Kate Lister:

But whether they're nine floors, nine miles or nine time zones away, people were already interacting virtually. There's research to show that.

Baratunde Thurston:

Welcome to Lenovo Late Night IT, an unfiltered, no nonsense show about tech, featuring the industry's top innovators. I'm your host, Baratunde Thurston, and tonight we're discussing flexible work, the good, the bad, the Zoom fatigue.

Now for a while it seemed like remote work might just be a COVID thing, and as soon as the streets were safe again, we'd all file back into our fluorescent cube farms. But that hasn't happened.

So the question is, if the future of work is flexible, how do we make it work? Here with the hard facts, we've got Kate Lister, one of the OG experts on remote work. Kate is President of Global Workplace Analytics, a consulting firm that's been helping organizations optimize flexible and distributed work for nearly two decades. That's way before Zoom backgrounds were a thing. Kate was also one of three witnesses called to testify before the US Senate on remote work in government, which is news to a lot of us that the government works.

We've also got Ryan Anderson, Vice President of Global Research and Insights at Miller Knoll, one of the largest and most influential modern design companies in the world. Ryan's work centers on how the places we inhabit can be better designed and managed to support positive, productive experiences. Ryan and Kate, welcome to our beautiful roundtable.

Kate Lister:

Glad to be here.

Ryan Anderson:

Thanks. Thanks for having us.

Baratunde Thurston:

Are we ever going to go back to the way things were in terms of how we report to work?

Kate Lister:

No.

Baratunde Thurston:

That was fast. Tell me more.

Kate Lister:

Because I was afraid he was going to say yes.

Baratunde Thurston:

All right. And this is nothing if not a race.

Kate Lister:

We've gotten too used to it. If it went on for two months, three months, maybe. But people have gotten out of the commute. They've gotten out of that routine. They're in their home, with their dogs. It's like, "No, I'm not giving this up."

I'm not saying it's going to be all remote. But we're not going back to the way things were.

Baratunde Thurston:

And what about you, Ryan?

Ryan Anderson:

Well, I think we're going to see a better balance. So right now we're not working flexibly. It's a crisis response to a pandemic. Most people are living on video meetings all day long in their bedrooms. And I don't think that's what most people aspire to for their work life.

Baratunde Thurston:

I definitely do not. But you mentioned the pandemic and I'm wondering what, I assume we collected a lot of data about office occupancy rates, about levels of frustration at video conferencing, about the infrastructure required. What have we learned through that lockdown experience?

Ryan Anderson:

There's a few things that come to mind. One is that I think people want a lot more flexibility over their schedule, yet feel locked into, like I said, kind of a lifestyle of meetings.

They want more flexibility with where they can work, but they want more flexibility over their work week. And I think they've earned it.

But I think people are also struggling. We see burnout rates on the rise. People are feeling socially isolated, feeling disconnected from their employers in new ways.

If we think of organizations as communities that are productive, it's not like they're really functioning as a cohesive whole. It's more like there's just pockets. Everybody's functioning as a member of a team, and probably feeling a degree of disconnection from the greater organization.

Kate Lister:

I disagree with some of that. I've been studying this for almost 20 years. I've collected over 6,000 studies, documents, case studies, anything I've put my eyeballs on, as well as working with companies. And it hasn't changed. 80% of people wanted to work from home at least a couple of times a week long before the pandemic.

We just did a survey recently with Owl Labs. It was the sixth annual State of Remote Work survey, and we released a report. And what it showed is that over the two years, the two big years of the pandemic, actually the desire for remote work went up. And not only remote work but more frequency. So we saw people who want to be all in the office go from 30% to 20%, and then that was distributed-

Baratunde Thurston:

It was only 30% to begin with though.

Kate Lister:

It was pretty low. I've got some opinions about that too. But it's telling to me that from the beginning of the pandemic through when people started to go back to the office, not back to work, which drives me crazy when people say that.

Baratunde Thurston:

Because they've been working.

Kate Lister:

Was that they want it more, not less.

Baratunde Thurston:

Yeah. How does the technology leader, the IT manager, how's their job had to change with everything we've been talking about?

