

# Beyond the screen:

## The irreplaceable power of face-to-face connection

*Digital tools have transformed the world of work with their flexibility, speed and global reach – but nothing can replace the depth and richness of face-to-face connection. Finding ways to integrate these modes is key to success in today's workplaces.*

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**Courtney Cox**  
Senior Knowledge  
Partner at Douglas

There's a certain magic that happens in face-to-face meetings – one Courtney Cox, a Senior Knowledge Partner at Douglas, knows well. As she recounts: “Shortly after pandemic restrictions were lifted, I flew out to meet an international client. It was at her favourite coffee shop – a cosy spot close to her office. It was the first in-person business meeting she’d had since the lockdown.” The gesture brought meaningful professional and personal benefits: “We spent hours together truly connecting on a deep level. She let her guard down with me in a way I wasn’t expecting – sharing things about work and life that she hadn’t even told colleagues or friends. And since then we’ve built a beautiful friendship. She sang our praises in her firm, and they’ve continued to work with us ever since. Every time work needs to be done, she sends it straight to us. We had always worked well together, but that day was the start of building real trust between us beyond normal work conversations.”

Would a video call have had a similar effect? Perhaps not. Are we ready to give up our powerful, and now indispensable, digital tools? Again, no. The way forward lies in a hybrid model that leverages the strengths of both.

### **Choosing connection over constant connectivity**

During COVID-19, we all got used to digital tools and work from home (WFH). Virtual meetings, instant messaging and collaborative platforms allowed businesses to continue operations throughout the dark days of pandemic restrictions. But an all-digital environment has its drawbacks. With constant connectivity and back-to-back video calls, “virtual fatigue” can set in. Many have found themselves longing for the real relationships forged in in-person interactions. The continued success of apps designed to encourage “digital detox” and mindful technology use – like Forest and Opal – reflect a growing desire to balance connectivity with personal health.<sup>2</sup>

This is also evident in the rise of what some are calling Fourth Spaces – hybrid events centred around shared online

<sup>1</sup> ILO, *From potential to practice: Preliminary findings on the numbers of workers working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic*, March 2021

<sup>2</sup> Opal, *Reclaim Your Digital Freedom: The Guide to Digital Detox Apps*, July 2023

interests.<sup>3</sup> Here, people move beyond online comment sections to meet in real life, engage in deep dialogue and build community connections. At The Commons in San Francisco, for example, members gather for regular discussions and workshops focused on exploring philosophical, ethical and personal questions.<sup>4</sup> This model has since been adopted in locations around the world including at The Conduit, a vibrant community space in London and the location of our second office. There, the focus is on bringing together knowledge, networks and capital with the aim of realising a sustained positive impact. The result is an interwoven community that exemplifies the power of human connection.

Not surprisingly, people have an intrinsic desire to engage with other people, not just computer screens. Nonverbal cues such as body language, facial expressions and tone of voice provide critical context and help build trust and rapport. In-person meetings lead to deeper conversations, stronger connections and more effective collaboration, especially in situations requiring creativity, negotiation or sensitive conflict resolution.



**Kirstie Schwerdtfeger**  
Knowledge Partner  
at Douglas

While digital communication offers flexibility and autonomy, it's also crucial that these advantages don't come at the expense of professional growth, especially in early careers. As Kirstie Schwerdtfeger, Knowledge Partner now in her third year here at Douglas, puts it: "Being in the office is important because it drives organic conversation. I've been looped into so many ideas and projects solely because I was sitting in the office and present. You get a lot of opportunities if you're just around, and that's helped me grow and develop so much as a young employee."

<sup>3</sup>Eventbrite, *Fourth Spaces: Where Online and Offline Worlds Meet*, January 2025

<sup>4</sup>Patricia Mou, *Introducing "the fourth place" & why "third places" have fallen short on their promise*, September 2023

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Digital is powerful, but face-to-face is valuable.

10%

more workers went into office during 2024 compared to 2023, according to [Placer.ai](#) – though this is still only two-thirds of pre-COVID foot traffic levels.

In-person meetings also create memorable experiences, fostering loyalty and a sense of commitment that digital interactions struggle to achieve. Businesses that recognise this have a tangible competitive advantage with clients and partners, who may see them as more relatable and reliable.

