Boston

LONGFORM

The Death of the Office Friendship

No more laughs around the water cooler. No more lunchtime gossip. Why a generation of Bostonians is doomed to drink alone after work.

by **TOM MCGRATH**. *11/23/2021, 5:42 p.m.*

Photo illustration by C.J. Burton

It was shortly after I'd spent the morning duck-hooking my way around the golf course while a bunch of middle-aged men looked on that I realized what a lonely planet we're building.

Once a year or so, I play golf with a group of guys I worked with at another magazine a couple of decades ago. Our games are mediocre-to-bad, but the gathering itself never fails to be spirit-lifting-to-sensational. There's catching up on careers and kids; good-natured ball-busting; downing of beer; chatter about the state of the world; and, of course, some reminiscing about the period when we all worked together. This year's outing was no different. Even as I flailed my way over 18 holes, I got to hear about Stump's new marketing business, Stieger's daughter's wedding, O'Neill's publishing projects, and Kita's cruises around the world. On the nostalgia front, someone even brought up an incident I'd completely forgotten about: the storied middle-aged-editor throwdown of 2001, in which two colleagues got into an argument—20 years later, no one really remembers why—and ended up in the middle of the office, shoulders back and chests protruding, with one all but poking the other in the solar plexus and bellowing, "You wanna take this outside?!" (I'd chosen publishing over, say, police work because I assumed it was nonviolent. How young I was then.)

Anyway…as I was driving home after the round of golf, it dawned on me just how much, even two decades later—or maybe *especially* two decades later—those relationships mean to me. And

with good reason. As coworkers, we'd been side by side for 40 to 50 hours per week, more waking hours than I typically spent with my wife and two young daughters. We'd seen a lot, done a lot, been through a lot, shared a lot.

I also realized they were hardly the only gaggle of good friends I've made at a job. There's the colleague from my first real magazine gig—a confidant now for three and a half decades, who was part of my wedding and coached me through various career transitions and shared his story with me as he came out of the closet. There's the group of men and women I worked with at a more recent job, dear friends whom I drank with and who got baby gifts from my wife and me and who came to my father's funeral and whom I still text, talk to, and see for dinner. The people who make up my life.

It was at that point I had a dark thought: Would any of these relationships even exist if we'd worked together the way people have over the past 20 months—via Zoom, Slack, text, and email? Is true friendship even possible when nearly all of your connections are digital?

We are, I guess, about to find out.

One of the most profound consequences of COVID, it now seems clear, is the Death of the Office as We Knew It. Yes, workplaces will still exist, and for the scores of occupations that actually require showing up for work—kindergarten teacher and orthopedic surgeon, plumber and air-traffic controller, massage therapist and Red Sox infielder—not much will change. But for the rest of us, the desk jockeys? More and more, the clichéd daily grind—slapping the alarm at 6:15 a.m., struggling to grab a shower and a cup of coffee, battling traffic on the way to the office, working eight hours, reversing the entire process at the end of the day—will be a remnant of the past, a rotary phone of a routine that future generations will look at with a mixture of fascination and amusement. Nationally, influential behemoths such as Google, Apple, and Meta (the artist formerly known as Facebook) have already announced they're permanently switching to hybrid work models, with many employees expected to show up in an office just three days a week—and some not at all. While here in Boston many companies are still figuring out their futures, others are rushing exuberantly into the brave new world of virtual work. At tech leader HubSpot, for instance, workers can now choose from three work options: @office, @home, and @flex. Whichever works best for you, the Cambridge company says, no questions asked.

Let me state for the record that I understand the appeal of working from home (or from a tiny cabin in the Berkshires, if that's your thing). For employees, it typically offers more flexibility and better work-life balance. For companies, it promises big potential savings on commercial real estate and office space. For society at large, it portends less impact on the climate, with fewer commuting miles racked up over time. Check. Check. Check.

And yet, I can't help wondering if we're underestimating what we're walking away from, if we haven't fully considered what we were actually getting out of the old way of doing things. Because the Death of the Office as We Knew It will, it seems to me, also mean the Death of the Office Friendship as We Knew It, and I fear we're only going to become lonelier, sadder, and nastier as a result.

