Understanding Resistance to Return-to-Office Initiatives by Investigating the Transition to Remote Work and Its Effects

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

COVID-19's Lasting Effects on Technology Companies

"Though the COVID-19 pandemic threatens most sectors, the general reliance on digital technology and a forced move to more robust and remote IT has enabled the digital world to continue to grow and innovate while supporting knowledge workers across industries and across the world. … It's very likely that the global pandemic will permanently change how people and businesses consume technology and conduct business." (Anikin, 2021, n.p.)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies across industries transitioned from co-located, in-person work to a hybrid or fully remote work model to slow the spread of the virus during its peak. Remote work, also referred to as work-from-home (WFH), in this context refers to employees usually in corporate desk jobs working from a personal offsite location such as a home office rather than a company building. While this transition was necessitated to slow the spread of the virus and faced initial challenges as new routines and norms were established, many employees grew accustomed to a remote-work lifestyle. According to *Forbes Magazine* and discussed in the quote above, the digitization of businesses due to the pandemic revolutionized the way work is done and will likely have lasting effects in that space (Anikin, 2021). Asset managers of J.P. Morgan also reviewed the growth in the technology sector and argue that the pandemic "[accelerated] some longer-term shifts," (Wilson, 2020, n.p.).

However, as the pandemic-related risks of co-located work lessen, some companies are requiring employees to return to the office at a greater capacity in a movement known as return-to-office (RTO), which is being met with discontent in the form of criticism and quitting (Robinson, 2023). Many RTO initiatives are motivated by maximizing productivity and innovation while fostering company culture, but remote workers praise working from home

(WFH) as a flexible and cost-effective option alleviates commutes, dress codes, and compromised work-life balance. As RTO plans face widespread backlash, the impact of the transition to remote work during the pandemic becomes clearer.

Throughout this paper, I highlight the changes made to the way work is done in the technology industry caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, I utilize Geels' multilevel perspective (2011) to investigate how these changes have been integrated into employees' routines and expectations as well as possible reasons for the resistance to return-to-office (RTO). In this paper, I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sudden, drastic, and ultimately welcome change to the way that employees work within the technology industry and that the discontent regarding return-to-office stems from a lasting shift in the preferred work style caused by the pandemic.

Remote Work and Return to Office

Starting in March 2020, millions of corporate office employees transitioned to working remotely with little warning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus is transmitted through airborne particles and droplets that are breathed out by those infected and causes a range of flu-like symptoms that could be fatal, especially for the elderly and immunocompromised (Huang et al., 2020). Thus, slowing the spread involved maintaining a six-foot distance from others and avoiding gathering in large groups (Lu, 2021). This provided challenges for companies within the technology industry with central offices for their employees, causing them to shift their operations to a WFH model.

As the pandemic began, companies that both produce technology as a product or service as well as rely upon it to complete their work quickly adjusted their operations while the need for

their services was highlighted to an extreme. Other industries such as the restaurant industry faced recession-like conditions including decreased profits and layoffs, but the technology industry benefited from the pandemic as productivity, communication, and entertainment technology adoption on the corporate and individual level increased dramatically (LaBerge et al., 2020). Growth in this area was expected as daily-use and productivity technology evolved, but the pandemic created conditions that incentivized the adoption of technology infrastructure, software, and devices. This surge in usage is described by De' et al. (2020, n.p.) as "inevitable" as "people and organizations all over the world have adjusted to new ways of work and life." Chat and video conferencing software such as Microsoft Teams and collaboration software like Jira and Confluence fueled corporate productivity in the absence of in-person discussion (Marek et al., 2021). In addition, individuals also leveraged digital technologies for socializing and entertainment. This surge in individual and corporate use of communication technologies offset many of the negative economic effects of the pandemic within the technology industry, proving both the viability and profitability of remote work.