And there's a direct link to increased revenue. Research by Accor, one of the world's largest hospitality groups, shows that professionals worldwide overwhelmingly believe that giving priority to in-person meetings is likely to lead to significant revenue gains – estimating an increase of 36% over the following year, on average.<sup>5</sup>

As Sophie Hulgard, Accor's Chief Sales Officer, says: "While technology brings us together from around the world, it doesn't replace the connection, culture and commercial value that comes from in-person interactions. Digital is powerful, but face-to-face is valuable."<sup>6</sup>

### High-profile companies lead a wave of office returns

With this in mind, several major companies have spearheaded the return to office (RTO) movement. Starting January 2025, Amazon has required its roughly 350,000 corporate employees to work in-office five days a week in an effort to strengthen company culture, improve collaboration and enhance innovation. JPMorgan Chase has recently issued a similar mandate to their 316,000+ employees, noting that client interests are best served by in-person availability. Starbucks, Dell, IBM, The Washington Post and many more have also tightened remote work policies to increase office attendance.<sup>7</sup> Placer.ai, a software company specialising in location intelligence and foot traffic data, found that office visits in the United States throughout 2024 were 10% above 2023's figure (though still only two-thirds of pre-COVID levels).<sup>8</sup>

But not everyone's a fan of the shift from WFH to RTO. In several prominent workplaces, employees have mounted significant resistance. In an Amazon poll, for example, 91% of workers expressed dissatisfaction with the newly announced

<sup>5</sup> Accor, "The Value of Face-to-Face meetings: Accor's Research Reveals a Path to Higher Revenues", *Hospitality Net*, November 2024

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sheena Gohil, Bob Shanahan, Dougal Jeppe and Kai Shane, "Return to Office 2025: A Shift in Balance Between Mandates, Flexibility, and Evolving Workplace Needs", *Colliers*, March 2025

<sup>8</sup> Placer.ai, *The Return to Office: Recovery Still Underway*, January 2025

schedule, with 73% saying they'd be looking for another job.<sup>9</sup> Research suggests that certain employee groups – such as women and millennials – particularly value adaptable work environments, and read distrust in rigid in-office requirements; one 2023 study found that high performers were twice as likely as the average employee to consider leaving as a result of new RTO mandates.<sup>10</sup>

## Striking the balance

So, what's the solution? The pushback against RTO suggests that neither fully remote nor fully in-person work policies are ideal for organisations seeking to foster efficient, flexible, collaborative and healthy work environments. Indeed, companies that regularly rank among the best for employee satisfaction – like Google, Salesforce and Microsoft – use hybrid work models that seek to get the best out of employees while allowing a certain amount of personal agency over their schedules.<sup>11</sup>

Salesforce, for example, currently has a threefold hybrid policy: Office-Based (4–5 days in-office), Office-Flex (1–3 days) and Remote. Many departments operate primarily in the Office-Flex model, with increasingly common “anchor days” for team collaboration. This structure preserves personal agency and schedule control for much of the workforce while supporting in-person connection and innovation where it matters most.<sup>12</sup>

Encouraging a culture that values both digital efficiency and human interaction ensures that employees feel supported, no matter where they work. What seems to be key is establishing clear guidelines for when to use each mode. When it comes to communication, digital tools are great for routine updates, quick check-ins and efficient collaboration; in-person meetings are best for complex discussions, brainstorming and relationship building.

It's all about flexibility, says Courtney, who works primarily from our London office at The Conduit. “If I need to be in Singapore for a conference for example, I can still reach out

<sup>9</sup> Kurt Schlosser, “Survey by Blind finds 91% of Amazon employees not happy about return-to-office policy”, *GeekWire*, September 2024

<sup>10</sup> Gartner, *Gartner HR Research Finds High-Performers, Women, Millennials Are Greatest Flight Risks When Strict Return to Office Mandates Are Implemented*, January 2024

