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The incredible enabling power of an avatar

8 compelling reasons why your hybrid teams need a 'virtual presence' if you want them to stay on-brand, engaged and connected.

Introduction

During the pandemic, remote work became a viable alternative to in-office work – but many employees working from home felt demotivated, depressed and disconnected from their colleagues. Now, as remote and hybrid work emerge as a new option that HR leaders are being compelled to consider, they need ways to iron out the myriad problems that come with working outside of the office.

Our white paper doesn't set out to discuss the pros and cons of remote and hybrid work; our focus is on the ethereal but game-changing concept of 'presence' – that little bit of magic that HR leaders have the power to introduce in order to help remote workers feel engaged, energised, and part of a larger whole.

The rise of the remote worker

No matter which data source you trust, you'll likely agree with the notion that the coronavirus crisis has accelerated the path for millions of people around the world to be able to work from home.

A virtual workplace

Not as a freelancer or contractor, but as a bona fide employee with rights, obligations and expectations.

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From now on, the home office is *the* office for countless workers, if not 100% of the time then at least part of the time.

The world has changed.

For HR leaders and those involved in the wellbeing, engagement and development of a workforce, this poses a staggering array of problems.

By no means an exhaustive list, HR now has to contemplate:

* How to keep remote-working staff engaged.
* How to keep them motivated.
* How to keep them connected, in order to facilitate collaboration.
* How to keep staff 'on brand' when they are physically distant from the office.
* How to keep staff safe and emotionally stable in their remote working environment.
* How to conduct appraisals and training when employees are not in the office.
* How to onboard staff remotely.
* How to ensure that remote workers don't have an inferior working experience compared to their in-office colleagues.

The list goes on; it's little surprise that in a recent report by Sage, three things highlighted as demanding ever more of HR's time are developing company culture, driving the People strategy and working on flexible working policies.

When staff physically can't be in the office, the traditional employer/employee transaction (cont'd)

REASON #1
THE WORLD OF WORK IS CHANGING

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takes a journey into uncharted waters. Shrugging and hoping the problem will go away is not an option.

The line has been drawn in the sand: people are demanding to work from home, and newly-flexible businesses and the HR teams that work with them are lining up to try and accommodate them.

Google. Twitter. Salesforce. PwC. Large organisations everywhere have publicly stated that they will cater to the work-from-home demands of their employees as best they can. Our own research, alongside insight from countless other polls, shows that the majority of businesses have either changed to reflect this already or are in the throes of doing so.
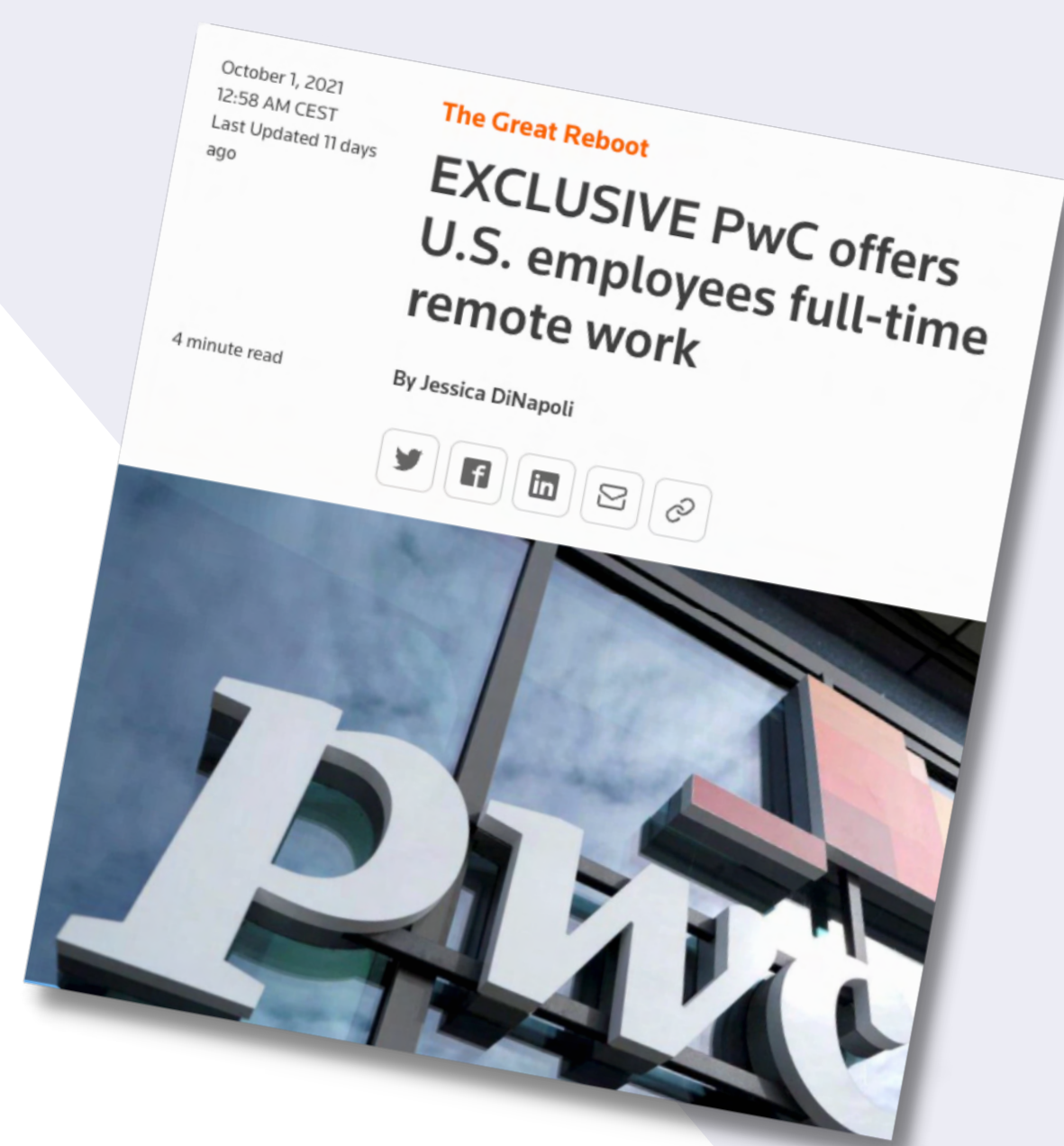
Unfortunately, this seismic shift also brings with it the possibility of disengagement, isolation, mental health issues and other concerns for those employees who will work from home some or all of the time. The traditional employee experience is in a state of flux.

