

Broad Matters Season 8 Episode 3

“Return To The Office” with Frederick Morgeson

Quinetta Roberson: Welcome to Broad Matters.

Ken Szymusiak: A podcast bringing you thought leadership, innovative perspectives and real-world impact from Michigan State University's Eli Broad College of Business. I'm Ken Szymusiak, Managing Director for the Burgess Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

Quinetta Roberson: and I'm Quinetta Robertson, the John A. Hannah Distinguished Professor of Management and Psychology.

Ken Szymusiak: Today, we are speaking with Frederick Morgeson, the Eli Broad Professor of Management, and current and founding editor of the Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior.

Frederick Morgeson: We are at the leading edge of generating new knowledge and expertise in the business world, and it tells you what's true when you do research and follow rigorous practices. It's something that we can bring into our classrooms and into our work with organizations that tell you this is going to work if you do it. And so Broad matters because we're generating the forefront of the next generation of knowledge. It's something every organization should care about.

Ken Szymusiak: Frederick, thanks for being here.

Frederick Morgeson: Thanks for having me.

Quinetta Roberson: Frederick, you've been at Michigan State for 25 years., during which you've conducted award winning research, taught a variety of courses, and consulted on numerous topics in human resource and talent management. Could you share a bit about your background and the focus of your research?

Frederick Morgeson: Sure, Quinetta. It's great to be here, as well. And you know, the thing for me is that I'm fundamentally interested in the idea of leadership and how we lead organizations. How do leaders deploy talent to deal with the problems and the events that are occurring in their organizational environment? My research is focused on topics of leadership and work design and event management, and these sorts of things. And the ultimate goal is, is how do we deploy our people? How do we deploy our expertise in an organization for its effectiveness?

Quinetta Roberson: We've seen a recent shift in organizations like Amazon, Apple, Meta, Zoom, and so many others who are telling their employees that it's time to come back into the office. Given your extensive research and work design, why do you think these companies are pulling people back to the office?

Frederick Morgeson: You know, I've been tracking kind of these issues since the beginning of the pandemic, and I've had a chance to kind of talk with a lot of people in organizations about this. And when you talk to people, they have a variety of sort of explanations about why they're bringing people back. They're worried about productivity, accountability of people working from home.

They're worried about can they build culture in the way that they want to in their organizations? They're worried about collaboration and the ability to collaborate effectively. They're worried about development and especially people early in their career. Can they get those experiences that are really

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needed to develop themselves as professionals? And so, these ideas of we know how to do that best in person. We have the most experience in history with that. There's a lot of logic to that. I think the question is, is how true is all of that? And I think that's the challenge, and that's where the research can give us some insight into., “Is this something that is in fact needed to do those things? And that's the big question.”

Quinetta Roberson: Do you have the big answer?

Frederick Morgeson: The big answer is, it's complicated, which is the most unsatisfying answer of all. But I think the challenges is that, you know, we get very familiar with how we have always done things. There's a desire on the part of a lot of organizations to sort of go back to normal. If we had quizzed everybody in January of 2020 and said, you know, something's going to happen and it's going to basically send everybody home, period around the world, no one would have said, “yeah, I can see that happening.”

And yet it happened a couple of months later. And so we all dealt with this. We all experienced this. And it's a lived experience for all of us, which is very different than kind of reading about it or hearing about it. You experienced it. You were in school and you went home. You were at work and you went home.

Some businesses shut down entirely. Others radically changed their operational process. And it's been the slow process back. And the question is, will it ever be back? And are we, in fact back now? If you look at some of the data on occupancy in office spaces, it's hovering still around 50, 55 percent. That's a far cry from essentially the 100 percent occupancy we had pre-pandemic. And so that's I think, something that we're really going to grapple with is how do we manage our workforce going forward in a way that recognizes this new reality we are in?

Ken Szymusiak: Yeah, I just want to riff on that a little bit and just kind of ask a follow up question. Was 4 or 5 years enough time to change culture in some of these institutions so that it feels normal to maintain this remote work environment, because you still see this, like balance.