Many employees also saw a variety of benefits of remote work that positively affected their overall perceived well-being, as seen in the figure below. In addition to decreased commute time and costs, remote employees gained benefits such as increased autonomy, flexibility, and comfort while working that improve work-life balance and flexibility. The specific remote-work environment (dedicated space, minimal distractions and disruptions, etc.) in addition to individual circumstances and preferences (extraversion, for example) indicate how content a particular remote worker may be, playing an important factor in their level of RTO resistance. While employees tend to enjoy working remotely, factors such as stress levels, daily routines, and social contact are most directly related to well-being (Russo et al., 2020). The flexibility

remote work provides also seems to relate to self-reported productivity, as Galanti et al. (2021)

observed a positive relation between individual leadership and autonomy and productivity and

work engagement. With the observed correlation between overall well-being and productivity

and acknowledging that, "on average, software engineers' well-being increased during the

pandemic" (Russo et al., 2020) following a transitional period, remote work could positively

affect technology-industry employees well-being and thus, their performance at work.

	Traditional Return to Office	Full Time Work From Home
Pros	• Team cohesion • Collaboration opportunities • More face-to-face interaction • More utilization of physical space	• Higher levels of productivity • Work/life balance • Unlimited recruiting area should lead to better talent • Likely positive impact on retention • Need for less physical space (cost savings)
Cons	• Reduced work/life flexibility • Commuting time & expense • Limits recruiting pool for open roles • Loss of privacy	• Feelings of isolation • Reduced team cohesion • More difficult to collaborate • More difficult to onboard and assimilate new employees • Lack of visibility may impact career advancement opportunities

Figure 1. Pros & cons of in-office vs. at-home work (Smuda, 2023, n.p.). This figure
identifies many advantages and disadvantages of working at home or at traditional office
for both organizations and employees.

While there can be a variety of benefits to a remote-work setup, remote employees may

also experience negative aspects of working remotely such as decreased social connection and

productivity and increased digital weariness, as well as the factors described in the figure above.

As individuals' work initially switched to working remotely to decrease exposure from close,

prolonged contact with others, this also leads to less social connections with coworkers since

communication is more intentional and less spontaneous due to proximity. While some of this

connection can be recovered via virtual meetings and conversations, many new remote workers

reported a phenomenon called "Zoom Fatigue" (Fosslien and Duffy, 2020). Zoom fatigue is the

reported feeling of mental and/or physical exhaustion after video conferencing due to a lack of visual variety. Additionally, major reasons for productivity losses when employees work from home are associated with poor WFH setups and communication difficulties (Kitagawa et al, 2021), which may have been mitigated as the employee acclimates. While there are some negative aspects to working remotely that may affect an employee's productivity and well-being, remote work is generally favored among technology-industry employees (Russo et al., 2020).

However, as the pandemic-related motivations for remote work are mitigated, employers are considering return-to-office policies fueled by monetary motivations like the utilization of real estate investments and maximization of productivity in addition to social goals like the strengthening of company culture and collaboration (DiDomenico, 2023), in addition to the factors outlined in Figure 1. With most of their employees working remotely during the pandemic, companies were left with empty office buildings that the company still paid for, providing economic motivation to return to leveraging that investment. Additionally, some leadership argue that "remote work doesn't cultivate the interpersonal relationships vital to workplace synergy, collaboration and innovation" (DiDomenico, 2023, n.p.). Working remotely also limits the ability for employees to discuss ideas in a more natural way, forcing communication to be more planned and thus limiting spontaneity and creativity. Having a joint office space also builds work-place culture, which DiDomenico argues is "vital to bottom-line performance." Therefore, companies prioritize both economic and social factors when planning their return-to-office policies.

In consideration of these factors, many companies in 2023 have initiated RTO policies for their employees that have been met with discontent. Employees are resistant to regressing to the working style of the pre-pandemic era, and thus "the return-to-office (RTO) war continues to

rage—employers cracking down with in-office mandates and employees quitting" (Robinson, 2023).

When remote work began in early 2020, many saw the sudden shift in working styles as a temporary necessity, but remote work has since become normalized and widely favored. With this consideration, knowledge in this space can be gained through investigating what insights can be gained by analyzing the transition to working remotely and be applied towards the effort to reverse the transition through RTO policies. By analyzing the transition to working remotely at the onset of the pandemic and the lasting changes caused by the pandemic, insights about the attitudes towards RTO and the path forward can be garnered.