A recent report by the Royal Society for Public Health actually quantified the effects of loneliness on people who switched to working from home as a result of Covid-19. The RSPH found that many people who worked from home because of the pandemic had "experienced health and wellbeing impacts, with the most common being feeling less connected to colleagues (67%)."

We are about to enter a new world of working where a significant portion of our workforce will operate in a way that has proven to be detrimental to their health. While we cannot stop the juggernaut, we must mitigate its effects.

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Are Zoom and Slack the answer to feelings of isolation and disengagement?

We already know that employees don't have to become 'invisible' when they work from home. Work-related Zoom calls rose by untold multiples during the pandemic, and comms tools like Slack gave dispersed employees a way to collaborate, too.

63%
of HR professionals say that flexible working has become more of a priority
(Source: Sage)

What some people feel that these tech tools lack, however, is a sense of presence. And because of this, they may not be the perfect solution for any HR leader who thinks that problems related to switching to a remote/flexible model can be solved using the 'default' methods (Slack, Zoom, Teams etc).

REASON #2 DEFAULT OPTIONS MAY NOT SOLVE THE ISSUE

According to the International Society for Presence Research, "Presence (a shortened version of the term 'telepresence') is a psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part or all of an individual's (cont'd)

What is 'Presence'?

According to the International Society for Presence Research, "Presence (a shortened version of the term 'telepresence') is a psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part or all of an individual's current experience is generated by and/or filtered through human-made technology, part or all of the individual's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of the technology in the experience."

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current experience is generated by and/or filtered through human-made technology, part or all of the individual's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of the technology in the experience."

In other words, presence 'tricks' people into feeling like they're somewhere or something they're not. And in the right circumstances, this can have incredibly powerful and positive effects.

Medical professionals, for example, are using VR to 'fool' people with phobias into believing they are in difficult situations in order to desensitise them to more harrowing real-life events.

Highways England, meanwhile, have recently been testing out how effective new road signs are by having VR headset-wearing participants in a study 'drive' along a virtual road and gauging their reactions.