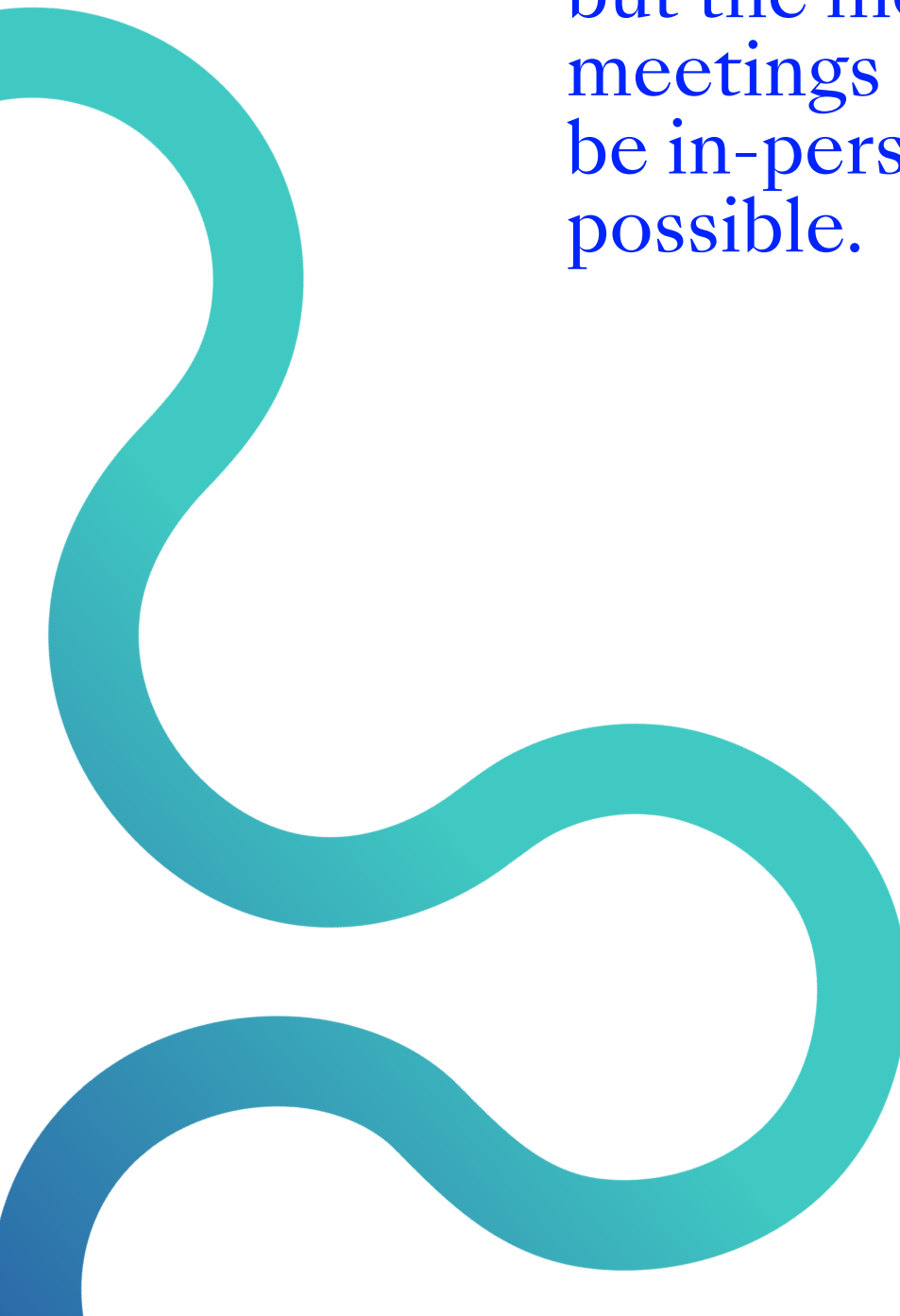
<sup>11</sup> See eg. Jayendra Patil, “Top Companies with the Best Workplace in 2024”, *LinkedIn*, November 2024

<sup>12</sup> Salesforce, *Salesforce's Hybrid Work Guidelines*, July 2024



to everyone, whether in Cape Town or London, and attend my meetings online. Digitalisation has expanded my capacity – but the most important meetings should still be in-person wherever possible.”

Human beings can thrive online – but that’s not where we really live. Increasingly, success lies in finding a way to live and work productively in the spaces in between.

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