The worse the office experience is, the tighter the bond between teammates can become. There are, apparently, no loners in foxholes.

"Work is so important," Tsedal Neeley is saying to me one recent afternoon, as we chat via Zoom. "Not just for the economic aspect that people talk about, but the social and developmental aspects as well."

Neeley, a lively and engaging woman who's a professor at Harvard Business School and author of the recent book *Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding from Anywhere*, is talking with me about work relationships—what lies beneath them, how they're likely to evolve in the years ahead, and why it all matters. "Work gives us social connections, professional friends, personal friends." She sums it up in one word: "Nourishment."

Research reinforces what Neeley says. A survey released last spring found that Americans are more likely to make friends in the workplace than anywhere else, with more than half the respondents saying they'd met a close pal through their or their spouse's job. Meanwhile, over the years, analytics company Gallup has found that having close relationships with colleagues may lead to a higher performance at work. In that survey, people who agreed with the statement "I have a best friend at work" were more likely to be part of a top-achieving team than folks who didn't bond with somebody at the office. As Gallup noted in its analysis of their findings, "When employees have a deep sense of affiliation with their team members, they take positive actions that benefit the business—actions they may not otherwise even consider."

That we create tight connections with coworkers is hardly a surprise. To start, there's the sheer amount of time we spend—or at least spent, before the pandemic interrupted our programming—with colleagues, a factor that's crucial in forming friendships. In 2018, University of Kansas professor Jeffrey Hall published a fascinating study that asked how long two people have to spend together before they become friends. His conclusions? On average you need 30 hours for someone to become a casual friend; 50 hours for someone to become a friend; 140 for someone to become a good friend; and 300 for someone to become a best friend. Given those numbers, it only makes sense that the office is America's great friendship incubator. Where else, outside of work, would most busy adults possibly find 300 hours—nearly a year of daily, hourlong conversations—to become besties with someone?

The other reason we get on with work teammates is what Neeley refers to as "shared experiences" and what a buddy of mine calls "the foxhole factor." After all, Neeley says, "We worked together toward a shared goal. We rallied together. We bonded together. We struggled together. The shared experiences are what lead us to create these friendships." And at least anecdotally, the worse the experience is, the tighter the bond can become. When I talked to a guy we'll call Jim (he didn't want his name used for reasons that will become apparent momentarily), he said he's still close with a team of people he worked with at Fidelity Investments a few years ago. "Part of the reason that group has been cohesive over time is that the group we were in at Fidelity was not a fun place to work. It was almost like we'd kind of been through it a little bit together. It was a shared, intense experience." There are, apparently, no loners in foxholes.

One of the other things I learned in talking to Jim and other Bostonians is that making friends at the office tends to follow a pattern not unlike dating. There's initial connection (say, working on the same project), followed by getting to know each other (maybe grabbing lunch a few times and figuring out you share some interests outside of work), followed by Taking Things to the Next Level (nobody's clothes come off; this is more about meeting up outside the office on a weekend).

“I kind of thought at the time, ‘Oh God, this girl hates me,’” Cyrus Dahmubed, 28, says with a laugh when I ask him to describe the evolution of his friendship with onetime colleague Srishti Goyal. Their initial encounter was on the first day of Dahmubed’s internship at the architecture and design firm Hacin + Associates and the last day of hers; her job was to show him the ropes. “That was awkward, but I thought: She’ll be gone and I’ll only have to message her when I’m really stuck.”

But as luck would have it, both of them were invited back for internships at the firm the following summer, and so on the second day—purely out of necessity, Dahmubed says—he asked Goyal if she wanted to grab lunch. “Her family is from India, my dad was born and raised in India—we can always fall back on talking about India stuff,” he remembers thinking. “But we got sushi and discovered we kind of clicked. I did my absolute maximum of funny, gay, over-the-top having-a-good-time thing, and all of the jokes seemed to hit just right. I was like, okay, I think I made a friend.”

What really sealed the relationship was the banter the two shared on a private Slack channel at the office. “I could tell from 20 feet away that I was cracking her up, and it would get me going,” says Dahmubed, who’s now the director of research at the architecture and planning firm Utile. In time, the pair started hanging out outside the office and eventually became roommates in the South End.