REASON #3 'FAKING' PRESENCE IS PROVEN TO WORK

The business community, however is still playing catch-up when it comes to giving people a sense of presence when they are not based in the office. While video calls do give people a chance to connect at a scheduled time, any sense of being in a shared space tends to end the second the call does.
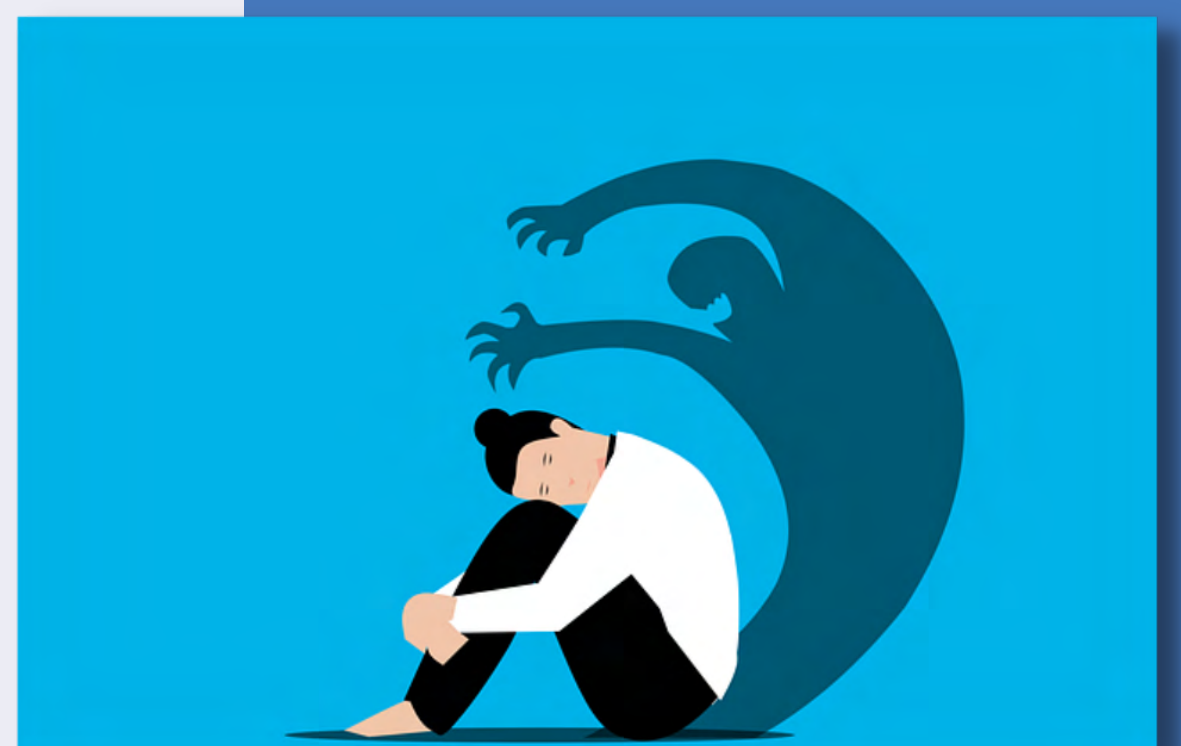
Treating phobias... with VR

Several companies are now offering VR solutions for people with phobias such as anxiety orders and also addictions, PSY C2Care among them. Therapists work with patients on their issues, and the company claims to have treated 22,000 people.

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Meanwhile messaging tools, while 'aways on' and played out in real time, have limited appeal in terms of social interaction, not least because they can sometimes seem eerily similar to the conversational format/interface used by some chatbots.

So how does a business offer its employees a sense of being there when they're not?

And if HR can help solve this conundrum, will all of those problems listed earlier be resolved – employee engagement and motivation in particular?

How a virtual version of yourself can be incredibly powerful

One way for a person to have a presence online is with an avatar. In the right setting, and with the right platform, this can generate a sensation of actually being somewhere – even if only in part.

The Wii console 'Mii' avatars

Avatars have been around since the early 1970s – in a review of their history The Philadelphia Inquirer notes that the very first one depicted an eyeball instead of a human, but avatars are more commonly used today to depict a more realistic version of an individual. Realistic avatars caught onto the mainstream with the launch of the Nintendo Wii console in 2006: it allowed players to create a 'Mii' version of themselves, and was extremely popular with players.

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REASON #4
PEOPLE ARE ALREADY FAMILIAR WITH AVATARS

Avatars are just one of many ways that people can gain a sense of presence in a digital arena, and during the pandemic their use in a virtual office-based setting became apparent, though as with much new tech, adoption is not yet widespread.

The importance of presence, however, should not be ignored. Presence is the secret ingredient that can elevate the day-to-day experience of working from home into something far more collaborative and connected.

According to a recent report by Ipsos: "Although difficult to know what the future will look like, it is clear that digital services will continue to play a central role in many of our experiences. Therefore, we need to look at how we can create the sense of presence in what we are doing and how various tools can be used to support this."

REASON #5 IPSOS SAYS THAT DIGITAL PRESENCE WILL PLAY A PART IN OUR FUTURE

In another article in Psychology Today in December 2020, clinical psychologist Lara Otte wrote: "We believe greater presence is required in the ongoing remote work reality, in order to head off the potential for bigger breakdowns as social capital degrades over time. When we cultivate presence, we increase engagement, produce more trustworthy commitments, drive better results, and ultimately achieve better outcomes."