Now, some of them are like, yeah, this is working really well. Some are in this camp where it's like, oh man, we gotta go back to the way it was. Companies that are built to be dynamic, I think can handle this really well. But some of these institutions where they have large employee bases, it's hard to keep track of accountability unless, you know, people are checking in, right?

Frederick Morgeson: I think the accountability is one of the big things. So why are they bringing people back? I think there's lots of explanations around culture and collaboration and other things. At the root of it is a worry about accountability. What are you doing when I can't check up on you in like a real way? And so I think people have not helped themselves when they're working from home, and they kind of disappear when you need to pull somebody and you go find them.

I have in my mind that CEOs worry about people doing laundry and walking their dogs during the middle of the day, because in a moment's notice, you can't find them. I think that is driving a lot of the desire to come back. The explanation that's given is different around productivity and culture and collaboration. But I think at its root, a lot of it is about accountability concerns.

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Ken Szymusiak: Do you anticipate any lasting changes in how work is structured or how employees might engage with organizations through this?

Frederick Morgeson: Well, I think one of the big lasting changes is the fact that this is a lived experience by everyone. And so you have done this thing. You went partially remote., if not fully remote, for a couple of years. You did your job just fine. Everybody has that experience or a lot of people have that experience. So now you're being told you got to come back because you can't do your job remotely. Well, that for a lot of people flies in the face of their own lived experience. And so now you're telling me we can't do it, and yet we did do it.

It's not an abstract thought that you can't work from home. I did work from home. You're saying I can't be productive. And yet, if you're a sales person, you have numbers. Maybe your numbers are great when you work from home. Maybe you go into the office and everybody's sitting on zoom calls or teams calls while they're sitting in a physical building.

Well, I could do this at home, right? And so part of it is getting around this idea about how do you explain why it's important to be there. One of the leadership challenges of managing this event and managing the explanation about why we're back and creating a narrative and a story about why we need to come back and what it means for us organizationally, and why that was an experiment in a way.

And and maybe we don't want that experiment anymore. It doesn't mean there's not consequences. If you do make everybody come back. But that's certainly a challenge from a leadership standpoint, articulating the logic in a way that is real to people that have experienced something -

Ken Szymusiak: and what work is, to some extent. Not just the place you earn, it's where you have colleagues. I almost think about. It is like a division of introverts and extroverts almost. You kind of wonder, like, will there be kind of two labor pools where people really opt into this is the lifestyle I want, now, after five years? I'm going to find companies that support that and folks who want to be around people. You know?

Frederick Morgeson: So, you said a bunch of things can that I think are really important for this issue. And one is there's definitely distinctive preferences on the part of a workforce about whether they want to be in full-time or a significant part of time in a hybrid arrangement. And folks who are totally happy staying remote. And that's something that I have personally seen evolve in my students and in working with organizations is early on, there was more of a desire to stay remote, but then people begin to see the downsides of being fully remote.

Organizations are social structures. They don't exist without the people in them, and a big part of what people get out of their work lives is the social piece - the connection to others, the ability to interact and develop friendships. It's a huge driver of retention is the sense that you have a friendship network at work and you're connected to them.

You're achieving something together. In person is the most sort of rich communication medium. Those are all real strong pulls for people. And when I asked my classes, you know, who wants to work

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remotely? It's become a 50/50 thing. Where half of them are kind of like, “maybe not fully remote, but certainly some hybrid flexibility” versus “no, I want to be there.” I want to be underfoot for a lot of the reasons you mentioned.

Quinetta Roberson: I wanted to unpack something you said earlier about there being this lived experience, but then this misalignment in the narrative between the accountability and the culture. Do you have any guidance or thoughts on how leaders let people know about the importance of being in the office at some times versus others? Is there a way to coach leaders on that?

Frederick Morgeson: I think so. One of the is to have a narrative and explanation about why we want people back, but for that explanation to resonate with people. So you can say, well, we need people to come back because they can't be productive at home. While there might be data and the science is very clear, people tend to be more productive working remotely because you're not interrupted as much.

You tend to work more. So that explanation rings hollow for a lot of people, probably because they've had the experience of being perfectly effective. So to have an explanation and narrative that rings true, that is compelling, it doesn't have to be something that everyone agrees with. There's a phrase that I've seen going around is this notion of disagree and commit.

So the idea being that I might disagree with, in this case, coming back to work full time or in a fuller way, but I am going to still commit to doing it. I think the long-term challenge for organizations is, can you get your people to come back and stay back? And that's the twist. And, you know, I think organizations are certainly within their rights to say, “we want you here.”

I think it's more effective when you can have a compelling explanation and argument about why that is, and be open about the fact that not everybody's going to agree. But at the end of the day, leaders are decision makers and organizations, and that's how it's always been, and that's how it will always be. I think maybe not having blanket policies. You'd let people flex that have maybe earned the right to flex because they're super valuable or some other thing that they've earned.

So blanket policies become challenging for really high performing talent. But understanding that but then the question becomes is if not every organization is doing this, now what? Because some part of your workforce is going to want to be remote or want to be hybrid, at least. They're not going to want to live in New York City, where their commute is two hours each way.

They're going to want to work a significant part of time from home. Citigroup made an announcement. They're embracing a long term, more flexible hybrid approach, which stands in contrast to, like JPMorgan and some of the other big financial firms in New York City. Jamie Dimon was quoted. He basically said, “I don't care what you people think”. And it's like, oh, well, you know, a lot of employees don't like hearing that.

Now, that may be true. And I think this is the disagreeing idea. He's not wrong, but people don't want to hear this. And if you're competitive, set is saying, well, we're going to embrace this. You might lose your key people. And I think one of the things that I've learned and what we know in our research, is that talent is what drives your organization's success, period.

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There is nothing else. So whatever you think matters organizationally, know that it ultimately resolves back to what the people are doing in your organization. When you think you're being innovative, it's because the people are coming up with new ideas. If you think you're being adaptive is because the people in your organization are adapting to the changes in the environment.

Talent is king. And so the question becomes is, if the very best talent leaves, where does that leave you? Organizationally, we see all the time these high-profile hires in the AI space, in the tech space where these sort of really successful people are being wooed away from organizations. Now imagine you're sitting in an environment where you're insisting upon people coming back and your main competitor isn't.

Do you think you're going to lose across the board, your people? No, you're going to lose your best people, because your best people always have the most options. They're always the most demanding, but they're always the most valuable and the most important for you organizationally. That's the dilemma leaders have to grapple with and weigh. If you push them away, you might win the battle, right? But you might lose the long term war. That's the thing to weigh. You can make them come back. But we have to think about the implications of making them.

Ken Szymusiak: Frederick, those are great examples. Are there any others that you're working with firsthand in your research that you could kind of comment on in terms of what types of results you're seeing, or some trend lines that might be emerging?

Frederick Morgeson: Absolutely, Ken, and I think this is an example of sort of this virtuous cycle between kind of the research activities that we do at Broad with the practical implications that matter for organizations, for the students that we teach and the people that kind of follow what we do. I had a project studying what I call event leadership. This is this idea that leaders need to respond to and manage the events that are occurring in their environment.

Obviously, the pandemic is a huge event and everything that sort of was wrought by the pandemic. And I was talking with the senior leader at a major organization. I can't say the name, but a major organization. And he was telling me how they've embraced kind of the remote work model. We talked about the implications of that. And, you know, it involves kind of moving their business around the globe and, you know, reapportioning resources.

But one of the points that he made was in recruiting. One of their big competitors in the space has initiated these return to office policies, and that they love the fact that their competitor did this because they've started to systematically hire their senior executives who don't want to come back to the office and honestly don't need to be back in the office in that kind of a role.

And so they see this as sort of a real competitive advantage for them from a talent acquisition standpoint. It was one of the things the Citigroup CEO mentioned as well. We see this as a competitive advantage because it allows us to appeal to top talent that does have a lot of options. Again, your very best talent, they're going to be treated well where they are.

You've got to figure out how do you lure them, how do you recruit them, how do you get them to be interested in you? It's an example to me of how you can envision what the future looks like and take

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advantage of it, today, especially, we have other organizations who are maybe stuck in kind of the old way of working.

When I talk about this to organizations, I say there's no going back. And I think we as human beings, we seek the familiar, right? That's the fundamental psychology of human beings. And we seek to go back to what we've experienced. The new generation of workers may not want it. And in a lot of ways, we're all changed by it.

So there really is no going back. There's a going forward and the question for us is what does that forward look like? And that's why we do research. What does the future of work look like? What is that future of hybrid or remote work look like? It's hard to know, but it probably doesn't look like the past. And I think that's the thing that we have to understand.

And if you think about who makes decisions in organizations, it tends to be people in baby boomer, generation X generations. And yet your workforce is filled with generation Z and millennials. They might not want the same thing, but the decision makers are, you know, “this is how I did it. I spent 20, 30 years working my way, grinding it out, and so should these people.”

And maybe they don't. I mean, there's lots of explanations for why we want to do things. And I think being honest with yourself and clear about why you're doing it, try to share as much as you can, even if it's information that you think people aren't going to like to hear. You not telling them doesn't mean they're not thinking about it, not speculating about it, and not doing all of those things that we know people do in organizations.

So you have to understand that very little private information remains in organizational settings. So you have to control it. You control the narrative. You manage the meaning. “We've announced return to office. Here's why we're doing our return to office. Here's how it benefits us. We know that some of you don't like that. Here's why we need to have that happen.

We know that some of you are going to leave, and we understand that as well.” Organizations have different cultures and have different values. It's a fundamental principle of our field is that people sort themselves in organizations where the values are consistent with their own, and I think this is a dimension upon which people will ultimately sort themselves. In the end, employees see through it either way, and they can vote with their feet by leaving.

And I think that's an okay thing. People have gotten maybe over the last five years in the idea that they have more agency because they don't have to go on a can stay home, but we all have always worked at the pleasure of the leaders in our organization to some extent.

Ken Szymusiak: The flip side is how hard it is for, you know, a team of 12 to 15 people to build rapport and work together on complex problems remotely has become an issue, right? Like when something needs five people in a room and it requires a whiteboarding session, Zoom doesn't have the same dynamic. The outcomes are not what you get when you put yourself together in a room and feed off one another to come up with unique solutions. There's probably no right or wrong at this point, but these are tradeoffs across the board.

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Frederick Morgeson: It's the one domain where the science is pretty clear. It's actually better in person. If you have a job or you have an organization that really relies upon really deep kind of teamwork, collaborative processes, creativity, in person still seems to be the way to go because of all the things you mentioned - the immediacy of it, the ability to bounce ideas off of each other.

Even before the pandemic, there was a research literature on remote, a virtual teams, and the advice that comes out of that research is that when you're launching that team, you're best off to get them together in person. So at least they get to know each other, know what their styles are, and so forth, and then then go away.

And then you bring them back periodically because that in-person interaction is just so important. And so if you're doing kind of complex, collaborative, creative work, yeah, in person is still the way to go. Many of the traditional practices are difficult to do online, and so don't try to do them the same way. And so it's not that it can't be done, it's just that it's done differently.

And I think that's the opportunity for organizations to sort of envision the future. We need to have our teams be cohesive and collaborative. Okay, so let's not try to replicate an in-person setting online. Let's think broadly about how we might actually do that in a different way than we would do it in person.

Quinetta Roberson: How do you address workplace design and return-to-office policies with your MBA students, and what feedback do you receive from them?

Frederick Morgeson: This has become just an enormously kind of hot topic in my Executive MBA. My Full-Time MBA and in my MSMSL classrooms. That last one is 100 percent online. It's something on everybody's mind because it obviously affects them in a pretty major way. And I will say early on, I saw a lot more interest in pure remote. And as the years have gone by, I've seen a movement toward, well, probably still a priority for hybrid, but a certainly a significant non-trivial number of people who say, “no, I want to be back in person for the things that we talked about earlier.”

This idea of I like the social connection, I like to segment. I don't want to have an office in my house because then I can never escape my work. During the pandemic, people got burnt out more and their well-being went down because they could never escape. You can be reached around the clock because there's your office. That's a real challenge.

And so we talk a lot about what does that future look like. And I think organizations should think a lot about the fit question. And that is, you know, some people really want to be in-person, just like some people really want to be creative. Some people really want to deliver high quality customer experience. These are individual characteristics people have.

So maybe organizationally we say, “you know, I want my people there. I'm going to focus in my recruitment selection on people who expressed the desire to work in person.” And then it becomes these different kind of fit elements, right. So if you're willing to offer hybrid, that's a different kind of workforce. You also have to have expectations for them that you communicate.

And I think that's kind of a way in which you can navigate this is by trying to understand what people fit with our organization. I do a lot of work in health care. And so one of the things a lot of health care organizations care about is hiring people with empathy. It's hard to train, so you got to find it.

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So you segment your recruitment and you're hiring on people with high levels of empathy. Couldn't you do that same thing with work from home versus in-person versus hybrid, and have some assessment devoted to that preference and establishing that expectation in the recruitment hiring process.

Ken Szymusiak: Yeah, I really like that idea. Thinking about new tools and ways to kind of measure how someone has that cultural fit upfront based on where you want to take your office five, ten years from now.

Right. That's my segue question here I'd love to build on is based on your research, where do you see the future of work headed in that kind of 5 to 10 year horizon? What are you seeing?

Frederick Morgeson: So I like to make this prediction in my classes that if we came back for the 20 year reunion, what would the world look like?

5 to 10 year windows, maybe more ten years: You know, we're going to look and we're going to say, here's the winners and losers. And I think the winners are going to be the people that figured out how to take advantage of this new reality, not to try to enforce a return to some previous state. Maybe some part of your organization or some organizations.

That is the answer. But I think my advice would be to try to figure out how can we leverage this? How can we take advantage of the fact that people are now more familiar and more comfortable? We've learned a lot about how to do this, maybe not 100% remote, you know, maybe have certain rules around hybrid. Maybe some people have to come in and we pay them more for that.

You know, it's a compensable factor of working in person versus working remotely. So in that long term, the organizations that survive and thrive, I think, are going to be the ones that figure out that your talent has a lot of options. Some of those options are going to be not working 10 percent in person, and we have to adapt and develop systems that enable us to do this effectively.

I would say revisit, re-envision the entirety of how you utilize your talent and why you're doing that. And that kind of goes back to something I said earlier, this idea of having a logic and a justification not just to convince people to do it, but to actually think through why we're doing this and what do we gain by doing it?

What do we lose by doing it right and making that calculation and thinking, you know, maybe we do have kind of a different cohorts in our organizations where this is our positions that can be flex and hybrid, and these are positions that have to be here and here's why. And how are we going to compensate people and how are we going to develop them or reward them in this new, more complex world?

Ken Szymusiak: Thank you so much for joining us today on the podcast, Frederick. If people are interested in keeping up with your work, where can they find you?

Frederick Morgeson: Well, all of my professional stuff is at my website. It's morgeson.com, so M-O-R-G-E-S-O-N-DOT-COM and I'm on LinkedIn and so kind of connect with me and love to hear kind of your experiences with kind of the hybrid return-to-work policies or anything else leadership.

I'm a curious person. That's why I got into research and I would love to hear from you.

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Ken Szymusiak: Want more Broad news and insights? Follow us on LinkedIn, X, Instagram and Facebook at MSUBroadCollege, or visit us on the web at Broad-dot-MSU-dot-edu. forward slash news.

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Quinetta Roberson: That does it for this episode. I'm Quinetta Roberson...

Ken Szymusiak: ...and I'm Ken Szymusiak. Join us next time to hear faculty and staff weighing in on relevant issues and discussing how their work makes an impact, illuminating how and why Broad Matters.