Kate Lister:

Critical. All of these parts of the organization have been fighting for a voice in the C-suite. So you've got the real estate people. And we've got to make the offices right for people, and this is going to increase productivity and all of that.

And you've got the HR people saying, "Talent and attraction and retention." And you've got the IT people saying, "We can support people anywhere." I think one of the blessings of the pandemic is that this lofted it to a strategic initiative, and therefore when the C-suite is saying, "This is what we're going to do," it brings all of those three groups together. The three legged stool.

You can't send them home if they don't have the good technology. The technologies that didn't even exist, being able to have a virtual background just two years ago.

Baratunde Thurston:

Or if it's not secure.

Kate Lister:

I'm not sure we've conquered that yet.

Baratunde Thurston:

Yeah. What are you seeing in terms of the IT manager's shifting role here?

Ryan Anderson:

It was interesting because leading up to the pandemic, we were seeing more collaboration between IT leaders and their real estate counterparts, mostly focused on the physical work environment, desk booking, indoor wayfinding. And then when the pandemic hit, it was like the attention shifted towards digital transformation, make sure everybody's got their video, make sure everybody's secure, which is not a bad thing at all.

But for me, I think the best approach is to say, "Yeah, the work's gotten more digital. Now can we take a look at whether or not these physical environments are supporting these digital experiences in a useful way?"

But until someone says, "Huh, what does it look like to use these tools when we're in the same spot? Or how are people doing using these tools at home?" The physical environment does need to get back on the IT leader's radar.

And the one other thing I'd say is, it is I think good time for IT leaders to begin to ask the question, how do smart buildings, and this goes by a variety of topics, corporate real estate, tech, prop tech, how does that begin to integrate into our chart of work?

Because there are more and more real estate decisions being made, right now, because everything that's going on, to optimize these spaces, to give them better user experiences, that are causing real estate leaders to step into the role of shadow IT. Most won't even know what that means. But they're making IT-related decisions about the space, and they really need their IT counterparts riding shotgun with them.

Baratunde Thurston:

Our audience will love to hear that. You're needed. When there's more flexibility in timing and location, how do you maintain a coherent culture? What is the office? What is the organization? If I'm in there Tuesday, you're there Wednesday, you're not there, and we are in remote video conferencing and chat rooms, and it's much more diffuse, it seems. Even if we weren't all happy in the office, we had a shared unhappy culture.

Kate Lister:

It's not harder, but it is different. I think as we started to look to the return to office, everybody thought, "Wow, we did remote. We got this hybrid thing down." And it's harder. It's a lot harder than being all remote and it's a lot harder than being all in office.

And through the pandemic, we were always sort of in triage mode. Ryan, you mentioned something about this earlier. We were always reacting. We were always doing tactical things rather than strategic. Because we were going to go back in three months, in three months, in three months, in three months.

Baratunde Thurston:

I remember [inaudible 00:07:58].

Kate Lister:

And so we haven't changed the practices and the processes. So we've got to look at those things differently. How do we create a culture? We've got to create emotional connections in the same way that we had those physical connections.

And by the way, Gartner did a study that showed that culture was on the decline long before the pandemic. This is not-

Baratunde Thurston:

We were already failing.

Ryan Anderson:

I will say, our research has led us to maybe not focus on culture as much as community. And there are some traditional kind of beliefs that, "Well, you can't collaborate very effectively if you're not in the

office." We don't believe that's necessarily true. "You can't maintain a healthy culture if people are highly distributed." I don't think that's true either.

But what I will say is, people function in organizations as a community. And the difference between a company or an organization and just a bunch of freelancers is that they've got some sort of shared purpose. They've got some sort of shared experience. And the physical environments, even for remote-first companies, getting people together in a co-located way, it can really help strengthen community.

Kate Lister:

And you don't have to do it very often.

Ryan Anderson:

Well, it depends. I think it depends on the nature of the work. It depends on the nature of the team. If you originate the company as a remote-first company, it's true. Most organizations were used to being co-located. Now they're in a different state. And I would probably over-index on trying to spend quality time together more often. But I'm also a big believer in the effectiveness of physical space.

Kate Lister:

But whether they're nine floors, nine miles or nine time zones away, people were already interacting virtually.

Ryan Anderson:

Oh, agreed.

