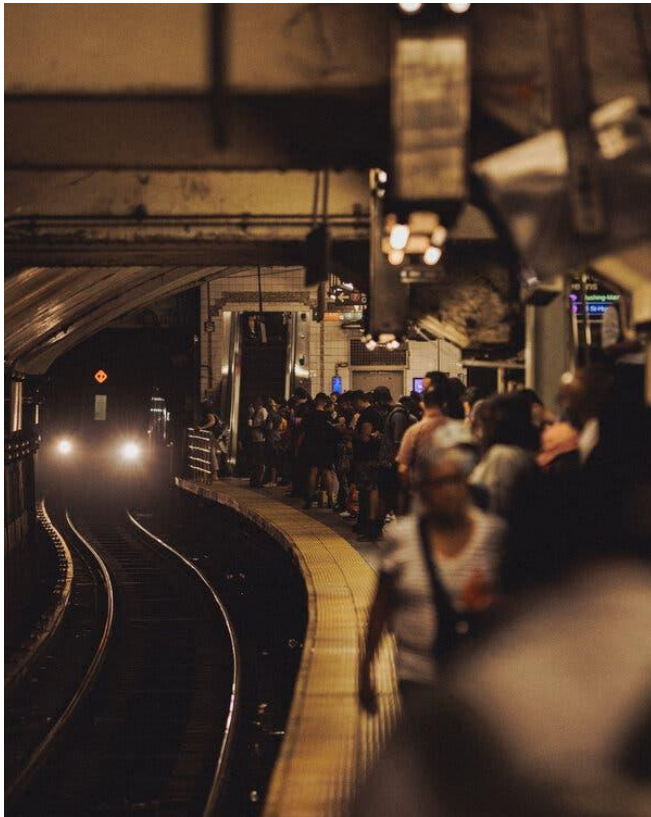


Office Workers Don't Hate the Office. They Hate the Commute.

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Credit...Timothy Mulcare for The New York Times

Elon Musk says we should all get off our duffs and go back to the office. People who want to work from home aren't just "phoning it in" from "some remote pseudo-office" as he's put it. Now he says we're immoral, too.

"The whole notion of work from home is a bit like the fake Marie Antoinette quote 'Let them eat cake,'" Musk told CNBC this week. Factory workers, service workers and construction workers can't work from home, so why do people in the "laptop classes" think they should be able to do so? "It's not just a productivity thing," he said. "I think it's morally wrong."

A cynic might note that factory workers can't work from private jets, either, yet Musk's commitment to worker equity didn't prevent his plane from making a

reported 171 trips last year. A cynic might also point out that a man who makes cars for a living has a stake in the perpetuation of Americans driving to and from work day after day.

But I'm not so cynical. Musk isn't alone among corporate executives in seeing employees' reluctance to return to the office as a genuine economic problem. Mark Zuckerberg of Meta, Bob Iger of Disney, Andy Jassy of Amazon, Jamie Dimon of JPMorgan Chase and others have been pleading with or arm-twisting workers to come back. Companies have tried carrots — redesigning offices — and they've tried sticks, like reversing remote work policies at the same time they announce huge layoffs. But in a tight labor market, the office has been a tough sell. The average office occupancy rate across 10 major cities has plateaued at around 50 percent, The Wall Street Journal reported this week, citing data from Kastle Systems. Remote work seems to be turning from a pandemic necessity into a permanent feature of the American workplace.

Is this a big problem? For some local economies, it could be shattering, but I'll get to that in a bit. First let's address why folks aren't coming back and why they probably won't unless we fix a big problem with office work that few C.E.O.s seem to mention: getting to and getting home from the office. Survey after survey bears this out. If we want people to go to the office more

often, we have to do something about the daily commute, a ritual of American life that's time-consuming, emotionally taxing, environmentally toxic and expensive.

In 2019 the average one-way commute in the United States hit a record of almost 28 minutes, according to the Census Bureau. Nearly 40 percent of Americans commuted a half-hour or more, one way, and almost 10 percent traveled for more than an hour one way.

Dig deeper into the moment.

For many, the pandemic-era shift to remote work proved that all the schlepping was unnecessary. They can't unsee all the wasted time, and questioning their morality isn't going to change that. They aren't taking a moral stance; they're just making a rational calculation: They can get a lot more done — in their work lives and in the rest of their lives — if they skip the commute.

Liberty Street Economics, a blog that features writing from New York Fed analysts, reported last year that collectively, Americans now spend 60 million fewer hours per day traveling to work. That's 60 million hours for which they weren't being compensated that they can now spend exercising, taking care of their children, getting a bit more sleep and starting their workday earlier or ending it later.

Workers are delighted by the switch. According to a survey by the Conference Board, overall job satisfaction in 2022 was at just over 62 percent, a high not seen in decades, and people with hybrid jobs that allowed them to work at home and at a job site were the happiest. A working paper published last year by the National Bureau of Economic Research even found that the rise of remote work "lessens wage-growth pressures and (modestly) eases the challenge facing monetary policymakers in their efforts to bring inflation down without stalling the economy."

What about workers' productivity? Has working from home led to a lot of slacking off? Not obviously. Another N.B.E.R. working paper published last year found that among workers at a large tech company, hybrid work arrangements did not significantly affect workers' productivity even though people worked slightly less on days they were at home and slightly more on days they were in the office. Hybrid work improved job satisfaction measures and reduced attrition by 33 percent, especially among those with the longest commutes.

So what's the downside to remote work? It might be hurting cities. Many of America's largest and most prosperous urban areas rely on the rhythms of the daily commute; the perpetual need for morning caffeine, sad desk salads at lunch and beer gardens at happy hour boosts downtown and office-park economies.

The shift to remote work abruptly disrupted this pattern, setting off what has been called an apocalypse in the market for office real estate and, for some cities, a death spiral for public transportation systems — things that can contribute to a cycle that further damages economies. (I embrace the soft pants revolution as much as the next person, but imagine running a downtown mom-and-pop dry cleaning service over the past three years.)

But if potential urban ruination is the danger, it isn't a problem for C.E.O.s to solve — at least not by grumbling about their lazy workers. Rather, it's a problem of infrastructure and policy;

it's a problem for local, state and national governments to address through long-range planning and a more realistic approach to urban development.

Like what? In theory, we know how to do this. If people are sick of commuting to work, we could aim to make commuting much less of a hassle. The ways to do that would likely involve some combination of reducing the distance between people's homes and offices, improving the modes of transportation along these routes and reducing the other costs of going to work — by providing more accessible and affordable child care, for example.

If it sounds as though I'm using the shift to remote work as an opportunity to advocate lefty urbanist pipe dreams — better public transit! Fewer cars and more bikes! Denser development! An improved social safety net! — you're right. I am.

But what are the alternatives? Digging tunnels for underground freeways or a hyperloop? Self-driving taxis that ferry us around so that we can work while we commute? Converting conference rooms to dank sleeping pods so that people can just live at the office all the time?

These are some of Musk's ideas for the future of work and life. Do they seem more realistic — or more desirable — than simply building more livable cities and better ways for people to get to work? Or is all this another way of saying, "Let them take robotaxis"?