Analyzing the Transition to Remote Work from a Socio-Technical Systems Lens

I leveraged Geel's multi-level perspective (MLP) as described in "The Multi-Level Perspective on Sustainability Transitions: Responses to Seven Criticisms" to analyze the transitions to and from remote work. The MLP framework, an interdisciplinary framework that analyzes transitions by emphasizing the interplay between factors, is well suited to analyze the rise, acceptance, and lasting societal effects of remote work because of the approach's consideration for larger systems and the multidisciplinary factors within them. The shift to working remotely caused by the pandemic has caused significant change to the way work is done within the technology industry and the cascading effects of this change can been seen through an interdisciplinary lens. Ultimately, leveraging the MLP will showcase the significance of analyzing current events as part of a larger socio-technical system and yield insights that can inform those events.

According to Geels (2011), "the MLP views transitions as non-linear processes that results from the interplay of developments at three analytical levels" with the socio-technical regime at the center. The socio-technical regime consists of the established practices and rules of the existing system that "orient and coordinate the activities" of the members of the system. The socio-technical regime is composed of small changes within the socio-cultural, user and market, policy, science, and technological regimes that align, diverge, and realign as the regime evolves. By composing the regime of each of these interdisciplinary dimensions, the MLP creates a detailed picture of how the actors in this system behave and regulate themselves. While the regime is susceptible to other influences, it changes constantly as small decisions, preference changes, and innovations occur in that space that affect its trajectory. The MLP leverages the regime as a central structure for the socio-technical system to better understand how the system organizes and behaves.

Furthermore, the MLP is composed of an upper layer, the socio-technical landscape, and lower level, niches, which develop and impact one another as well as the socio-technical regime (Geels, 2011). Niches are defined as smaller scale or isolated spaces where users have special demands and where innovation is supported, such as startups and think tanks. These spaces provide seeds for systemic change that, when focused, can break into the socio-technical regime during a window of opportunity. Changes in the regime can in turn affect the landscape. The socio-technical landscape refers to the wider context of the system, including societal values, economic patterns, and demographics. This interaction between niches, regimes, and landscapes is also illustrated in Figure 2 below.
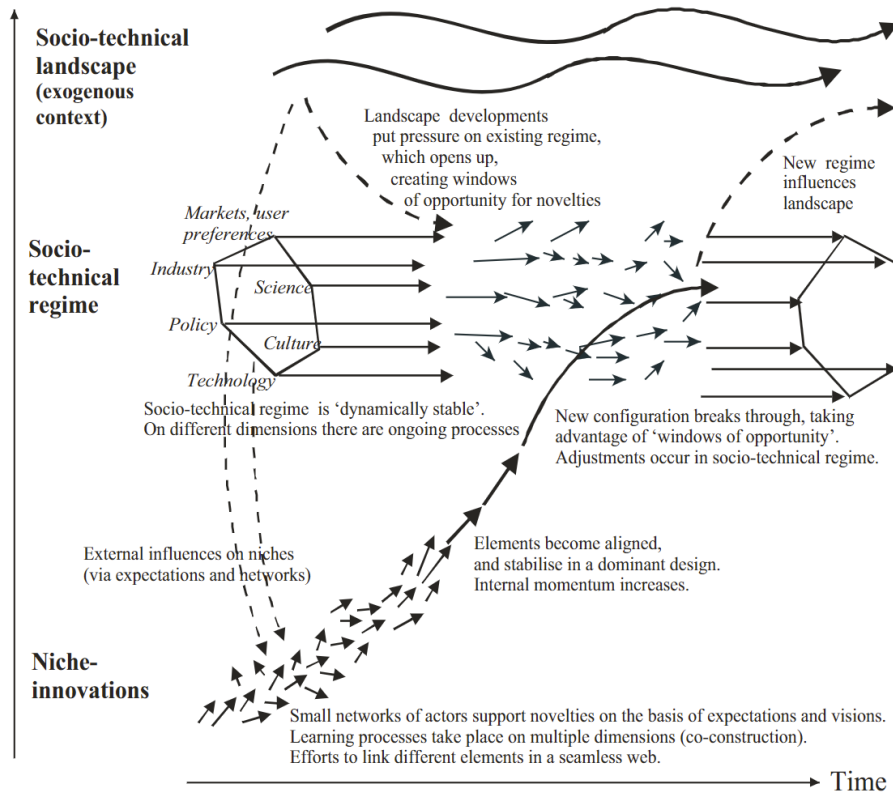
Figure 2. Multi-level perspective on transitions (Geels, 2011, p. 28). This figure identifies key components of the multi-level perspective and demonstrates the effect that levels can have on one another.

Using the MLP, major societal changes or transitions can be analyzed as the result of changes and pressure from in a larger system of factors (Geels, 2011). Transitions in this context constitute a shift in the regime caused by upward pressure applied from niche innovation or downward pressure applied from changes in the landscape. Applying this perspective to transitions emphasizes these causes of transitions as well as the lasting effect changes in one level has on others. Thus, insights about socio-technical transitions like the causes and effects of the introduction or deprecation of technology can be garnered using the MLP.

The MLP emphasizes consideration for the layers of factors and actors involved in major socio-technical transitions, such as the shift to remote work in the technology industry caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to working remotely focuses on a major change in the landscape (the spreading pandemic) using which niche technology (video-conferencing software and remote work practices) could enter the wider socio-technical regime of the public. As the pandemic-related risks of co-located work lessen, this framework also serves as a method for analyzing changes in the landscape and regime for lasting effects as companies consider return-to-office policies. Thus, the MLP is overall well suited to analyzing the transition to remote work and the lasting societal effects.

A limitation of leveraging the MLP as the research approach for this topic is that the framework underplays the role of individual agency and preference that could add additional dimension to my research as it pertains to personal work preferences. This framework generalizes the members of the system and their contribution to the landscape by assuming that the whole system adheres to a singular landscape and that any deviations are niche until they are focused and adopted by the public. Geels argues that the MLP is "shot through with agency, because the trajectories and multi-level alignment are always enacted by social groups" (Geels, 2011) but this again lacks consideration for individuals on a personal level and how their choices impact the system as a whole. While the MLP lacks consideration for individual agency, it is still overall well suited for my research topic because of its diverse consideration of factors as they apply to transitions.

The process I conducted for leveraging the MLP involved outlining the system before and after the pandemic to garner insights from the changes, as seen in the figure below. To begin, I outlined aspects of niches, socio-technical regime, and socio-technical landscape before the

pandemic. Relevant research and testimonies in areas including the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work environments, productivity, corporate strategies, and collaboration informed this exercise. I emphasized researching the impacts of upward and downward pressure applied by different levels to establish the cause of changes and described the effects of this pressure on the system as a whole. I then followed a similar process for looking at the system after the pandemic, outlining the levels as defined within the MLP and highlighting the changes from the pre-pandemic system.
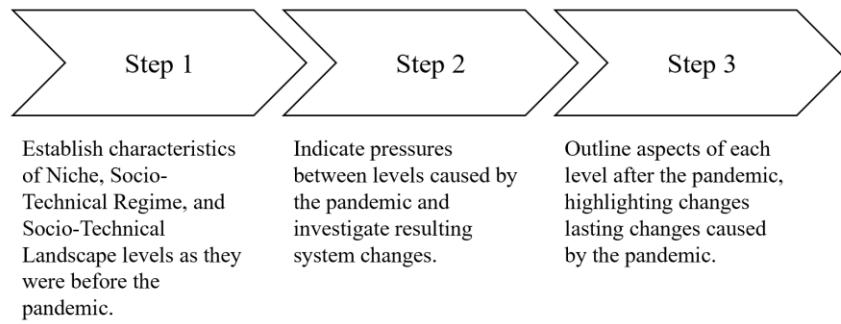

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Establish characteristics of Niche, Socio-Technical Regime, and Socio-Technical Landscape levels as they were before the pandemic.	Indicate pressures between levels caused by the pandemic and investigate resulting system changes.	Outline aspects of each level after the pandemic, highlighting changes lasting changes caused by the pandemic.

Figure 3. MLP analysis steps (Created by Author). This figure showcases the process of analyzing the transition to remote work caused by the pandemic using Geels' MLP (2011).

Overall, the MLP framework is well suited to analyze the rise, acceptance, and lasting societal effects of remote work because of the approach's consideration for larger systems rather than individual technology as well as the multidisciplinary factors within them. This shift of working remotely was caused by an interplay between multiple factors and the system-wide, lasting changes they initiated. Ultimately, leveraging the MLP will showcase the significance of analyzing current events as part of a larger socio-technical system and yield insights that can inform those events. In this context, these insights can inform how organization and employees view their work environments and expectations moving forward.

The Lasting Effects of the Pandemic on Working Preferences

Leveraging the MLP to analyze the system of working within the technology industry, the changes to the way work is done resulting from the pandemic become clearer, as summarized in the figure below. The spreading pandemic forced the entire system to adjust in order to move forward, causing societal changes such as the shift of expectations and routines to account for Covid-safety. As the pandemic conditions improved over a couple of years, many employees became accustomed to WFH and leveraged its benefits. While working remotely started as a necessity to address the spreading pandemic, employees adjusted their lifestyles to this way of working and came to expect it, altering the culture of work within the industry. As some companies initiate return-to-office policies, the system lacks pressure to revert.
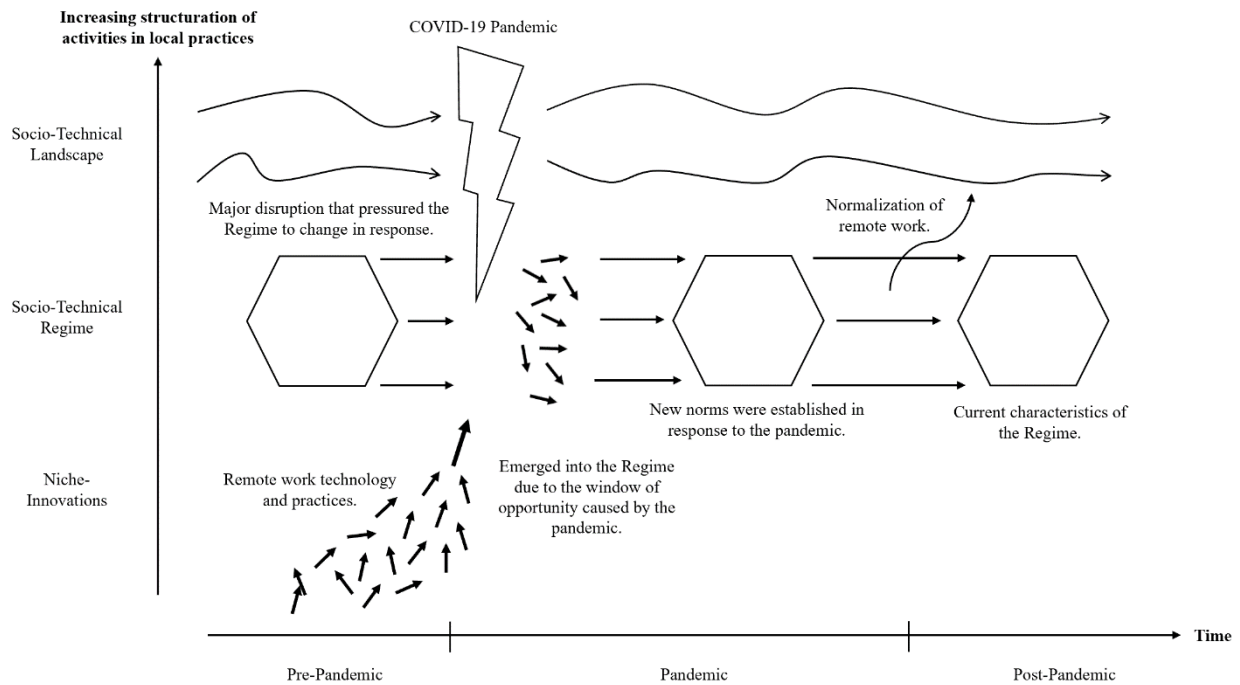

