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Creative or Coercive?: Cities, Workspaces, and Business Anthropology in the Near Aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Eitan Wilf

Of Two Iterations of Creativity and One Pandemic

Discourses and practices that situate creativity as a recipe for success in different domains and at different levels of social reality have had an increasingly global reach in the last few decades. Creativity has become the focus of managerial theories, self-help books, and experts whose goal is to help individuals, firms, cities, and nation-states all over the world harness creativity as a resource for boosting productivity and for creating value.

Among the recent iterations of creativity, two have become especially visible and consequential. The first iteration is the "creative city," which, broadly speaking, refers to an urban policy of investing resources in creative practices as a way of increasing a city's attractiveness to cultural tourists and especially to knowledge workers who, so it is hoped, would be lured into the city in search for a better quality of life and in turn attract with them lucrative companies from the "creative industries" such as the high-tech and design sectors. This policy has been embraced by cities around the world in different forms following the high traction it gained as a result of its dissemination in a

number of highly visible publications (Landry and Bianchini 1995; Florida 2003; Howkins 2001) and the fact that it has tapped into the anxiety of city bureaucrats in the context of a global "place competition and consumption" (Pratt 2008:107; Chatterton 2000:392; Evans 2009).

The second recent influential iteration of creativity is the "creative workspace." At stake is the idea that companies must become creative and innovative in order to be financially sustainable, let alone successful, and that the way to do so is to foster free and serendipitous information flow across their teams, departments, and divisions by designing new infrastructures of organizational communication that include the workspace (Wilf 2020). Whereas companies have for long attempted to facilitate the productive flow of information between stationary employees by means of communication technologies such as online platforms, the "creative workspace" paradigm focuses on the redesign of companies' physical work environment in ways that can encourage and, indeed, force their employees to constantly flow or move around and thus to increase the chances of serendipitous cross-fertilization of ideas. At stake is the attempt "to encourage creative sociability arising out of and fuelling further unpredictable interactions. From cafes to temporary dens to informal meeting rooms to walkways that force their denizens to interact, the idea is clearly to encourage a 'buzz' of continuous conversation oriented to 'transactional knowledge' and, it is assumed, innovation" (Thrift 2006:293; Lange 2016; Eagle 2004).[1]

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a blow to these two iterations of creativity as sources of value. In the context of the first iteration, cities saw a decline in different kinds of commercial and financial activity as people preferred or were ordered to stay at home, or moved outside of the cities altogether. "Creative" cities, which depend much more than other cities on cultural tourists, seemed to have experienced this decline much more significantly because of the global disruption of travel and tourism. Meanwhile, and relatedly, companies that had only recently invested significant resources in redesigning their office space in line with the "creative workspace" paradigm were forced to instruct their employees to work remotely from home.

Now that the pandemic seems to be easing its grip due to the development of effective vaccines and higher rates of vaccination among the general population, cities hope to see a gradual return to their pre-pandemic state, and company executives are contemplating instructing their employees to return to the office, even if for two or three days a week. However, there are many indications that a significant number of employees resist the idea of returning to the previous status-quo, or even

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[1] The city itself has been similarly conceptualized as a locus of creativity because it facilitates serendipitous interactions between people with different skillsets and backgrounds (see Wilf 2015:684 for a critical discussion of these ideas).

to an attenuated form thereof. The ways in which they articulate their resistance to returning to "creative workspaces" in "creative cities" provide business anthropologists the opportunity to critically re-examine not only the "creative city" and the "creative workspace" paradigms, but also a few taken-for-granted ideas that have provided the basis for some of business anthropologists' own theories and practices in relation to those paradigms.

So, What's New?

The "creative city" and the "creative workspace" paradigms had been the subject of a fair amount of criticism prior to the Covid-19 outbreak. For example, scholars have pointed to a number of problems in key formulations of the "creative city" paradigm, as well as in the ways in which it has been implemented in different locations (Pratt 2008, 2010; Evans 2009; Scott 2014; Vorley et al. 2008; Chatterton 2000). They have argued that the "creative city," as an urban policy, has come to be understood in many different ways by different stakeholders; it has been based on ambiguous and loosely defined terms such as "creativity" and the "creative class"; its self-professed promise to generate value for the cities that would implement it has been based on undefined and unfounded causal mechanisms; it has been developed in the context of mostly North-American cities and is therefore not necessarily applicable elsewhere; it has emphasized cultural consumption rather than production and in so doing has undermined the very creativity it purports to celebrate and sustain; it has become a ritualized mantra, eagerly embraced and imitated by city bureaucrats in the context of a global competition over scarce resources, which it has exacerbated; and its success has partly stemmed from the fetishized nature of creativity in the contemporary moment and from the opportunity it gives city bureaucrats to initiate highly visible projects that might seem to produce value but whose actual productivity is questionable. Perhaps one of the key problems with the "creative city" paradigm is the dangerously simplistic instrumental role it assigns to the cultural industries as attractors of a desired labor pool, a role founded on "traditional behavioural and environmental determinist arguments" (Pratt 2008:108) that tap into the anxieties of "ailing cities" (Chatterton 2000:392) in the context of "place competition and consumption" (Pratt 2008:107; Evans 2009).

