

Top of the Hill

Time to Zoom out

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It's official. We are all completely over Zoom. But are we yet ready to go back into the office?

This is the big question facing pharma as it approaches the end of what has been a year marked by unprecedented disruption, pivoting, agility, collaboration and the increased use of athletic wear as work clothes.

Ok, so everyone was already wearing jeans to work but the shirts, ties, heels and jackets which came out for conferences, when people tried to show a little more professional pizzazz, were left hanging listlessly in the closet.

Last week several events which normally feature strongly in the pharma calendar were held online, with conference participants unlikely to have been concerned about what they were wearing.

However, it has become difficult not to be distracted by other features of the new world of web watching. In one session of pharma leaders, one chose to go to the office for the event only to suffer from internet dropouts which saw him frozen mid-sentence, while another chose the unusual backdrop of a bed to speak to industry.

While such incidents have frustrated and amused us throughout the pandemic, the latest data suggests pharma staff may not just be over seeing themselves and others on screen, but that the experience may also be increasing their stress levels.

Thoughtful companies have introduced Zoom-free days to try and relieve the stress on their workers but it is still hard to escape the pull of the screen, especially during big conference events.

Anecdotal evidence suggests people are feeling more disengaged than before, while it is clear anxiety levels are rising as quickly as workdays lengthened.

In Melbourne, the government has not yet given the all-clear for companies to open their offices and for people to return to the workplace but elsewhere in Australia where this is an option, many are still choosing to work from home rather than tackle the commute and extensive office hygiene requirements.

The inconvenience of having to book a desk before you show up and continually hand sanitise while social distancing is turning many off and limiting the appeal of a return to the office.

It seems we have all become so accustomed to our homely lives and the convenience of being able to move seamlessly from breakfast table to work station that we are somewhat reluctant to change.

Remote working may well be the "new normal" but the mental health benefits of connecting and collaborating found in the office environment are clearly not easy to replace.

As Australia has more "donut days" with zero Covid cases and more offices open up, companies face the challenge of enticing their workers back in while also ensuring those that are happier working from home continue to have the flexibility to do so.

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