Zoe Morin, who works in marketing for the Boston recruitment software company Workable, describes a similar relationship arc. Morin didn’t feel much of a connection with a new coworker when they first met, but after working more closely and talking with the woman several times at a regular Thursday night office happy hour, her impression changed. “I was able to see how smart she was, and I think I realized, oh, there’s something there,” Morin says. They ended up in an office book club and eventually became part of a four-person friend group. “There were four of us who made that switch from, ‘Here’s a work setting on a Thursday night and the office is going out’ to ‘It’s a Saturday night, and you’re bringing your friends and I’m bringing my friends and now we’re connected.’ It’s not just going to be a coincidence.”

Are they still close? Morin tells me her friends are getting together on the upcoming weekend to celebrate their recent engagements to their significant others. “None of us work together anymore,” she says. “But the friendship has remained and is, I’d say, even stronger now than when we worked together.”

Neeley notes that when we interact with colleagues—at least if all goes well—we’re building up two different types of trust. One is what she says is “cognitive trust,” faith that the other person is reliable, competent, and capable. The other is “emotional trust,” a bond that forms as we begin to share pieces of ourself—interests, opinions, aspirations, challenges—with the other person. “Emotional trust is what leads to friendships,” Neeley says. “It’s not only about connection, it’s about a deep mutual understanding of one another.”

Friendship, of course, is just one potential upside of what happens when we work together with other people. Part of the appeal of offices—and one reason the workplace has been at the center of so many classic TV shows, from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Mad Men* to *30 Rock* and *The Office*—is that they’re self-contained worlds, mini-societies with recurring characters and daily drama and gossip and relationships that run the gamut from rivalries to romances. When I emailed the *Boston* magazine staff to see if anyone had stories to share about office friendships, two people fired back instantly that they’d met their spouse at work. When I reached out to Bob Rivers, the thoughtful CEO and chair of Eastern Bank, to talk about office

life, he told me he'd met his wife when they worked together at M&T Bank in Buffalo years ago. "I don't think we would have met otherwise," he says.

All of these workplace relationships can have a deep—and unique—meaning in our lives. "It's so natural to build relationships with people you work with because they understand, in a way no one else can, whatever is happening at the office," Morin says. "It's the only other person who gets it. You don't really want to bring that home. You don't want to have to explain it to your friends or partner. And it's like, great, I have this outlet."

Still, it's not just about having a buddy to bitch to. It's about being seen and heard and appreciated in ways even our significant others might never fully grasp. "A work friend sees this professional part of you that your close friends never really see," Morin says. "They know you in a way that none of your other close friends will ever really understand."

Photo illustration by C.J. Burton

I don't think it goes too far to say that while the pandemic has sucked, it would have sucked way more—brought about complete societal paralysis, in fact—if it had happened 30 years ago, before the arrival of the technology that's now so integrated into our lives. Zoom fatigue is no fun. Fax fatigue would have been worse. And yet, as much as, say, video conferencing has enabled the remote-work revolution we're now witnessing, even its most ardent advocates would probably acknowledge it's somehow not *quite* the same as connecting with someone in the flesh.

Why is that? What, exactly, is missing? Isn't a conversation a conversation? Isn't a talking head a talking head? Part of the problem is the way Zoom works. For instance, while it's certainly helpful that you can see a person's facial expressions, picking up on other body language, or even body characteristics, is a challenge. "We now have this joke in the office: How tall are you?" Dahmubed says. "Because we hired a whole bunch of people during COVID without having seen them in person." On top of that are the technical factors that experts say cause the aforementioned Zoom fatigue—from an ever-so-slight audio and video signal lag, which forces our brains to work harder to comprehend a conversation, to the extreme close-ups we get of other people's faces, an unfamiliar (and intimidating) view of a human being that can actually trigger a stress response.