The critical analysis of the "creative workspace" paradigm has not been as extensive as that of the "creative city" paradigm, perhaps because the "creative workspace" paradigm is more recent, its implications are not as visible and momentous to so many people as those of the "creative city" paradigm, and it does not depend on the investment of public funds and thus does not generate as much public debate. In my own critical analysis of the "creative workspace" paradigm, I have pointed to a

number of problems with it based on fieldwork I conducted with innovation consultants who are responsible for coming up with new workspace designs (Wilf 2019a, 2021), and with "change managers" who are responsible for implementing those designs in companies and for making sure that employees smoothly transition to the newly designed workspaces (Wilf 2020). For example, although the creative workspace does bring employees with different skillsets into each other's physical presence, they do not necessarily communicate with one another. Furthermore, in forcing employees to be constantly on the move, the creative workspace jeopardizes the crucial everyday work that must be performed in stable teams, as well as managers' ability to train and mentor junior colleagues. Lastly, the need to constantly move exhausts employees both physically and mentally.

Employees who resist the idea of returning to the office in the near aftermath of the pandemic articulate their resistance in ways that resonate with some of the points made by the existing criticisms of the two paradigms. However, they also target a key taken-for-granted assumption that the two iterations of creativity share and that those existing criticisms have mainly neglected. This assumption views creativity and physical presence as inherently interrelated and as each other's cause and effect. Thus the "creative city" paradigm is predicated on the assumption that urban forms of "creativity" will inevitably attract knowledge workers and result in their physical presence in those cities. Meanwhile, the "creative workspace" paradigm is predicated on the assumption that the physical co-presence of knowledge workers with different skillsets will inevitably result in new manifestations of creativity and innovation.

In what follows, I first analyze some of the arguments raised by employees who question the notion that creativity and physical co-presence are inherently interrelated and co-constitutive, especially in the context of the "creative workspace" paradigm. I then discuss the challenges that such arguments pose to a number of fundamental assumptions that have structured the work of practicing anthropologists who do for-corporations research. Lastly, I make a few suggestions for how those challenges can be met in view of the likelihood that remote work will become the future norm.

"Frankly, They Don't Know What They Are Missing," (or Don't They?)

My empirical example is based on the comments made by readers to a recent *New York Times* article published in July, 2021, titled: "Return to Office Hits a Snag: Young Resisters" (Schwartz and Marcos 2021). This article generated 1864 comments—an extremely high number compared to most articles published in the *New York Times*. This number points to the intense interest generated by the topic of returning to the office in the

near aftermath of the pandemic. It also provides an opportunity to make some observations whose value is more than anecdotal.[2]

The *New York Times* article opens with the following ethnographic vignette:

> David Gross, an executive at a New-York-based advertising agency, convened the troops over Zoom this month to deliver a message he and his fellow partners were eager to share: It was time to think about coming back to the office. Mr. Gross, 40, wasn't sure how employees, many in their 20s and early 30s, would take it. The initial response—dead silence—wasn't encouraging. Then one man signaled he had a question. "Is the policy mandatory?" he wanted to know. Yes, it is mandatory, for three days a week, he was told. Thus began a tricky conversation at Anchor Worldwide, Mr. Gross's firm, that is being replicated this summer at businesses big and small across the country. While workers of all ages have become accustomed to dialing in and skipping the wearying commute, younger ones have grown especially attached to the new way of doing business. And in many cases, the decision to return pits older managers who view working in the office as the natural order of things against younger employees who've come to see operating remotely as completely normal in the 16 months since the pandemic hit. … "Frankly, they don't know what they're missing, because we have a strong culture," Mr. Gross said. "Creative development and production requires face-to-face collaboration. It's hard to have a brainstorm on a Zoom call."