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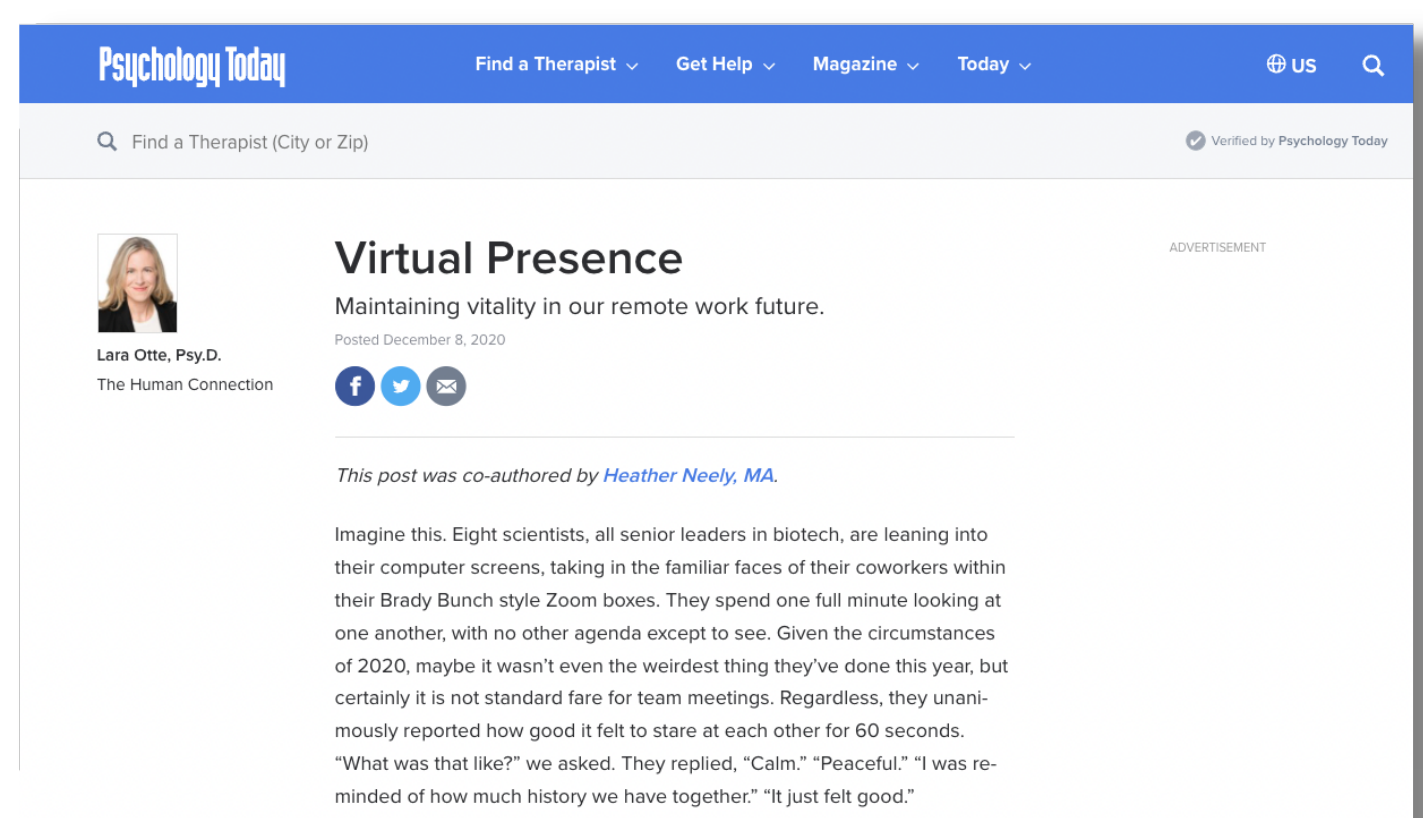
This notion of being somewhere virtually is gathering pace at an exponential rate. In the world of entertainment, video game Fortnite held a live online concert by Travis Scott that was attended by more than 12 million players – quite possibly the biggest concert audience of all time. People still say they were "there" – because in a way, they were.

For many people, there is no longer a clear distinction between real-life and online experiences.

"When we cultivate presence, we increase engagement, produce more trustworthy commitments, drive better results, and ultimately achieve better outcomes." Clinical psychologist Laura Otte

You don't need total immersion to gain a sense of presence – especially if it makes you feel nauseous

Paying close attention to everything that is going on in the 'presence' space is Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg. This year, he unveiled a vision in which he saw people coming together socially online in a way that has thus far eluded social media. 'Presence' is a key driver.

He sees a new world – dubbed 'the metaverse' – where people become comfortable doing things in augmented and virtual reality that they have previously only done in person, including meeting colleagues (cont'd)

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Photo: Anthony Quintano

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg

at work. The real world and the digital world will converge, he feels, and as the owner of VR tech company Oculus, Zuckerberg is in a strong position to try and make this happen.

However, the success of this vision appears to rest on something for which there cannot – at the time of writing – be any guarantee: Zuckerberg's metaverse seems to be predicated on the idea that people will soon be content to wear AR and VR headsets for prolonged periods.

From a work perspective, this raises a larger question – one that many tech-savvy HR professionals may recently have contemplated: who wants to wear a headset to attend a virtual meeting at work?

When it launched five years ago, the Oculus Rift VR headset was hailed as a major breakthrough. Following multiple false starts over the decades, virtual reality was suddenly slated to take off in a big way.