Then there's the way we use Zoom. In an office, we connect with coworkers through all sorts of serendipitous encounters, hallway conversations, and organic moments. On Zoom, we schedule

a meeting to discuss what we need to discuss with whomever we need to discuss it, then do one of those fey little waves, hit "Leave Meeting," and move on. "When you end a Zoom meeting 20 minutes early, people just click off," says Brian McViney, a Hingham resident who's VP of sales for an Ontario-based software company. "Whereas if you finish an in-person meeting early, you're like, well, my next meeting is in 20 minutes, might as well sit here and shoot the shit." And even if you do make a human connection with someone during a video conference, the platform's very remoteness—the fact that you could be sitting a thousand miles apart—precludes getting to Stage Two of office-friend development: the spontaneous lunch or post-work drink where you discover your mutual Harry Potter obsession and build up the emotional trust Neeley talks about.

One final difference between virtual life and real life is the physiological change that happens inside our bodies when we're physically present with other humans. When we're with people, there's an increase in feel-good hormones such as dopamine and oxytocin. And research has found that when people work together on tasks, the neural activity in their brains aligns. We literally get in sync.

Consciously or not, it seems we crave all of this when we don't have it. Earlier this year, after people had begun to get vaccinated and the city started to open up, Morin and her coworkers got together for dinner, then went to a dive bar. "It's Boston," she says, "so normally in a packed dive bar, no one's nice to each other. If someone jostles you, you're like, 'Oh, I can't believe it.' But honestly, everybody in that space was so joyful. We're known in Boston for being grumpy and myopic, but there was just something indescribable about being able to see people and be near them. You could just kind of be."

The Death of the Office Friendship might not be such a big deal if our social ties were stronger in general—if, either literally or metaphorically, we were all hanging out at the local dive bar every night and sucking up a bunch of human connection. But that's not the case. In fact, evidence shows that for nearly half a century, we've been systematically growing farther and farther apart from each other.

It's a phenomenon that Harvard's Robert Putnam chronicled in his well-known 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, which looked at loosening social ties in America over the previous decades. (The book's title referenced one of Putnam's touchstones, the decline of bowling leagues.) He detailed how we'd become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and civic institutions because of an array of factors, from TV and two-career families to suburban sprawl and generational value shifts.

Putnam's book was published two decades ago, when the Web was just becoming a thing, and shortly after the invention of smartphones and social media. The great irony is that, while technology has seemingly given us more ways to connect than ever before, our disconnection has only accelerated. The survey I referenced earlier, about work being the most common place people make friends, also reveals that over the past three decades the number of people who say they have a "best friend" has dropped significantly—from 75 percent in 1990 to 59 percent in 2021. There's also been a notable decline in the number of "close friends" people have. Today, 32 percent of Americans say they have no more than two close friends, double the number who had so few in 1990. Even more startling? Twelve percent of Americans today say they have *zero* close friends.

Our ever-quickening isolation is something public health experts were growing concerned about even before COVID trapped us in our homes in 2020. Last year, Vivek Murthy—who was U.S. surgeon general under Barack Obama and holds the position again under Joe Biden—wrote a book called *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* that described what Murthy called a loneliness epidemic in America. In 2018, then-British Prime Minister Theresa May appointed the U.K.'s first-ever "minister for loneliness"—which, yes, sounds like something out of a Monty Python skit, but made clear May's concern about the isolation of her countrymates.

And the health impact shouldn't be taken lightly. Not only are lonely people more prone to depression, but disconnectedness can also undercut our physical well-being. According to research from Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University who's been studying loneliness for years, the heightened risk of mortality from loneliness equals that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic, and the overall health risks are greater than those associated with obesity.

So, okay: None of this is to say that too many Zoom meetings will necessarily shave years off your life, or that too many work-from-home days will necessarily leave you in despair. But it should make us stop and think: Is removing ourselves from the daily social whirl of the office, the place we're *most* likely to find friendship as adults, the best prescription for our collective well-being?

"So much of our daily interaction in the workplace is not structured communication—it's the so-called water-cooler effect or coffee-room chatter," says Jeremy Nobel, a Harvard doctor and the founder of the UnLonely Project, an organization whose goal is to reduce the stigma of loneliness and create interventions to combat it. "These are incredibly critical exchanges of something that humans seem to need. You know, *I went to my son's soccer game and it made me so proud of him*. You reveal something in that moment. It's a very intimate moment, even if it lasts 60 seconds or less. And that's why, 20 years later, you're still golfing with that person."