The article continues to discuss the issue in terms of a generational difference between older managers and younger employees. It presents a recent survey that shows that "55 percent of millennials, defined as people born between 1981 and 1996, questioned the wisdom of returning to the office. Among members of Generation x, born between 1956 and 1980, 45 percent had doubt about going back, while only 36 percent of baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, felt that way." The article then presents some of the reasons employees would like to continue to work remotely, and managers would like their employees to return to the office. Employees emphasize the flexibility that working from home gives them, as well as its contribution to their mental and physical well-being. Working remotely allows them to spend more time with their family, exercise, cook healthy food, rest, avoid an exhausting commute, while remaining productive in an environment that is free from office distractions. Meanwhile, managers, in addition to arguing that physical co-presence is important for innovation, emphasize that by

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[2] This article is not unique. The *New York Times* has published a number of news stories about employees' reluctance to return to the office as opposed to their employers' insistence that they do return to the office. See, for example, Gelles (2021) and Nguyen (2021).

working remotely "younger employees lose chances to network, develop mentors and gain valuable experience by watching colleagues close-up," and that "it's really hard to get cohesion and collegiality without being together on a regular basis." The article ends with one manager who "hopes peer pressure and the fear of missing out on a promotion for lack of face-to-face interactions entices people back," and with another manager who "tries to persuade his staff members … to come back by focusing on the benefits of face-to-face collaborations" while acknowledging that "you can't force anyone to do anything these days. You can only urge."

Before turning to the comments readers made on the article, note that the "creative city" and the "creative workspace" paradigms haunt the opening vignette and the article as a whole. First, the vignette focuses not only on a company that is located in a quintessentially "creative city," i.e. New York City, and on the border of a quintessentially "creative" neighborhood in that city, i.e. the West Village, but also on an advertising company, i.e. a company that is categorized as part of the creative industry and whose employees are the quintessential knowledge workers that "creative cities" hope to attract.[3] Second, Mr. Gross's reason for asking his employees to return to the office is taken straight from the playbook of the "creative workspace" paradigm, which emphasizes employees' physical co-presence as a condition of possibility for creativity and innovation. In itself, then, the article's description of employees' resistance to returning to the office already casts a shadow on these two paradigms, in that it suggests that knowledge workers are far from being blindly drawn into the "creative city" whose many attractions pale in comparison with the inconvenience of commuting into it and with the myriad benefits of staying at home in the suburbs, and that they are equally not impressed by the benefits of physical co-presence to increasing productivity and innovation.

However, the comments made by readers provide a much more detailed picture of this resistance, especially with respect to the "creative workspace" paradigm. Readers suggest that not only is this paradigm counter-productive, it also rests on false assumptions that have become taken-for-granted and institutionalized for power-related reasons. Among the themes that recur in their comments, consider the following three:

1. The idea that employees' physical co-presence is a prerequisite for collaboration, "serendipitous creativity," and mentoring is unsound and even counter-productive

The following comment expresses in a condensed form a number of arguments that recur in many other comments:

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[3] Anchor Worldwide, Mr. Gross's firm, is located on Hudson Street in Manhattan.

I don't need company culture, camaraderie, or happy-accident creativity to do my job. I don't want to live in the office 9 or 10 hours a day, then spend another 4 getting there and back home to do it all over again. I think that people have figured out that "culture" isn't as relevant as it was when you worked for the same place your whole life and your life revolved around goings-on at the office. Some people thrive on that and that's OK, let them back-slap around the water cooler all they want. Others work much better when given a set of tasks and a way to communicate with our colleagues if we have questions.

The reader critically references the "creative workspace" paradigm first and foremost by means of the phrase "happy-accident creativity," which this paradigm is supposed to facilitate. He further does so by means of the image of employees who "back-slap around the water cooler," which references the idea that serendipitous creativity takes place between physically co-present employees in informal ways and sites in the office. The reader argues that this paradigm has nothing to do with his—and, he seems to suggest, with many workers'—ability to get their job done. Another reader similarly writes: "I've yet to hear of one person coming up with an 'inspired idea' while pouring themselves burnt coffee and being asked if they watched the game last night." The image of employees casually talking around the coffee machine is essentially similar to the image of employees "back-slapping" around the water cooler. Both images connote the kind of chance encounters in informal sites between employees, which are supposed to result in innovation, and which "creative workspaces" are supposed to be good at orchestrating.

Some of the readers claim more explicitly that the emphasis on physical co-presence as a condition of possibility for organizational creativity is empirically unsound:

Note the disparity in the arguments being presented here between those that insist on coming back to the office and those that prefer remote work. Remote work is argued with concrete and measurable advantages. Higher productivity, less distraction, time management, more time for mental and physical health in lieu of a commute. All the old guard can summon is vague generalities. It's harder to collaborate or mentor. How so exactly? Do you have to be able to smell people and breathe their air in order to get a project done? If you're going to construct flimsy arguments to disguise your need for control, at least put some effort into it.