Samsung, HTC and Sony PlayStation also launched in the VR arena around the same time, and while their respective devices have been a success of sorts, VR has not become the mainstream.

Today, most gamers prefer to play games on their PC screens rather than strap themselves into a cumbersome headset and 'switch off' from the real world.

VR headsets make some wearers feel nauseous (healthline.com has a whole section about it), and even those who don't suffer from

(cont'd)

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motion sickness would likely attest to the inconvenience of wearing a headset for prolonged spells.

All of which suggests that headsets aren't 100% practical right now – especially in a work environment. Additionally, if a company did decide to embrace VR as a way to connect remote employees, this would necessitate a considerable capital investment. At the time of writing, an Oculus Quest 2 headset (the latest model) had a purchase price of £270.

There are technical considerations, too: not every employee would easily be able to connect a high-end VR system to their laptop and enjoy a seamless experience.

Indeed, Ipsos recently noted that: "There are still many challenges with this technology, specifically the ownership and adoption of VR headsets, which remain expensive and have limited appeal outside the world of gamers and tech enthusiasts. People also need to acclimatise to virtual environments and understand how to operate once immersed."

Ultimately, the gaming community's continued love affair with screens – and not VR headsets – is an indication that no matter how immersive and impressive VR games are, the traditional way of doing things is 'good enough'. The majority of video gamers are perfectly content to play online with their friends in front of a monitor.

REASON #6
VIRTUAL REALITY MAY NOT BE THE ANSWER

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How to create presence effortlessly and comfortably in the workplace – and why 'good enough' is good enough

If we accept that Mark Zuckerberg's grand vision – while not completely devoid of merit – is unlikely to see a remote workforce shifting to prolonged VR headset use any time soon, we can start to assess the other, less technically-demanding, solutions in their own right.

Because when it comes to creating a sense of presence for remote-working employees, there are solutions today that deliberately eschew the high-tech trappings of VR.

It could be argued that it is precisely the "good enough" quality of the existing solutions that makes them attractive, affordable and viable in today's workplace. Many of the platforms available require very little set-up and no new hardware. They are designed to be quickly integrated into existing business operations.

Virtual workplaces: three different approaches

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During the pandemic, a number of platforms emerged with the express intention of giving remote-working employees a virtual place to gather instead of a physical office.

Equipped with an avatar and some software that mirrored their existing workplace, employees were able to enjoy the at-work experience from home – to varying degrees.

Most of the platforms have built-in collaboration tools, and allow users (typically remote workers, though some work with hybrid workforces) to move their avatar around a virtual version of the office. These platforms have so far raised in excess of $20m in seed funding between them.

Perry Timms, the author of two HR books and the founder of HR company People and Transformational HR (PTHR), has been a user of virtual workplace platform Yonderdesk for 12 months, and agrees that the "good enough" approach to immersion that underpins what the Dublin-based tech company sets out to do is the correct approach.

$20m

The amount in seed funding that virtual working platforms have already raised.

Yonderdesk has found the sweet spot between technology and usability, he says, and creates a vital sense of presence that helps people feel connected when they are physically dispersed. His 15-strong team agrees.
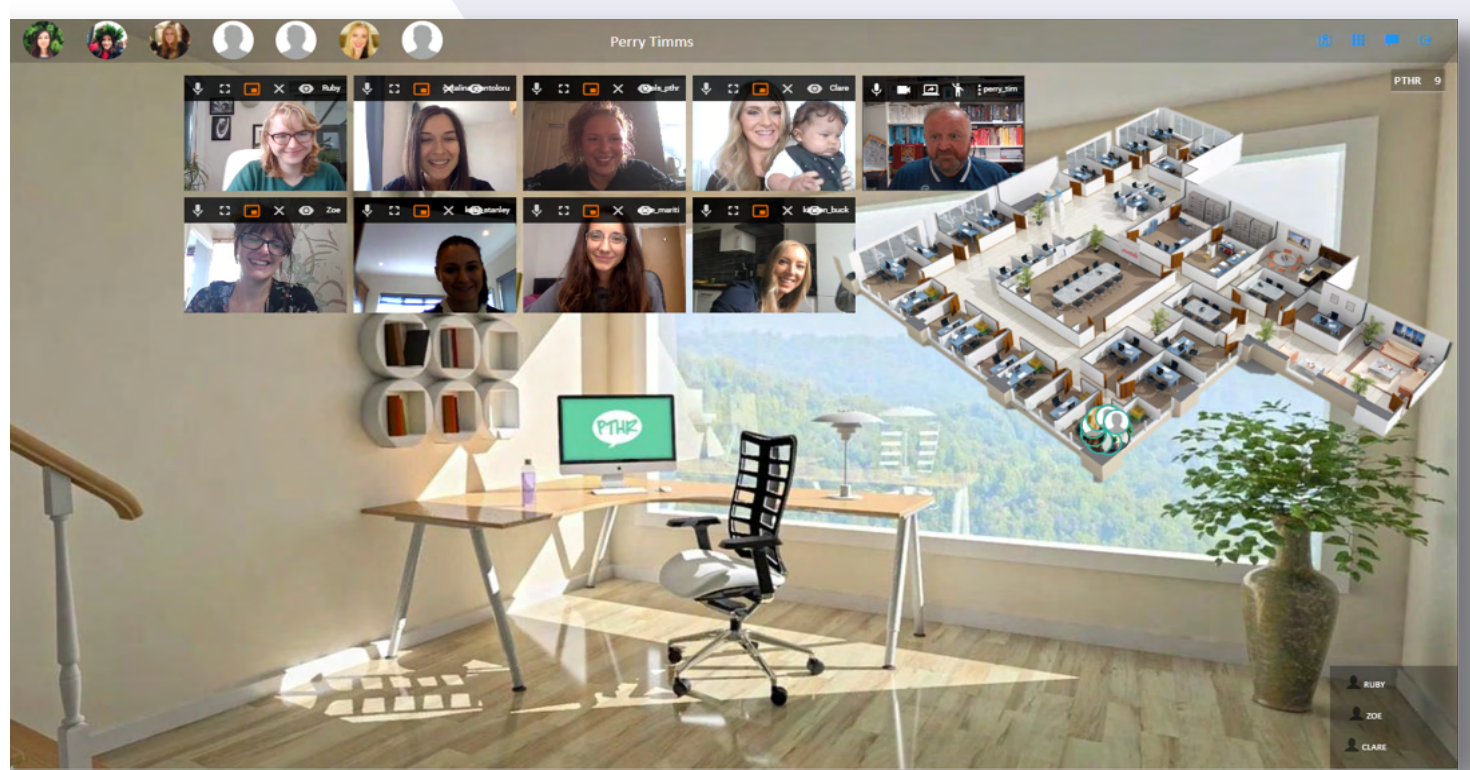
Perry Timms' virtual office

"We use Slack a lot," explains Timms, "but people don't always have time to post because they're working. But if they're on Yonderdesk and you can see that they've got their door 'locked', you realise that they must be in the midst of some deep work. So, as a leader, you firstly know they are actually there, and you also know they're deeply into something."

It's a way of showing up for work without having to declare that you've shown up, says Timms. "Also," he adds, "I really like the random 'pop-in' stuff where I can have one of those quick 'side of desk' conversations with someone. People say, 'I miss the office', but with a virtual office, you don't have to."

Timms and the PTHR team recently celebrated the business' ninth anniversary on Yonderdesk – 15 people from all over the UK online, in the same virtual office, having a party. "We all gathered in my office, had a nice little chat and did a Mexican wave," Timms says.

It was fun, personal and collaborative. And Timms doesn't see how this would have been improved if they'd been using VR.

REASON #7 VIRTUAL WORKPLACES HELP REMOTE WORKERS TO CONNECT

"I personally find VR a little bit intimidating because it is invasive," he says. "With Yonderdesk, I see it more as a walk around the office to see who's there and what's going on rather than total immersion.
Yonderdesk probably has none of the barriers that I think VR has – especially if VR involves putting a headset on."

"People say, 'I miss the office', but with a virtual office, you don't have to."
Perry Timms, founder PTHR

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How HR leaders can use virtual workplaces and a sense of presence to solve their engagement, isolation and motivation problems

Writing about telepresence in City Journal, Joel Mokyr, a professor of economics and history at Northwestern University, said that, "Nobody wants a world without human in-person contact, social or economic. But a world with more options will be a better world."

Yonderdesk and the other virtual workplace platforms set out to offer just such options. "When we go back to a world where we're not fearful of being infected by others, telepresence will be an addition, not a replacement," Mokyr adds.

Virtual workplaces give HR freedom to choose a flexible future that really works for them and their employees, and allows them to boost both employee engagement and the employee experience. These platforms may also help attrition rates to fall in call centres, too.

"Nobody wants a world without human in-person contact, social or economic. But a world with more options will be a better world."
Professor Joel Mokyr, Northwestern University

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Virtual offices give HR the opportunity to address what Microsoft is calling 'the hybrid paradox': people wanting the flexibility to work from anywhere, whilst also wanting more in–person connection.

And they also allow HR to tap into a global talent pool by seamlessly integrating their virtual office with their physical premises so that no one feels left out.
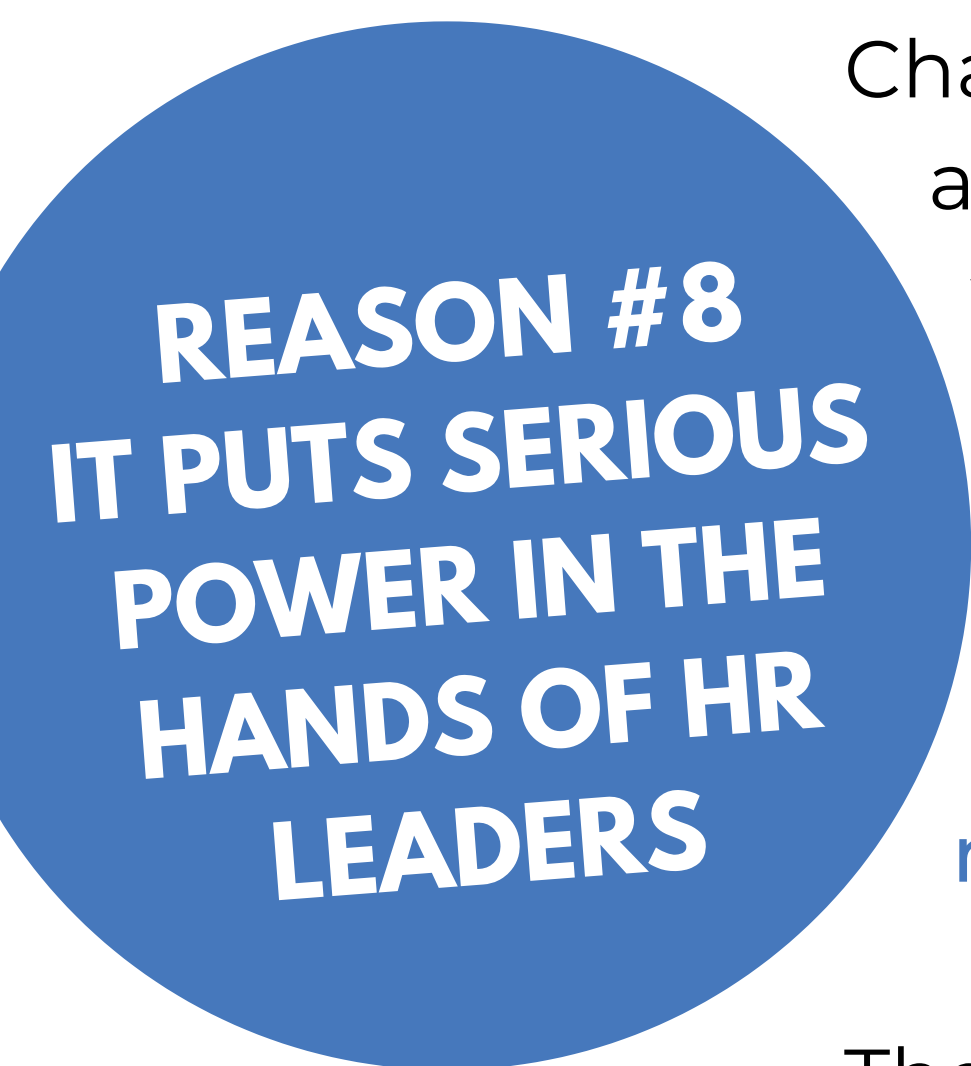
Change can be unsettling – post-pandemic, we're all on a journey into the unknown. The best virtual workplaces have been designed to remove some of the uncertainty around these new changes and offer a kind of 'soft landing' for HR leaders who understand that technology can be a way to bring some much-needed presence into their employees' lives.

These platforms offer a way to 'reconnect' those people who may otherwise be sat at home, cut off from the workplace; people who quickly become disengaged, demotivated and who lack any valuable connection to the rest of the team. This is HR's big moment.

In Sage's recent report, 59% of HR leaders say they have become more visible and influential since the pandemic. Right now, HR has the opportunity to show the boardroom that future choices about the workplace aren't quite as binary as people are making out.

"People leaders are better positioned than ever before to create business value and help raise organisational performance."
Amanda Cusdin – chief people officer, Sage

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Says Perry Timms at PTHR: "I think we've got this polarity about hybrid at the moment – people talking about how many times you're 'in' the office and what you're doing and how many times you're 'out'. But I think there is a third dimension, which is a virtual workplace: you don't have to be 'there' in that physical way any more because you can always be there virtually."

Ultimately, he says, the virtual interactions he can have with his team using Yonderdesk help add all of those "social value things" that people often think can only happen when you're physically there in the office.

"You don't have to be in the office," he says. "With a virtual workplace, you can really 'hack' that space and create that bridge. Whether you're 'in' or you're 'out', you're always 'in' if you have a virtual office to fall back on."