It's those revelations and connections that have taken such a spectacular hit during the pandemic. On a recent morning, I spent some time chatting with Elizabeth Lowrey, a principal at Elkus Manfredi Architects, at the firm's Seaport offices.

"Everything we do is about building community," Lowrey says when I ask how she and her colleagues dealt with having to go into lockdown in March 2020. "We don't think about architecture or making an object. We start with building a community—how does architecture and space do that? So clearly we were kind of standing there looking around like, now what?" Lowrey tells me everyone adapted, but it wasn't the same as being together (employees are now back in a limited way). As she puts it, "Proximity matters."

Of course, the people most likely to pay the price for the lack of proximity aren't middle-aged folks like me who've been going to offices for years, but young people who've hardly gone to offices at all. The less time they spend in person with their coworkers, the harder it's going to be for them to find friends, mentors, mates—in short, the cadre of people who help sustain you through your life and career.

Which doesn't mean there won't be a cost to all of us. One other thing that loneliness studies reveal is how isolation tends to feed on itself. Rather than making people more desperate to connect with others, being lonely makes people more selfish, only concerned with what's happening in their small worlds. There's no way to prove this, but as I thought about that

research I couldn't help but wonder if our isolation—all that bowling alone, and now working alone, that we're doing—helps explain why we're at each other's throats culturally and politically. It's pretty easy to demonize your neighbor if you've never had a conversation with her—if your brain and hers have never actually synced up.

"It's a grand social experiment," Bob Rivers says of the changes we're seeing in how we work. He tells me it's a constant topic of conversation among Boston's CEO class, although he's holding off as long as possible on making a final call on what Eastern Bank's policy will be. The one thing he's sure about, though, is that Eastern won't be going back to the five-days-a-week, 9-to-5 grind they had before March 2020. That era is over.

Neeley, meanwhile, believes we'll be just fine. She says COVID simply accelerated a remote-work trend that was going to happen anyway, and that companies will find new ways for employees to build up trust with one another—whether it's being more intentional about connecting new workers with veteran ones or starting Zoom meetings with "structured unstructured time," a few minutes in which people share something of themselves before getting down to business. "This is where the personal dimension comes in," she says. "You are bonding, believe it or not. Groups who do this, we're finding, have much stronger cohesion and relationships with one another."

Just as important, Neeley says that after a nearly two-year-long quarantine, there's a new generation of workers who simply don't know anything different when it comes to work. In the same way we have digital natives—millions of young people who don't remember life without a smartphone or Instagram—soon we'll have millions of remote natives, employees for whom going to work has only ever meant turning on your computer while you sit in your apartment or a neighborhood coffee shop.

Elizabeth Lowrey tells me those remote natives include her daughters, whose entrance into the professional world has been different from her own, thanks to the pandemic. While Lowrey wonders about building a career with less in-person contact, she's aware the world keeps changing. "Their experience may lead to new ways. I think human nature—you want to have friends, right? It'll be just different for them."

Maybe Neeley and Lowrey are right. And maybe it's also true that we'll compensate for our looser ties with coworkers by forging closer ties with our families, non-work friends, neighbors, and communities. Maybe bowling leagues will make a comeback.

And yet, I remain skeptical, in part because of the generational aspect Neeley references. Yes, there are digital natives, but as I look at the data, I see it's precisely that most digitally connected generation that's reporting the highest levels of mental health duress and highest levels of loneliness. I don't know if that's just a coincidence, but I do know this: As amazing and powerful as technology is, on some level it's a magic trick. When I'm talking with Neeley on Zoom, I'm not really seeing her face and hearing her voice. I'm staring at a device made of metal and plastic that's projecting digital facsimiles of her face and her voice. I can't help but wonder if my brain, my being, knows the difference, and that it somehow matters more than we imagine.

Then again, perhaps my skittishness about all of this is really just practical. When I chatted with Jim, the former Fidelity employee, I asked him how he was coping with the pandemic overall. He said he was fine. His only real issue was that he realized how tedious his job is. "Working from home saps a lot—maybe most—of the actual joy associated with doing work," he says. "You

totally miss just being with people. So the problem is, I prefer working from home." He paused. "But I'm actually getting less and less interested in doing this job."

Great Resignation, anyone? Sometimes the only thing that makes work bearable are the people we do it with.