Indeed, not only do readers question the purported benefits of employees' physical co-presence, they also argue that employees' physical co-presence, especially in the kind of "creative" workspaces that are supposed to encourage creativity and cross-fertilization such as open plan

offices, actually jeopardizes employees' productivity and their ability to become creative:

> All of these managers work behind closed doors. The rest of us grunts in the open office plan wore headphones all day to tune out the talkative gossips and loud eaters to get work done. We watched colleagues and mentors close-up as they belittle their underlings, and talk about the company as family right before they sign the pink slip. I get more work done in 2 hours than I ever did in an 8 hour day at the office.

One reader even makes the ironic observation that the only "creative" idea that was generated by the people who work in his company's "creative" workspace was the result of an effort to mitigate the problems generated by this kind of workspace: "I work in open offices and the only brainstorming that happened was to give everyone noise cancelling headphones."

2. The notion of a company's "culture" that generates unity, camaraderie, and commitment to creative collaboration among physically co-present employees is unsound and masks an everyday reality of cutthroat competition

On the one hand, proponents of the "creative workspace" argue that it encourages employees to collaborate and cross-fertilize merely by virtue of how it "channels" employees in space, i.e. by making them physically co-present in unexpected ways. Employees' physical co-presence is thus supposed to naturally and inevitably lead to productive communication. On the other hand, companies have had to make sure that employees understand how to properly inhabit the "creative workspace" and that they need to collaborate and cross-fertilize. In itself, this inconsistency points to the dubious value of the "creative workspace" as an infrastructure of serendipitous communication. More important for my discussion, however, is the fact that although some companies have "guided" their employees by means of explicit rules (see, for example, Lego's "rules of engagement" that instruct its employees how to use the company's newly designed London "creative workspace" [Wilf 2020:901-902]), a more widespread and presumably effective way has been to foster an organizational "culture" of creativity as and by collaboration (Kunda 2006).

Many readers argue that the notion of an "organizational culture" as both a tool to foster, and as an expression of, employees' commitment to the organization's goals and to each other is, like the idea of the importance of employees' physical co-presence, unsound and unexamined. Thus one reader comments: "I am tired of hearing 'culture' as a reason to be back in the office. What does that even mean? That people at the company are nice and collaborate with one another? What

'culture' means, to me, is a flimsy excuse to turn back the clock without any specifics." Other readers argue that the notion of an "organizational culture" of collaboration in fact masks an exploitative and cutthroat reality:

> Most office "culture" is outright toxic. The companies that crow on about it are doing so for a reason, and it's not because they are making extra $$ from having a "super fun" office. No, it's because they are using that culture to drive their employees harder/faster/longer/etc. And the gossip, the politics, the backstabbing, the faked smiles. "They don't know what they're missing." You're kidding right? I spent years in an office and now over a decade remote. I know what I'm "missing." And I'm missing it about as much as I miss that cavity the dentist drilled out last month.

This comment suggests that the rosy notion of a great "office culture" hides a basic conflictual reality that pits employer against employees, and employees against each other. Many comments target one or the other of the two kinds of conflict. One reader writes: "Save me the comments about building fraternity and community and a sense of belonging to the culture of a company. All capitalist entities at their core are exploitive. Let's not forget that. And [they're] exploitive from both sides. Worker vs. ownership relationships are founded on this conflict. Both trying to get the most for the least."

3. Managers continue to insist that employees be physically present in the office for performative and surveillance reasons

Many readers hypothesize about why managers insist that employees return to the office despite all the evidence that shows that employees' physical presence in the office is not a prerequisite for productivity and that it is possible to work more productively remotely from home. One hypothesis is that managers do so for performative reasons, i.e., because the "creative workspace" paradigm creates the perception that a company that adopts it is innovative (cf. Wilf 2019a:124-146, 179-183; Wilf 2021). Consider the following comment: "Requiring the entire company to come sit at their desks for 8 hours because a few people might have a brainstorm, probably has more to do with indulging management's perception of itself as a creative collaborative company, than with how creative people actually collaborate." One reader draws from a phenomenon that has been the object of anthropological study to argue that at stake is a kind of ritual in the context of which companies imitate the outer forms of innovation (such as the "creative workspace") in the hope that this imitation will bring actual innovation: "Requiring people to sit in a sea of beige because a VP who emails Dilbert cartoons thinks that's the way it should be is cargo culting, and should be punished by the

marketplace by having the best talent go to non-dinosaur employers."