Kate Lister:

There's research to show that. And so I think anything we can do to improve the digital working environment is going to improve the physical working environment as well. And technology is part of the answer, but it's not the whole answer.

Baratunde Thurston:

Are you selling headsets? Is this a headset [inaudible 00:09:39] because I'm not doing that.

I have loved this so far. You all are experts. I'm curious to know what the everyday person thinks about flexible work. So we sent our producer Alex Stone out to do some remote work of his own, in a segment we call Tech Walks. Let's take a look.

Ryan Anderson:

Cool.

Alex Stone:

COVID forever changed the landscape of work culture. More than one in four Americans now work from home, and that number is only growing. Did we install all those Nitro cold brew taps for nothing? To learn more, we took to the streets of New York City.

So one of the things we're asking people about is flexible work, remote work.

Speaker 5:

I work from home. I retired, but the company said if I could work part-time, I'd just still do the same thing I did for them from my basement.

Alex Stone:

Would you want to work in an office or would you want to work remotely or some combination of both?

Speaker 6:

I would prefer to pick my own days, especially with the dog.

Speaker 7:

We experience the world through the presumption that most people have access to technology, which is far from the truth. As the world becomes more reliant on people having that access to technology, people who don't have it will be further excluded from the job market. And I think there should be more flexibility in work hours, but I don't think the focus should be on remote.

Jamele:

I think that businesses are learning that you don't need to be together in order to get the job done. If you're efficient and effective, you can work from anywhere.

Speaker 9:

I think that it's a false dilemma to say, "Would you rather work at home or in person?" There are times when the flexibility and the convenience matters. And then there are also times when people getting together really matters.

Alex Stone:

What's the most embarrassing thing you've ever done on Zoom?

Jamele:

Oh. Oh, bro. Forget the Zoom, I'm cursing on TV now.

Alex Stone:

That's okay.

Jamele:

I was on a Zoom one time, I turned the screen off because I had to pee. And all I heard in a whole Zoom, I forget how many of us were in the Zoom, they're like, "Jamele, you need to mute." And I was like, "Oh my..."

Baratunde Thurston:

Have you peed on Zoom?

Ryan Anderson:

Who hasn't escaped to go to the bathroom?

Kate Lister:

I haven't.

Ryan Anderson:

What?

Kate Lister:

I hold it.

Ryan Anderson:

Well, you probably have a more balanced schedule than all of us that are stuck in meeting hell all day long. Yeah. Sometimes you got to do what you got to do.

Baratunde Thurston:

Yes. As long as you mute and kill camera. I triple check every time.

There are so many different types of workplaces, and I'm thinking, broadly there are jobs that cannot be done remotely. Bus driver, fruit picker. There are things that a human body needs to be in a physical space, airline gate agent. And then there's a lot of office work, which we tend to default to when we even talk about this flexible work. But there's different types of offices. Law firms, insurance, clerical, data entry.

Can you fill in some of the nuance of differences even within office work and how they might show up in a flexible work environment differently from another type of office? What are you seeing?

Kate Lister:

Much different need for collaboration from say, one industry to another. Different levels of trust. Different personalities. So I think about engineers, they're a different lot. As are lawyers. Very hierarchical. Got the corner office, so dragging them out of it is going to be harder, going to unassigned desks is going to be harder.

Ryan Anderson:

There's a couple of things that come to my mind. One would be, is there a physicality to the work? So we make furniture and textiles, so if there's product development activities going on, sometimes there's something physical that you need to attend to.

There's also apprenticeship-based culture. So this is the law firms, the investment banks. Basically what you saw in suits. Where if you're not actually looking after how somebody's doing their job, it could cost somebody millions.

Baratunde Thurston:

And when you realize that there is that dependence, do you do prearranged dates? Speed dating? Serendipitous interactions in Slack? How do you foster that when you don't just bump into each other at the water cooler-

Kate Lister:

You're intentional.

Baratunde Thurston:

And realize, "We've got something we could work on. Let's grab two or three more people in a conference room and figure this out."

Kate Lister:

Got to be intentional. And that's the difference. It's not spontaneous. Yet there are all-virtual organizations with thousand-plus employees, and they make it work. And I think we've learned a lesson from a number of those.

One of the things that showed up in the pandemic was that our weak ties got weaker and our strong ties got stronger. And so the people you know-

Baratunde Thurston:

[inaudible 00:14:10] did this. Like wealth inequality.

Kate Lister:

The people you know you've interacted with, but you didn't get to know those people over there and those people over there. And we didn't mix in that way. And when you talk about innovation, it's one of the things that's really important for innovation.

Baratunde Thurston:

Also that apprenticeship. So I remember meeting some lawyers who started, they graduated law school during the pandemic and they started at their firms remotely. And I was speaking to this group at a conference. It was the first time they'd ever met their colleagues.

Ryan Anderson:

Really?

Baratunde Thurston:

Yeah. If you start outside like that, and so you have by definition weak ties. And the trend is that they've gotten weaker in this kind of remote forward environment, how do we solve for that?

Ryan Anderson:

You got to get people together. Now that doesn't necessarily mean you have to have them working out of an office five days a week, but co-location is the key. It's why long distance relationships, romantic relationships are tough. It's why people that work in social media or podcasters still get together at conferences and hang out. Because we tend to bond with each other and strengthen our ties when we're co-located.

Kate brings up a really helpful reference. This idea from the world of sociology, this is from Stanford back in 1973, the same year that I came around, of strong ties, weak ties refers to our networks. The people that we're closest to are our strong ties. That's who we live life with.

The people that are our extended networks are our weak ties. And strong ties are really important just to make it through life. But weak ties are where we get that sense of community.

And so when we went into isolation and quarantine, we got cut off from hundreds, typically, or thousands of people in our personal and professional lives. And the reason why it's fun to get back at a conference or at a concert or at a restaurant, is that we're forming this again.

Kate and I have known each other for years. We've been on webinars for years. This is the first time we've ever been in the same room. And it's bringing me joy. Yes.

Baratunde Thurston:

Oh, it's bringing me joy. Look what we did.

Ryan Anderson:

Because our weak tie has got stronger.

Baratunde Thurston:

Yes.

Ryan Anderson:

And that's what a physical space can do.

Baratunde Thurston:

We salvaged your friendship.

Kate Lister:

But I will also say that we didn't realize that we'd never physically met.

Baratunde Thurston:

Yeah.

Ryan Anderson:

That's true. I didn't realize that when I walked in.

Baratunde Thurston:

Mind tricks.

Kate Lister:

Well, what I mean is-

Baratunde Thurston:

It's as real, even if it wasn't physical.

Kate Lister:

It felt real. Does it get stronger because we've been together? Absolutely. But there's been research that shows it doesn't have to be that often. Teams get together every six months, or once a year.

Baratunde Thurston:

Or once a quarter.

Kate Lister:

Yeah. And bring people together. And what's happening now is sort of organically, during the pandemic, they self-formed. "Oh, I didn't know that you lived around here. Let's all get together over at this co-working space," or whatever.

Baratunde Thurston:

That's cool.

Ryan Anderson:

What my teams start to look for when we go into an office environment is, there might be a place for people just to hang out, coffee bar, community reconnection. It's where that new employee, like that attorney you mentioned, starts to make some new friends, et cetera. That's really tough to have just organically happen on a chat platform or on video.

So yeah, that's the kind of spaces. Immersive spaces for strong ties or social spaces for weak ties that offices have to begin offering.

Baratunde Thurston:

Well, all work, no play makes for a very dull host. So I say we play a game. You'll hold up the card until the other person hopefully successfully communicates to you what's on that card without saying what's on that card. You'll have about a minute each to get through as many as possible. Kate, I'm going to have you start, in 3, 2, 1, go.

Ryan Anderson:

All right. This is a working location, not in the corporate workplace, but where you might prefer to be where you live. It's your...

Kate Lister:

Home.

Ryan Anderson:

Yep. Home...

Kate Lister:

Your home office.

Ryan Anderson:

There we go.

Baratunde Thurston:

Next. Let's keep it moving.

Ryan Anderson:

Here we go. Oh, it's something that is very commonly said on Zoom calls when someone starts talking and you can't hear them.

Kate Lister:

"You're on mute."

Ryan Anderson:

Yes.

Baratunde Thurston:

We'll accept that. "You're muted, you're on mute," same thing.

Ryan Anderson:

Big topic of conversation, different parts in the world, to have people work less throughout the seven days, that...

Kate Lister:

Four day workweek.

Ryan Anderson:

You got it.

Baratunde Thurston:

Ooh, nice.

Ryan Anderson:

Oh, if you work too remotely and you get socially isolated, you might be-

Kate Lister:

Lonely.

Ryan Anderson:

Or experience... Where you work too hard, you're exhausted.

Kate Lister:

Overworking.

Ryan Anderson:

Close.

Baratunde Thurston:

So close.

Kate Lister:
Exhausted.

Ryan Anderson:
Think about lighting a fire and it's going to...

Kate Lister:
Burnout.

Ryan Anderson:
There we go.

Baratunde Thurston:
Just in time. Wow.

Kate Lister:
Good one.

Baratunde Thurston:
Nicely done. No, we're out of time. We're out of time. We're out of time. Well done. Good collaboration. Are you ready?

Ryan Anderson:
I think you did very well. I'm not sure I was at my best there. Yes, I'm ready.

Baratunde Thurston:
Okay. You'll start in 3, 2, 1.

Kate Lister:
Okay. Regular working hours are...

Ryan Anderson:
Are 40 hour work week, predictable work week.

Kate Lister:
From the morning to the afternoon.

Ryan Anderson:
Oh, nine to five.

Kate Lister:
And there was a movie that...

Ryan Anderson:
Working nine to five? Dolly Parton?

Baratunde Thurston:
We'll give it to him. Let's go.

Kate Lister:
Oh, you want to get your face lit up, but...

Ryan Anderson:
Oh, like a ring light?

Kate Lister:
Yeah.

Baratunde Thurston:
Oh, fast.

Kate Lister:
Getting in the car and...

Ryan Anderson:
Commute.

Baratunde Thurston:
Now you're scaring me.

Kate Lister:
Oh, when you're in a Zoom call and you want to separate into smaller groups.

Ryan Anderson:
Oh, breakout groups?

Baratunde Thurston:
Breakout room, but we're going to give you that.

Ryan Anderson:
Breakout rooms. Okay, there we go.

Kate Lister:
Okay. When you don't have an assigned seat.

Ryan Anderson:

Hot desking, hoteling.

Kate Lister:
You got it.

Baratunde Thurston:
Wow.

Kate Lister:
Oh man. So when you don't actually work during the same hours.

Ryan Anderson:
Asynchronous. Asynchronous working, asynchronous collaboration.

Baratunde Thurston:
Yes.

Kate Lister:
Give it.

Baratunde Thurston:
Goodness.

Kate Lister:
That's a hard one. Oh, when you really want to keep your...

Ryan Anderson:
Work-life balance.

Baratunde Thurston:
What? Seriously.

Ryan Anderson:
We talk about this stuff all day long.

Baratunde Thurston:
But she didn't say anything.

Ryan Anderson:
I knew where she was going.

Baratunde Thurston:
She made a face. Did you see it in the reflection of her eyes?

Ryan Anderson:

No.

Baratunde Thurston:

That's the only explanation. Or magic.

Ryan Anderson:

I live this stuff, man, 30 years of this.

Baratunde Thurston:

All right. That was the best.

Kate Lister:

Make me look good, mister.

Baratunde Thurston:

The best I've ever seen anyone play this. Well done.

Ryan Anderson:

We doing okay?

Kate Lister:

Good.

Baratunde Thurston:

You're doing more than okay.

Kate Lister:

Good job.

Baratunde Thurston:

You just owned that game.

Ryan Anderson:

We strengthen our weak ties and we now we're performing much better.

Baratunde Thurston:

All right. So what are some misconceptions that managers cling to when they probably fearfully think about remote work?

Ryan Anderson:

Probably the most ingrained one is the idea of presenteeism, like if you're not there, you're not being productive, which I hope we're past at this point.

And the early origins of offices were supervisory. If you go back to the 1800s, they were designed for what was then called bosses to oversee a bunch of clerks who wore starched white shirts, that's why we call it white collar work.

And there's still a group of people out there that believe that if you're not in the office or if you're not present in front of your computer, you're not being productive. So we need to get past that.

I also think we need to get past the idea that work happens in prescribed locations. What most people want is more choice.

Baratunde Thurston:

When you think about the technology of remote worker needs, what should the IT manager have in common now beyond ring lights and a decent webcam?

Kate Lister:

Get everybody on the same platform, for one thing. And I think that that did happen largely, everybody went to either Teams or Slack or Google Docs. You just can't have people using all different platforms.

And I think you've really, they have to have their ear to the street, because things are changing so quickly. And there's so many cool technologies out there. And unfortunately big companies don't always like to try the newest thing. But if they don't, they're going to be left behind.

Baratunde Thurston:

What do you have in terms of recommendations?

Ryan Anderson:

Well, I'd start with wifi, which I know a lot of organizations assume that their employees are going to have to get their own wifi, but there's a lot of inequity there. If I look globally, it's probably the biggest challenge, making sure that everybody has good solid wifi, they can afford it, they've got a good router, maybe a mesh router, something that ensures connectivity.

So I know that that's probably out of scope for some organizations that don't want to reimburse, et cetera. But if you want a globally distributed workforce, you better make sure that everyone has got good connectivity.

Baratunde Thurston:

Yeah. You would make sure they had power at their desk if they were inside the office.

Ryan Anderson:

Exactly.

Kate Lister:

Yeah. It's actually required in California, and lots of parts of the world.

Baratunde Thurston:

How do we make sure that the Neurodiverse community is being fully considered and accommodated if need be as we shift to more remote work? What does that look like?

Kate Lister:

I think there's greater opportunity for it. And I think we already saw that during the pandemic, that it gave them a place where they could be safe, at home with the dog or whatever it was they needed. It gave them options for chat in meetings rather than having to speak up because they didn't feel comfortable speaking up. Or responding later via an email or through Slack or in some other way. But being able to contribute without having to be like everybody else.

And let's face this, none of us are like everybody else. And we really need to create these environments that allow everybody to be their best. And choice is the key.

Ryan Anderson:

That's where I pick up, choice is the answer. When we were recently taking a look at like a small, it was just called wellbeing room on the floor plate of an office, and originally just had a recliner and a door you could shut. And the question was, "Well, who's that for?" "Well, somebody who's having a tough day." That's great, but can we take a look at somebody that needs a hyposensitive environment? Can we take a look at maybe the needs of a nursing mom? A person who's trying to escape code switching? A person that may have anxiety disorder?

The more you can understand this range of human conditions, the more a single space, whether it's in your home or an office, co-working space or whatever, can just be more informed. It's called inclusive design. The challenge is, you have to engage the employees to figure out, "What do you struggle with?" If you're not asking, how do you possibly design to solve it?

Kate Lister:

And it's not an easy conversation to have. Who wants to admit that, "I'm not like everybody else." And yet they're struggling with it, and therefore they're not as productive as they could be. They're certainly not as happy as they could be.

We also saw during the pandemic that people with physical disabilities were able to be more employed, greater employment in that group, because they didn't have to go. They didn't have to get up and go.

Baratunde Thurston:

Right.

Ryan Anderson:

Yeah, it's been a bit of an indictment on the office, actually. When you find that those with physical, sensory, cognitive disabilities do better at home, that's not a bad thing. Great, let's support flexibility. Let's make sure people can have effective experiences at home.

But there's the flip side, which is, looks like our offices need to be a lot better. That's crazy, we need to be able to be more inclusive in how we design them so that people do feel a sense of belonging. That someone, when they walk in an office feels like, "This space is for me."

Because traditionally, too much hierarchy, too much status, too much design for the leaders, versus having people know that, "Okay, somebody designed a space to help me be successful, to help me achieve something." That's a very different mentality that unfortunately is not yet widespread.

Baratunde Thurston:

Thanks, y'all. That was a blast.

Kate Lister:

It was great.

Ryan Anderson:

It was.

Kate Lister:

Thanks for having us.

Baratunde Thurston:

It's all about work-life balance. And that couch over there, it's calling my name. So it's EOD for me. Many thanks to our guests, Kate Lister and Ryan Anderson. I'm Baratunde Thurston, and I'll see you next time on Lenovo Late Night IT.