



# The In-Office Advantage - Leading Early Professionals in the Remote Work Era

By Tareq Fattul

Before March 2020, the business world ticked to a familiar beat. Commuting to the office or traveling to the client site was the standard routine. Offices were vibrant and energetic, and meeting rooms were filled with collaborating professionals. In the blink of an eye, COVID-19 shifted the landscape. Remote work transformed from a perk that forward-thinking organizations offered to attract talent to a critical enabler for maintaining business continuity.

**The shift to remote work has made it more difficult for leadership teams to cultivate the skills of their young professionals and build the collaborative, high-performing culture they aim to establish.**

Young professionals who graduated college between 2020 and 2023 entered the workforce at the beginning of the remote work era. For many, long commutes are a thing of the past. Employees no longer have to dress for business and can take meetings from their backyard or the neighborhood coffee shop. Working remotely makes it easier to schedule personal responsibilities like daycare and picking up kids from school. But these and other apparent advantages may be manifestations of a *present bias* - a tendency to prioritize immediate comfort over long-term benefits. In the long-term, early professionals who work remotely will not develop into the senior contributors and leaders every organization needs to thrive. They will suffer from a lack of personal interaction that results in stunted interpersonal skills and limited professional networks. They'll miss opportunities to learn and grow by observing experienced leaders in action, and they'll fail to contribute to and benefit from the collaborative, high-performance culture organizations seek to create.

A key element to unlocking an early professional's potential is helping them learn to navigate human interactions. Research from Harvard University found that 85% of career success comes from having well-developed soft skills and



people skills, while hard skills, including technical skills, only make up 15% of career success [1]. By working with others in a shared location, early professionals develop essential soft skills through direct interactions, and they forge valuable connections that can accelerate their career trajectory. This dual advantage of skill development and networking inherent to the office environment is a powerful catalyst for high performance and career growth.

**Working in the office fast-tracks the development of soft skills; before long, the interpersonal skills of in-office early professionals surpass those of their remote counterparts.**

Working in an office enhances an early professional's ability to "read the room," an aspect of communication that's often overlooked. Non-verbal cues, including body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions, play an important role in understanding the emotional implications of professional interaction. A study conducted by Dr. Albert Mehrabian reveals that 93% of communication effectiveness is determined by non-verbal cues, 55% by body language, 38% by tone of voice, and only 7% by the actual words being said [2]. The digital communication tools that support remote work strip away the nuanced aspects of personal interaction, making it challenging to understand the essence of what the other person intends to communicate.

**Without the clarity of face-to-face interaction, remote workers will find it difficult to navigate conflicts among team members, resulting in loss of productivity and diminished team cohesion.**

Understanding the nuances of non-verbal communication is a critical building block in the development of conflict management skills, especially early in one's career. Video calls offer some visibility into body language and facial expressions, but they cannot replicate the richness of a face-to-face exchange.

The lack of shared physical presence in a communal workspace reduces opportunities for early-career professionals to learn through osmosis; to observe tactics, techniques, and behaviors demonstrated by senior professionals that surround them in an office work environment.

Imagine a senior executive leading a team gearing up for a critical sales pitch to a Fortune 100 company. The office is alive with energy - team members



feverishly edit slide decks and practice their presentations, aiming to execute the pitch flawlessly and with executive presence. Amidst the frenzy, the executive brings order. Her methodical approach to preparation, from structuring ideas to polishing presentation content, becomes a guiding light for less experienced colleagues. Initially overwhelmed by the bustling environment, the young professionals learn by observing her. Observing seasoned colleagues in action is essential for the development of early career professionals, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, and fostering the development of the next generation of leaders. It's also a catalyst for the development of lasting professional relationships.

**Working in the office enables early professionals to develop professional relationships much faster than remote colleagues.**

Human interaction is essential in everything we do, shaping professional lives and employees' career trajectories. Ever come across the saying, *"It's not what you know, but who you know?"* Office work embodies this principle in a way remote work simply cannot. The office workspace, a hub of daily life, is key in forging relationships and memories. It's within the confines of the office where many early professionals find advisors and life-long friends. The spontaneous team dinners, inside jokes, and meaningful conversations are what young professionals experience when working in the office, allowing them to get a head start on relationship development compared to their remote co-workers. The foundational connections that young professionals establish in-office are crucial for business leaders to consider, as they significantly impact employee engagement and retention rates within the organization.

On the other hand, remote work presents challenges in developing professional relationships. The lack of real interaction can lead to feelings of isolation, leading to mistrust and miscommunication among employees. When some team members work remotely, it can be challenging for leaders to keep everyone aligned with the organization's goals. To mitigate this risk, organizational leaders must focus on closing these location-related gaps. Leaders must recognize the unique challenges that come with physical separation and implement targeted strategies to enhance connectivity and engagement. Leaders must proactively increase the frequency and quality of communications, utilize technology for more effective collaboration when in-office isn't possible, and foster a culture of openness and inclusivity.



## What kind of culture do you want to create?

The people who make up an organization are more than accumulations of soft skills and professional networks; together they give rise to corporate culture. Corporate culture will develop whether leaders intentionally manage it or not, and to manage it effectively, they must [understand what it is](#) - the shared expectations, observable behaviors, and core values of a group of people. A strong company culture thrives on the direct and personal connections that develop most effectively when working together in person. The benefits of a healthy corporate culture extend beyond the individual and the teams within an organization. According to a study from Columbia Business School, 92% of the 1,348 North American executives who were polled believe that improving corporate culture increases a firm's value [3].

Some percentage of early career professionals will continue to prefer remote work arrangements. In situations where full-time in-office work isn't feasible, there are strategies to help mitigate the impacts remote work will have on their development and on the contributions they'll be prepared to make to their organizations.

- **Recognize that different personality types thrive in different environments:** Tailoring programs to address personal preferences can bridge the remote/in-office gaps. Implementing targeted initiatives that cater specifically to the needs of remote early career professionals, while also promoting cohesion across the entire team, will support personal growth more equitably and contribute to the health of the organization.
- **Require in-office time:** Early professionals should be required to spend some time in the office, but they shouldn't be there alone. In order to realize the value intended by an in-office policy, VPs, Senior Managers, and other leaders must also be there. This needs to be an all-hands-in effort.
- **Be deliberate about soft skills, hard skills, and cultural development:** Actively involve early professionals in the creation and execution of development programs and require them to take greater ownership and accountability for their growth. This will not only allow for a greater



sense of belonging but also enable a connection between the early career professional and the organization.

- **Monitor and adjust:** Monitor remote worker development program outcomes and ensure they stay aligned with the organization's strategy and objectives. As the organization evolves, so should its development programs. Remote, early-career professionals have different needs than other employees, and their success relies in part on leadership's ability to tailor development efforts to fit their unique needs.

Direct human interaction provides advantages over screen-to-screen time when developing soft skills and supporting a high-performance culture. When full-time in-office work isn't feasible, there are steps executives can take to narrow the gaps and mitigate the risks early professionals and their employers face in a remote work environment. Make it a priority to mentor early professionals in person. One day, they'll be the leaders responsible for developing the next generation.

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### **Sources**

[1] The Soft Skills Disconnect

<https://www.nationalsoftskills.org/the-soft-skills-disconnect/>

[2] Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent Messages*. Wadsworth.

[3] Corporate Culture: Evidence from the Field

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