However, by far the most common explanation that readers give for managers' insistence that employees return to the office is that managers feel the need to control employees and to assert their power over them. Such comments include: "Maybe what some of these older workers in middle/upper management miss is surveillance culture"; "The managers, directors, chiefs—they want their underlings back so they can feel important (again?). After all, what's your purpose if you are a manager but everyone is managing just fine on their own? As usual, it's all about POWER"; "Employees working from home are much harder to bully, and firms know this. Thus, all the talk about collegiality, culture, mentoring, etc."; "It's funny that all these managers/owners stress the importance of 'collaboration.' In my experience with numerous employers, what the bosses call 'collaboration' is usually just another opportunity for them to satisfy their emotional needs—by showing they're the boss."

The Theoretically Over-Determined Importance of Physical Co-Presence, the Informal, and the In-Between

The different points made by the article's readers pose a number of challenges to business anthropologists who conduct for-corporations research. From the outset of the institutionalization of for-corporation research conducted by practicing anthropologists, the value of such a research for corporations (and for the anthropologists who claimed to be able to conduct it) was based on the idea that the production of knowledge and goods in corporations (and elsewhere) depends on resources that always remain unaccounted for by the corporation's attempts to formally plan and codify such a production. More specifically, it rested on the argument that the production of knowledge and goods depends on the real-time and emergent situated action of, and interaction between, physically co-present embodied individuals whose cognition is distributed across the physical environment, material artifacts, and each other's ongoing representational and embodied contributions, and who rely on informal communication channels to communicate with one another and to perform their work. In formulating these ideas, practicing anthropologists drew inspiration from theories such as ethnomethodology (and the field of conversation analysis that emerged from it) and activity theory (Wasson 2000:381).

Lucy Suchman has succinctly and effectively conveyed the essence of these ideas and arguments by means of the opposition between "plans and situated action" in her ground-breaking book that was based on her experience of working at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (Suchman 2007). This opposition explains why business executives have been willing to hire anthropologists in an attempt "to solve workplace

problems (for example, to improve productivity or to ascertain consumer needs and wants)" (Urban and Koh 2013:147): if there is always a discrepancy between executives' image of how the production of knowledge and goods takes place in their companies, and how such a production takes place in practice, then executives urgently need to find ways to unearth this discrepancy and to capitalize on the informal resources that employees rely on to get their jobs done.[4] Consider the following typical formulation of these ideas made by a practicing anthropologist:

> I drew [executives'] attention to the unappreciated, largely invisible ways in which employees were relying on face-to-face communication, personal networks, and "the favor economy" to get things done, explaining that interpersonal relationships are of paramount importance for managing operational problems. For example, for the sense-making that has to go on twice a day at shift changes, reconciling discrepancies between machine data and on-the-ground data often had to be accomplished by informal communication. [Jordan 2010:105]

Of course, it did not hurt anthropologists' own value that in tandem with making their observations, they argued that such informal resources could never be successfully formalized and codified:

> By investigating [a specific operational aspect of production] we were able to identify in detail the many instances where documentation simply glosses over important processes, relying for its efficacy on operators' embodied, tacit, localized knowledge. Automating such tacit knowledge and expertise would be highly problematic ... That documentation leaves things out is, of course, one of those things that "everybody knows." What our study demonstrated to our funders, however, was the massive prevalence of this phenomenon in every nook and cranny of the operation. [Jordan 2010:118]

Employees' refusal to return to the office and the reasons they provide for their refusal present a number of problems for practicing anthropologists who conduct for-corporations research. On the most obvious level, the notion of an insurmountable discrepancy or misalignment between "plans and situated action" created the need for executives to have a set of anthropological eyes on the ground, i.e. on the factory floor or the office, by means of which this discrepancy could be unearthed, mitigated, or mobilized to improve productivity. If physical workspaces become obsolete to some degree, practicing anthropologists

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[4] Suchman's analysis of human-machine work-related configurations was heavily indebted to ethnomethodology (see Wilf 2019b for a discussion). See also Suchman (2000) for an analysis of design practices, which draws on both activity theory and ethnomethodology.

who conduct for-corporations research will need to reinvent their practices and reframe their own value.