Figure 4. Multi-level perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on work in the technology industry (Created by Author). This figure summarizes the application of the MLP on the socio-technical system of the way work is done before, during, and after the pandemic, showing how the pandemic effected the norms of employees' working environment.

The transition to remote work was necessary due to forces outside the control of any company or individual, but return-to-office initiatives are not motivated by a similar systemic pressure and thus face challenges. Companies may see RTO as a way to resume fulfilling organizational goals such as real estate usage and fostering collaboration, culture, and synergy that might have been lost during the pandemic, but employees focus on the individual benefits of flexibility and autonomy. As seen in the figure above, WFH was necessitated by the major disruption in the landscape that forced the regime to change, but any motivation to revert to in-office work is motivated by priorities within the regime that lack the same public urgency. Without a catalyst to necessitate another shift in working conditions, many employees fully adjusted their lifestyle to accommodate working remotely and resist change. Thus, return-to-office initiatives have faced general backlash as many employees' priorities no longer align with full-time, in-person work. The pandemic required organizations to shift their operations towards working remotely but the reasoning for reversing this transition lacks the same urgency and thus lacks momentum among employees.

Additionally, the backlash that RTO is facing is intensified because the swiftness of the change to remote work affords individuals the ability to directly compare working styles. Technology-industry workers are of the age that most vividly remember both pre- and post-pandemic working environments and can compare and choose the style that better suits them. Most major technology shifts taking place over multiple years or decades, such as the Industrial Revolution, and are slowly but persistently integrated into common practice until old ways are left behind. However, in this case, individuals remember what it was like to work both in-person and remotely and have the ability to choose a company that aligns with their preference. This ability to compare allows individuals to make a more informed decision about accepting or

rejecting the new technology and practices of remote work, and given the backlash to RTO, it seems as though the majority of workers in the technology industry have accepted WFH and integrated it into their lifestyles.

Ultimately, the shift to remote work was necessitated by the pandemic while RTO lacks a similar catalyst, causing resistance and dissatisfaction among workers within the technology industry. Employees have integrated working remotely into their lifestyles and expectations, causing the system to change. Rather than trying to revert the system to its pre-pandemic state, organizations can embrace WFH technology and integrate it in a way that suits both them and their employees. The RTO backlash demonstrates an unwillingness to revert to a system that has evolved beyond that, and recognizing and accounting for that will help both organizations and employees within the technology industry establish the synergy desired to move forward.

How Companies Can Move Forward Following the Shift to Remote Work

Because there is no major force or event triggering the initiatives to RTO, changing the way people live and work for RTO poses challenges for organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a sudden, drastic, and ultimately welcome change to the way that employees work within the technology industry and that the discontent regarding return-to-office stems from a lasting shift in the preferred work style caused by the pandemic.

While this work generalizes employees within the technology industry by making the assumption that most prefer and flourish in remote work, future work could involve further investigation into characteristics of the types of work and individuals that are better suited to remote or in-person work. Further analysis can also be done to discover what kinds of benefits

and accommodations can be augmented to traditional in-person work environments and practices to improve satisfaction with RTO.

The RTO backlash demonstrates an unwillingness to revert to a system that has been left behind by many, and recognizing and accounting for that will help both organizations and employees within the technology industry establish the synergy desired to move forward. As millions of employees in the technology industry face RTO, organizations can utilize this knowledge to inform their RTO initiative. By adopting a wider perspective similar to that fostered by the MLP, organizational leadership can better understand their employees and the cultural changes caused by the pandemic and leverage that information to establish a path forward that aligns the goals of organizations and employees.

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