"Whether you're 'in' or you're 'out', you're always 'in' if you have a virtual office to fall back on." Perry Timms, founder PTHR
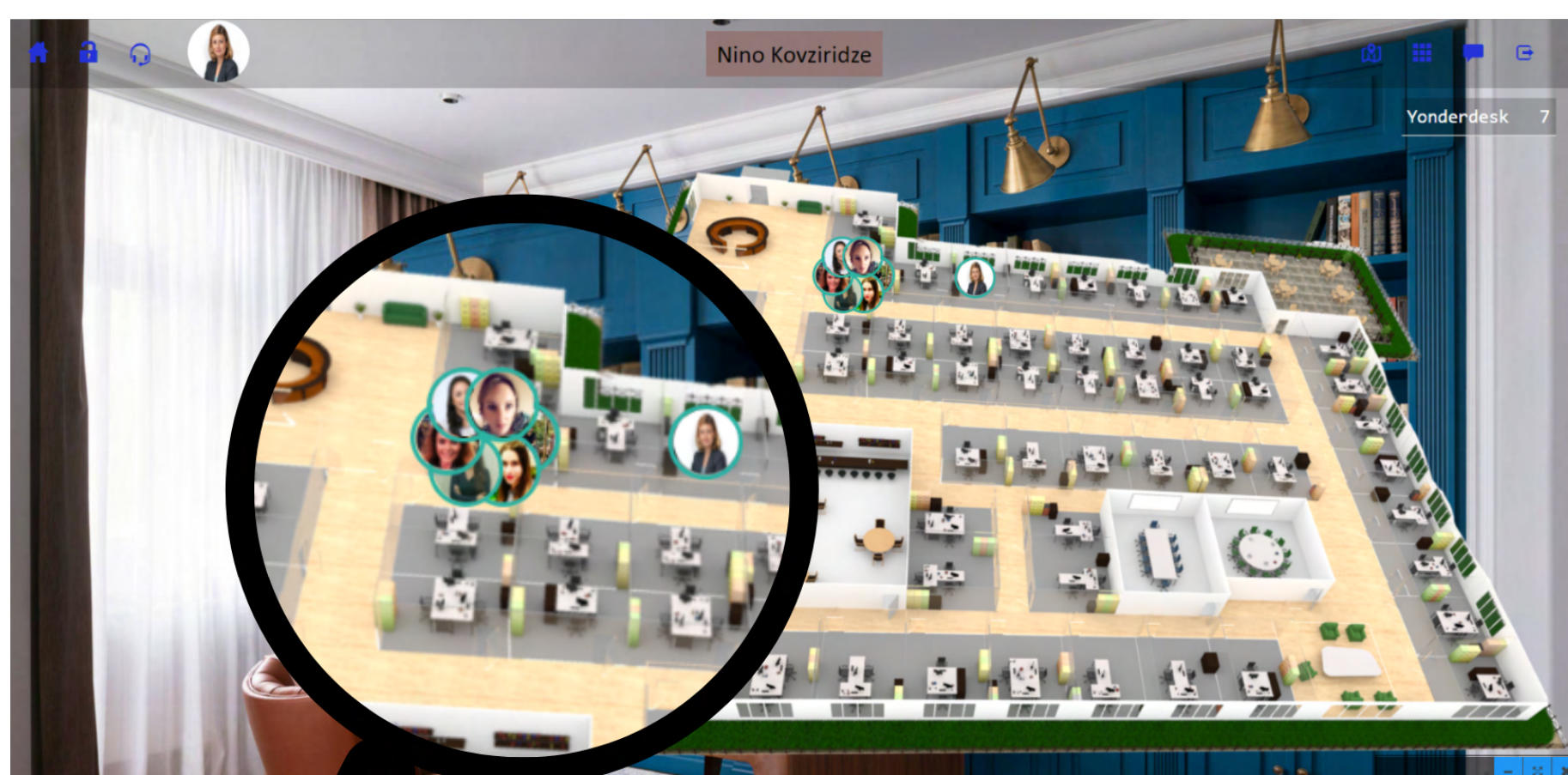
About Yonderdesk

Yonderdesk is a leading virtual workplace platform that has been catering to customers in multiple sectors – from SMEs to large multinationals in the BPO space – since launching in 2020.

Headquartered in Dublin, it creates tailor-made office spaces that mirror the physical workspace, and provides an easy-to-use way for people working remotely to connect and engage with their colleagues.

Users have instant access to their fellow employees, while managers can see at a glance who is actually working today. They can also see who is available for a chat and who is busy – denoted by a 'locked' room. Meetings require no set-up or logins; users simply walk to another user's office and 'knock' on their door to initiate a video call.

Multiple users can connect and interact at once, and meetings can take place in virtual conference rooms, boardrooms or breakout rooms.

A number of exciting add-on options are available, including live fitness classes and virtual desk assessments to make sure at-home work setups are compliant. Negotiations are currently underway to add virtual GP surgeries, creches and more.

All areas within the Yonderdesk virtual workspace can be branded and designed in the company colour scheme, and a virtual reception desk for visitors can be configured to show a promotional video while guests are waiting.

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"Yonderdesk allows the whole team to be connected as if we worked in a physical office. From my perspective, it's super-important to create a sense of belonging. Thanks to Yonderdesk, any team member can quickly reach out to a colleague as if they just entered a real room. Connecting relationships and technology is simply wonderful."

Nadia Harris, remote work expert and founder of remoteworkadvocate.com