Another problem is more serious, as it concerns some of the aforementioned theoretical assumptions and emphases of anthropologists' for-corporation research. The first assumption is that embodied knowledge, as well as communication between employees who are physically co-present and who can draw on each other's embodied contributions in real-time, are crucial and irreplaceable resources for knowledge transfer, productivity, and innovation. Consider the following early formulation of this idea, made in the context of a work-related study:

> As with utterances and talk, human movement performs social action and activity. A movement, whether a gesture or postural shift, a nod, or a look, may be used to accomplish particular tasks in face-to-face interaction. Movement performs "locally" and gains its significance through its coordination within the moment-by-moment progression of action or activity, be it vocal, visual, or a combination of both. Moreover there is no reason a priori to assume that doing things visually rather than through speech will be limited to particular types of action or activity, or certain forms of non-vocal behaviour. Rather, as with utterances and talk, it may be fruitful, at least in principle, to consider how the immense variety of movement found in face-to-face interaction may perform social actions and activities. [Heath 1986:10]

Anyone who is familiar with the immense conversational analytic literature that emerged in tandem with and following the articulation of this formulation knows that its proponents have tended to ignore the caveat found in the last sentence of this formulation, i.e. "at least in principle," and focused on showing in practice the interactional relevance of every aspect and dimension—however minute—of "the immense variety of movement found in face-to-face interaction."[5] To the reader who I quoted above asking with exasperation—"All the old guard can summon is vague generalities. It's harder to collaborate or mentor. How so exactly? Do you have to be able to smell people and breathe their air in order to get a project done?"—proponents of this strand of research have, in the form of their research, responded with a resolute and resounding "yes!"

We can react in a number of ways to the discrepancy between employees' intuition that physical co-presence is not essential for productive collaboration, and anthropologists' insistence that it is. We can argue that employees are unaware of the conditions of possibility for

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[5] Indeed, Heath exemplifies this tendency in an analysis of the use of gaze and head and facial movements in a specific interaction immediately after he makes this formulation (Heath 1986:11-13).

their work, which include physical co-presence. We can also argue that anthropologists have over-emphasized the interactional importance of the most negligible of embodied behavior. I suggest the truth lies somewhere in between: although employees are unaware of many of the embodied foundations of their interactions, those foundations are not as extensive and as irreplaceable as they appear to be in the aforementioned research, and they can perform their interactional "magic" in online communication, too, depending on its goals.

Employees' refusal to return to the office and the reasons they provide for their refusal problematize a second assumption that is foundational for for-corporation research and that is intimately related to the first one. This second assumption is that successful knowledge production and transfer, let alone innovation, take place by means of serendipitous communication between employees by means of informal and inchoate channels and in between employees' sanctioned positions in the organization's physical space and formal decision-making structure.

Examples for the explicit and implicit celebration of such informal channels and serendipitous communication abound in this literature. Thus when describing a research she did for an office furniture manufacturing company, Wasson writes that whereas the company had a binary notion of office settings that include either individual workspaces meant for solitary work, or meeting rooms used for multi-party meetings,

> E-Lab's ethnographic studies of office environments revealed a much more complex picture. Workers used spaces in many ways designers had never intended and for multiple purposes. To give just one example, hallways and other "in between" spaces turned out to be highly significant sites of work interactions. This finding had far-reaching design implications for Steelcase. It led the company to focus more on products that could be placed in such "in between" spaces to facilitate employees' interactions. Such products ranged from chairs to whiteboards. This finding has become institutionalized at Steelcase and is almost taken for granted today. [Wasson 2000:384]

In this literature, "highly significant sites of work interactions" that include informal channels and inchoate spaces "in between" employees' sanctioned or formal positions in the organization's physical space or decision-making structure almost always mean site of innovative knowledge production and transfer.

Similarly, in their highly cited article on the use of conversation analysis in for-corporation research, which they wrote while working at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center, Jordan and Henderson argue that "physical arrangements, the spatial layout of a setting, the arrangement of furniture, the open spaces, walkways, coffee niches, doors to the outside, and so on, have an important influence on structuring interaction"

(1995:74-75). This articulation emphasizes the importance of informal channels or spaces of serendipitous communication—"open spaces, walkways, coffee niches"—for what is assumed to be, ipso facto, innovative knowledge production and transfer.

The following example of the taken-for-granted status of this idea in this literature focuses on a specific modality of informal and serendipitous exchange of information, namely sound. Jordan describes her ethnographic work for a specific company:

> On the upstairs engineering/administrative floor, much of the daily activities could be sampled through the acoustic overflow from behind the low partitions. I made it a habit of dropping in on discussion in and around the ubiquitous cubicles. Sometimes joining the conversation when two or three engineers were standing in the hallway, and sometimes just listening to what kinds of issues they discussed (yes, I suppose one could call that "eavesdropping," but in cubicle land everybody knows that conversations are overhearable). [Jordan 2010:111][6]

