

# Leaving It All Behind: Evolution of the Work Environment and Liminal Spaces in the New Industrial Revolution 4.0

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The first and second industrial revolutions were centred on industrial production factories and bureaucratic buildings as fundamental locations for employees to conduct their daily work. The third industrial revolution began to change this trend; in the last decades, the growth and popularity of technical innovations redesigned the work model, and organisations redirected their efforts to technological tools to replace manual processes. The advances and expansion of information and communication technologies and the accessibility to “any time, anywhere” work models have enabled employees to carry out work activities at remote and flexible locations. Perhaps most notably, flexible, remote and virtual work from home have become widely accepted and, at times, vital to maintaining and fostering organisational success. This trend, further fuelled by Covid-19, appears to be here to stay, hence leading to the question of how does it influence employee well-being?

With the role of the knowledge worker continuing to grow in significance, organisations have started to recognise their vulnerability to human error and are shifting their strategies to value employee well-being. The latter has been found to significantly affect productivity, efficiency, satisfaction, loyalty and retention and is directly impacted by the demands and resources inherent to the digitisation of work.

Employees with remote work arrangements report higher job satisfaction, commitment to their organisations, and productivity. However, while some research recognises [positive relationships](#) between remote working and employee well-being, [others report less favourable outcomes](#). In some cases, employees working from home experience negative impacts on work and life balance, increased conflict, and high levels of stress and isolation. Moreover, while technological innovations translate to better connectivity across spatial and temporal spaces, the boundary between work and home is eroded. The possibility to work flexibly at any time anywhere often translates into employees working [“all the time, everywhere”](#). The latter is further facilitated by the prevalence of IoT, smart glasses, augmented and virtual realities, WhatsApp, Zoom, or Teams on electronic devices, making employees available at all times and thus, forcing employees to blend their work and personal lives.

Indeed, regardless of whether employees perform their jobs from a central office, home office, or flexible work environment, it is widely accepted that transitional spaces between work and personal life are needed, as this affects employee well-being and organisational success.

In an office environment, transitional spaces can be found in corridors, stairwells, bathrooms, hallways or the entrance to a building. Places used to elude the visibility of the workspace become [important territories for private reflection, inspiration or creativity](#).

For many employees, the commute between home and work (be it on a car, train or bus) acts as a barrier between home and work activities and provides an needed space for reflection and escape. [The commute provides employees with a place for relaxation and respite](#), shielding the stresses from one location to another, and serve as a break-away space where employees can escape from ritual identities and find a sense of sanctuary in a working world.

These transitional moments arguably can provide employees “with opportunities to physically and psychologically detach from work demands. [...] Doing so enables employees to decouple from work demands and feel refuelled by respite activities” ([Chong et al., 2020, p. 64](#)). These spaces between work and home offer people a space of tranquillity, contemplation and escape, thus contributing to stress relief and calm, encouraging a psychological transition: [a liminal state of mind to just “press pause”, where employees can decompress from one mental state and get ready for the next](#).

[Our behaviour is often shaped by the space we occupy](#) and is influenced by response to our audience: clients, co-workers, children or spouses. However, as the tasks at work and home require alternate states of mind (or identities), a rapid shift between these spaces can leave people feeling anxious and exhausted. Indeed, [Kundtz \(2003\)](#) argues that “to manage stress effectively, you cannot go directly from a stressful situation back to normal life without spending some time in stress-free relaxation” (p. 74). Furthermore, Kundtz suggests that the disregard of this relaxation stage exacerbates the stresses felt, negatively impacting psychological and physical well-being.

[The term ‘liminal space’ is derived from the Latin word ‘threshold’](#) and signifies an ‘in-between’ time and place, void of responsibilities, obligations or orders. It is identified as the moment a person has exited one identity but has not reached the next. Van Gennep spoke of liminal spaces in his book [Rites of Passage in 1908](#) as places that hold a ritual of physical and temporal passage: an intermediate boundary, signifying the halfway point between one identity and another.

These spaces promote change and transform the behaviour of their inhabitants and [represent in-between transitions between private and public identities](#). While transitioning through these liminal spaces, [boundaries become blurred, and identities are released so that new ones can be attained](#). Therefore, these transitional spaces are invaluable as their inhabitants can attain relief from the pressures of their private or public lives before facing the other.

At the same time, these transitional spaces are [conducive to inspiration](#) and creative breakthroughs. Because the liminal spaces are void of pressures or stresses, they allow the mind to solve problems – whether from work or home. The relaxation and restoration experienced in these in-between spaces are necessary to achieve equilibrium and a balance, resulting in problem-solving and innovation.

[Work and personal life require a division](#) to foster well-being through balance and equilibrium. However, these moments are eliminated or rushed for remote working employees, potentially resulting in poor mental preparation and readiness. [Employees working from home are not commuting](#), which is excellent for the environment and a host of other reasons. Similarly, corridors, watercooler moments, or spontaneous moments of respite waiting for a lift, sitting at a red light, or waiting for public transport are all gone. These informal micro-moments vital in everyday life are being replaced with a home office. Homes have become workspaces, meeting rooms, classrooms, gyms, as well as places of rest.

However, life at home is not always considered a refuge: life at home can be a stressful space filled with responsibilities, tasks, monetary strains, and home duties which often need to be conducted around work-time. The transition from one identity to another with different obligations and behavioural conditions requires mental planning. Moving from one identity to another needs a rearrangement of thoughts, feelings, and moods through instances of liminality.

Hence, remote working employees need a space to experience freedom from these stresses, however brief or transitional, so that pressures of each identity do not flow into the other. Therefore, a physical or temporal space might be necessary to successfully cope with the conflicting demands of home and work life.

[Bachelard \(1964\)](#) argues that “every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination” (p. 136). Spaces like hallways, stairways and empty corners have been out of sight, used mainly to transition through the home. These spaces can now come into full use. These in-between spaces must be explored and enhanced within remote working models to encourage employee well-being. While traditional liminal spaces are removed, the importance of a physical and temporal space for introspective reflection and psychological respite is critical as we continue into the next industrial revolution.

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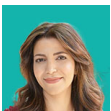
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Bora has over ten years of experience working in academia and industry. Bora obtained her PhD from the University of Adelaide, Australia (where she taught for five years) funded by the ARC Training Centre for Innovative Wine Production, graduated with honours from a MSc in Luxury Goods and Services from the International University of Monaco (Monaco), and has a BS in Bioinformatics from Jacobs University (Germany) which equipped her with strong analytical skills. Dr. Qesja continues her engagement with the industry as a consultant, with the latest project ('Riverland on the Verge') resulting in a permanent Virtual Reality fixture (for promoting the tourism of the Riverland Wine Region) in both the National Wine Centre (Adelaide) and Riverland Wine Centre.



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Samaneh is a self-motivated researcher with a multi-disciplinary background in marketing and tourism management fields. She has a solid experience in applying qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research methods. Samaneh holds a PhD in Business and Management from University of South Australia.



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