This description is followed by two pictures (Jordan 2010:112). The first picture depicts a group of people having a conversation in a cubicle. Its caption is "engineers trouble shooting in their cubicles." The second picture depicts two people (who are presumably engineers, too) who are smiling at the photographer who is taking their picture from behind their cubicle's low partition. One of the people makes a V hand gesture while smiling. The picture's caption is "Overhearing is easy and commonplace." The idea of serendipitous knowledge exchange in "informal" channels and in "in-between" sites finds expression in these verbal and visual representations in the form of their celebration of the "acoustic overflow from behind [cubicles'] low partitions" and of the conversations engineers are having "in the hallway" and "around the ubiquitous cubicles."[7]

The fact that many of the readers who commented on the *New York Times* article signal precisely these different "informal" channels and sites of "accidental" communication—especially in the modality of sound—as a hindrance to, rather than as a resource for, productive work

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[6] To reiterate, such statements justify the anthropologist's presence in the office or on the factory floor, for it is by means of the anthropologist's presence that communication between employees, which takes place in informal channels that executives are unaware of and to which they have no access, can be accounted for. Similarly, in explaining what participant observation might look like in the office environment, Wasson writes that researchers "might sit in the employee cafeteria to observe impromptu meeting patterns" (2000:382).

[7] Two other pictures depict and evaluate employees' interactions in a similar way. The caption of the first picture is "face-to-face information exchange is vital on the floor"; the caption of the second picture is "… and around the engineers' cubicles" (Jordan 2010:105).

should give us pause. Against the backdrop of practicing anthropologists' celebration of accidental "eavesdropping" and "overhearing" and of "acoustic overflow," it might be useful to quote again some of the complaints made by the *New York Times* article's readers: "All of these managers work behind closed doors. The rest of us grunts in the open office plan wore headphones all day to tune out the talkative gossips and loud eaters to get work done"; "I work in open offices and the only brainstorming that happened was to give everyone noise cancelling headphones"; "I've yet to hear of one person coming up with an 'inspired idea' while pouring themselves burnt coffee and being asked if they watched the game last night"; "I don't need company culture, camaraderie, or happy-accident creativity to do my job. … Some people thrive on that and that's OK, let them back-slap around the water cooler all they want." Could it be the case that because anthropologists' raison d'être is their capacity to unearth the value of informal and therefore as-of-yet unaccounted for channels, they have tended to celebrate this rather rare value while ignoring the much more prevalent and banal reality in the context of which the same informal channels function first and foremost as a source of informational noise that is not only irrelevant to employees' work but also detrimental to it?[8]

A Point of No Return?

Anthropologists focusing on the self-reflexive engineering of corporate culture (including the engineering of cultures of innovation), whether as practicing anthropologists who play a direct role in such engineering or as ethnographers who study it as a cultural phenomenon, have given some thought to its potentially problematic implications. However, they have tended to frame this issue as an academic debate, i.e., from the point of view of the anthropologist or academic practitioner who either voices her concern about those implications or dismisses them as the "self-flagellation hindsight marked by the mea culpa tone sometimes found in the work of academic scholars" (Cefkin 2010:18; see also Kunda 1995:228; Urban and Koh 2013:152). Employees' views have been mostly left outside of this debate, perhaps because it is easier to dismiss concerns about the ethical implications and practical value of engineering corporate cultures of innovation when they are expressed by anthropologists as an abstract issue rather than by the employees who are directly affected by such an engineering and who have an experiential knowledge of its effects.

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[8] Anthropologists have also been intent on showing the value of different material artifacts such as post-it notes and whiteboards, whose explicit function is to afford and encourage serendipitous cross-fertilization and emergent interaction between physically co-present employees, rather than the ways in which these same artifacts can function as sources of confusion and informational noise for employees (see Wilf 2016 for a critical discussion).

The exclusion of employees' views may blind anthropologists to important information and insights that can be gained from them. For example, many of readers of the *New York Times* article argue that now that employees have tasted what it feels like to work remotely, there is no coming back, especially given the fact that many of them are digital natives for whom using digital technologies to communicate with one another and to perform different tasks is the default mode of operation. As one reader puts it: "Guess what? The tooth paste isn't going back into the tube. 'How Ya Gonna Keep 'em Down on the Farm (After They've Seen Paree?)'." This comment references a World War I song that became popular after the war had ended and that expressed the idea that American soldiers from rural environments might not want to return back to those environments after experiencing firsthand life and culture in different European cities such as Paris during the war. This reference is ironic in the present context, as it concerns a situation in which employees, after experiencing flexible life in the suburbs, might not want to return to their daily commute to "creative" workspaces in "creative" cities such as New York City or San Francisco whose attractiveness has been exaggerated by their proponents.

Employees' perception that remote work during the pandemic represents a point of no return raises the question of whether it also represents a point of no return for practicing anthropologists who work for for-profit corporations and who have celebrated physical co-presence as a condition of possibility for creativity and for innovation. The answer to this question, too, can be found in employees' critical voices. One of the recurring comments that readers of the *New York Times* article make is that it is absolutely not true that "creative development and production requires face-to-face collaboration," or that "It's hard to have a brainstorm on a Zoom call," as Mr. Gross, the manager, argues in the article. One type of comments draws on readers' personal experience of remote work and creative collaboration:

> "Creative development and production requires face-to-face collaboration. It's hard to have a brainstorm on a Zoom call." Mr. Gross's argument is absolutely ridiculous. I work in my employer's Creative Services group, and we have been working remote since last year. My fellow designers and writers collaborate all the time over WebEx and Zoom (even email), and the quality of our work hasn't diminished one iota. As a team, we've never missed a deadline, and the idea that we need "supervision" by being bottled up in an office all day is archaic.

Another type of comments focuses on the online technologies that employees have at their disposal and that afford the same kind of creative collaboration that proponents of the "creative workspace" celebrate:

> Isn't remote work the whole point of all of this technology we've

been developing for decades? Wireless phones meant you no longer needed to be tethered to your house in order to make a phone call. The internet meant distance was no longer a factor when getting information and it also gave people a way to interact and collaborate with others from anywhere at any time. Remote platforms like Zoom or Slack made it possible to have meetings and work on projects from anywhere. All of these things were actually made to encourage creativity (Instagram? Snapchat?). So how can anyone say remote work doesn't work? I say let the naysayers go back to their dry erase boards, sticky notes and pen and paper.

Such descriptions do not necessarily invalidate practicing anthropologists' aforementioned assumptions, as much as they suggest that these assumptions need to be adjusted to the realities of remote work, and that such an adjustment might give those assumptions the kind of nuance that they have badly needed from the very beginning. For example, readers do not necessarily deny the importance of a culture of collaboration and of non-representational embodied knowledge and behavior as much as they argue that they do not depend on physical co-presence and can work their interactional "magic" online, too. Thus, one reader comments: "If you have a culture that easily deteriorates when people are not in each other's faces constantly, then no, you don't have a 'strong culture.' You have a WEAK one." This reader's astute comment points to a glaring contradiction in the views of managers who argue that their companies have strong cultures that employees who want to work remotely might badly miss, but who also argue that once employees are not physically co-present they immediately cease to collaborate. Equally important, however, is the fact that the reader suggests that people can share a strong culture online, too, as anthropologists of online worlds have demonstrated in detail (Boellstorff 2015).

Another reader writes:

Mr[.] Gross: "Creative development and production requires face-to-face collaboration. It's hard to have a brainstorm on a Zoom call." Nope and nope. Zoom IS face-to-face, indeed much closer to each other's faces than would be the case "in person." Second, I've had numerous brainstorms via Slack, Zoom, Figma, take your pick. Some of the members of the product teams I work with have always been remote. And yet, we storm up our brains all the time.

This reader's equally astute comment points to the ways in which online communication might make some embodied dimensions of communication much more salient for participants compared with communication that takes place in the office between physically co-present employees.

These and similar comments suggest a way forward for practicing

anthropologists, namely to take their analytical concepts and see how and to what extent they can be repurposed in order to clarify the nature of remote work. This move will require practicing anthropologists first to demystify the importance of physical co-presence for employees' creativity, and second to demystify the importance of their own physical presence in the office or on the factory floor for executives who would like to understand how employees work and how they can be managed in the most effective and productive way. Such a demystification might also lead practicing anthropologists to decide not to assist in the creation of organizational strategies that are supposed to foster productive collaboration between physically co-present employees, which employees experience as a hindrance to their work and as strategies whose main purpose is to satisfy managers' power-related needs. Although the knowledge thus acquired and the methodology for acquiring it may not be as performatively attractive as employees' "impromptu" conversations around the water cooler "overheard" by the anthropologist, they may lead to a more nuanced, accurate, and ethical understanding of work in general, and contemporary work in particular.

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Eitan Wilf is a cultural and semiotic anthropologist whose research interests focus on the institutional transformations of creative practice in the United States and in Europe. He has conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the institutionalization of jazz music in academic programs, the development of art-producing computerized algorithms and sociable robots, and business innovation consulting services. He is the author of *School for Cool: The Academic Jazz Program and the Paradox of Institutionalized Creativity* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), and *Creativity on Demand: The Dilemmas of Innovation in an Accelerated Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2019). Wilf holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago.