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Rethinking productivity

Roundtable discussion paper
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The Ivy Tower Bridge, London



Rethinking productivity

A personal reflection on an evening of honest conversation about work, workplaces, people and artificial intelligence

As people began arriving at The Ivy Tower Bridge, I was reminded why I enjoy hosting these dinners. You can choose a subject, circulate a paper and think carefully about the mix of people around the table, but you can never completely predict where the conversation will go.

Our roundtables are deliberately small, and places are highly sought after. We bring together people who have something useful to say, but who may never otherwise find themselves having the same conversation. This time, our guests came from property, facilities, workplace design, construction, programme management, recruitment, change and transformation. Some spend their days thinking about whole estates and investment decisions. Others are much closer to the daily reality of people, projects, clients and buildings that need to work properly.

At BMG, we see what happens after a workplace decision has been made. We see the carefully planned moves, the last-minute changes, the pressure placed on operational teams and the difference between an office that looks impressive and one that genuinely helps people do their jobs.

There were no oversized personalities waiting to take over the evening. People arrived thoughtfully, listened properly and gave one another room. At first, the conversation was measured. By the time the starters were on the table, that reserve had gone. A comment from one end of the table would be picked up at the other, challenged, debated and sometimes turned on its head.

We came to talk about productivity. We soon realised that we did not all mean the same thing by it.

Rachel Houghton,
Managing director
Business Moves Group





A question of measurement

I started with a simple question: what do organisations measure too much, and what do they fail to measure enough?

The answers came quickly and included presence, cost, occupancy, completed tasks, and time. These are all relatively easy to count, which is probably why they appear so often on dashboards. The harder things followed, such as judgement, relationships, learning, attention, creativity, customer value and the quiet friction that builds between teams. Those are much more difficult to put into a neat monthly report, yet they are often where performance is won or lost.

One guest described the difference between being busy and being useful. Another questioned whether a project delivered on time could really be called productive if it failed to achieve the result it was meant to create. A recruitment perspective noted that making a placement is an output, but the real value may be whether that person performs, develops and stays.

That led us to cost. Cutting cost can be the right decision, but a saving in one part of a business often reappears as pressure somewhere else. Reduce office space too far and people cannot come together when they need to. Remove support and expensive specialists begin doing basic administration. Squeeze a service and another team waits longer for an answer. The saving is visible; the transferred cost is not.

This was the first point at which the room really came alive because everyone had seen it. A perfectly reasonable target for one department can create an entirely unreasonable working day for somebody else.

The national picture

UK output per hour in the final quarter of 2025 was only 2.4 per cent higher than the 2019 average. More importantly, the slowdown in national productivity began around the financial crisis in 2008. It started long before widespread hybrid working, although where people work has somehow become the explanation for almost everything.

That does not mean place is irrelevant. It means the office is not the only factor. Investment, leadership, skills, process, technology, regulation and organisational design all matter. The better question is not simply whether somebody is productive at home. It is whether the business is turning people's time, capability and working environment into something of genuine value.

The hybrid working debate

It would have been easy for the conversation to divide into two camps, but it did not. Nobody claimed that working from home is always better, and nobody pretended that sitting in an office automatically makes a person more productive.



An office can be full and still achieve very little

What people did recognise was the Tuesday to Thursday problem. When most employees and decision makers choose the same three days, the whole working week is squeezed into the middle. Meetings, approvals, visitors, catering, facilities support and client activity all peak together. One group gains flexibility, while another has to absorb the pressure created by it.

The research gives good reason not to dismiss hybrid working. A randomised trial involving 1,612 graduate employees at Trip.com found that working from home for two days a week did not damage measured performance or promotion prospects, and resignations fell by roughly one third. That is a meaningful result, particularly at a time when attracting and retaining good people remains difficult.

But the table was equally interested in what those figures cannot tell us. If somebody starts work during the hour they once spent commuting, then returns to emails after dinner, their output may rise because their working day has quietly become longer. That is not necessarily a sustainable productivity gain – it may simply be hidden overtime.

By the main course, there was broad agreement that the argument about a fixed number of office days is too blunt. The purpose of being together matters more. Some work needs quiet and concentration. Other work needs a quick decision, a sensitive conversation, access to specialist facilities or the chance to learn from somebody with more experience. Presence should have a reason.

As somebody who has spent most of my working life helping organisations change and use their workplaces, I found this part of the conversation especially important. Occupancy data is valuable because it tells us when people arrive, where they sit and how space is being used. It does not tell us whether anything worthwhile happened while they were there.

A person can sit at a desk all day and spend most of it being interrupted. Another can come in for two hours, solve a difficult problem with a colleague and leave having created far more value. Counting the occupied desk without understanding the activity only gives us half the story.

The guests who work closest to property and workplace decisions were clear that different buildings need to do different jobs. A London office used by senior professionals and clients may need space for events, networks and relationship building. A regional service centre may need dependable technology, sensible team adjacencies and fewer barriers between people who rely on one another. Consistency matters, but identical offices do not.

We also talked about the temptation to use amenities as a shortcut to culture. Good coffee, food and beautiful design can make a workplace more enjoyable. They cannot repair poor leadership, weak communication or a lack of purpose. People may visit a beautiful office once because it is new; they return because being there helps them and because they feel part of something.

Three apples tall

As the evening progressed, we stopped talking about buildings and began talking about how people learn.

Most of us begin watching, copying and learning from the adults around us when we are about three apples tall. We notice how they speak to people, how they react when something goes wrong and how they behave when they think nobody is watching. We do not call it development – we are simply absorbing what happens around us.

Work is not so different. A young person learns by hearing an experienced colleague handle a difficult call, watching somebody repair a client relationship, noticing when it is better to pick up the telephone than send another email, and seeing how a good manager behaves when there is no obvious answer.

The phrase three apples tall made people laugh, but it also changed the mood. Around the table were people from very different professions, yet everyone could remember somebody they had learnt from simply by being near them.

Several guests now see gaps in telephone confidence, face to face communication, email judgement and the ability to deal with ambiguity. This was not an attack on younger people, but an honest acknowledgement that many have had fewer opportunities to observe working life at close quarters, particularly if their education and early careers were disrupted by the pandemic.

Apprenticeships, placements, graduate academies and structured mentoring all came into the discussion. The important point was that development can no longer be left to chance. If people are not together as often, organisations must become much more deliberate about creating the moments in which knowledge, confidence and judgement are passed on.

The impact of AI

The topic of AI got people very animated. Guests talked about analysing employee feedback, structuring information, testing the tone of an email, and asking a system to look at a problem from the perspective of finance, human resources or management.

One example that stood out to me was the same paper being given to an AI tool twice, but with different context. The feedback changed significantly, which is a useful reminder that AI does not possess an independent understanding of the business. The quality of the answer depends heavily on the quality of the question, the context supplied and the judgement of the person reviewing it.

There is no doubt that the productivity gains can be substantial. A study of 5,179 customer support agents found that a generative AI assistant increased the number of issues resolved per hour by 14 per cent on average. For novice and lower skilled workers, the improvement was 34 per cent.



That sounds entirely positive until we consider the contradiction. Less experienced people may receive the greatest immediate benefit, but they are also the least likely to spot when an answer is wrong. Experienced people may gain less speed because they already know the work, yet they have the judgement needed to challenge what the system produces.

What happens to the missing middle

The conversation then moved from today's efficiency to tomorrow's workforce. Junior employees have traditionally built expertise through routine research, administration and analysis. If AI completes that work, businesses may remove cost and gain speed, but they may also remove the training ground in which professional judgement develops.

The familiar organisational pyramid could begin to look more like a diamond, with fewer junior and intermediate roles supporting a smaller group of experienced specialists. While that may look efficient on a chart, several years later the business may discover that it has too few people ready to step into senior roles.

This is one of the questions I left the evening thinking about most. We should not preserve repetitive work simply because it has always existed. But if we automate it, we must replace the learning that came with it.

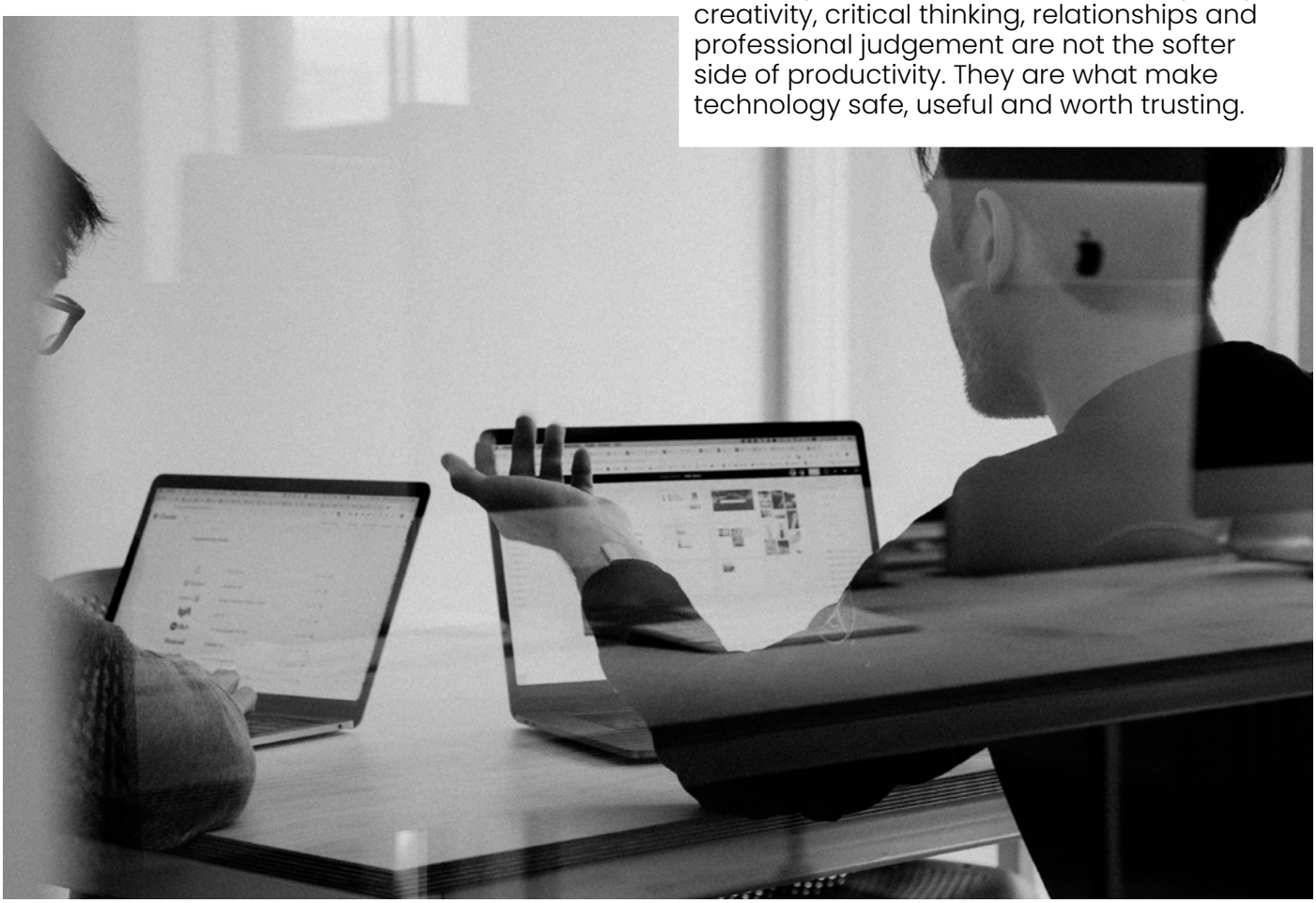
The conversation became quieter

Data and decisions that affect people's lives – such as in medicine, law, recruitment – brought a different atmosphere to the table. If an automated system produces the wrong answer, who is responsible for the consequence? The machine cannot apologise, explain its judgement or accept professional responsibility.

Removing emotion may appear to make a decision more consistent, but emotion is not always a flaw. Empathy, context and an understanding of human consequences matter. The group was not arguing that AI has no place in high-stakes work, but that the boundary between technological support and human accountability must be clear.

Privacy and surveillance were also concerns. Discreet cameras make it harder to know when a conversation is being recorded. Candidate, employee and client information can be exposed through tools that have not been properly governed. Every use of an AI tool comes with an energy and water cost.

What came through strongly was that human skills do not become less important as technology improves – they become more important. Communication, empathy, creativity, critical thinking, relationships and professional judgement are not the softer side of productivity. They are what make technology safe, useful and worth trusting.



What I took away from the evening

We did not leave with a new universal productivity score, and I am glad we did not try to invent one. Productivity means different things in different organisations, roles and moments. What matters is being honest about the outcome we are trying to create and equally honest about the cost of creating it.

A business can reduce expenditure and make work harder. It can fill an office and achieve very little. It can automate a task and weaken the route through which its future leaders learn. It can give people flexibility while concentrating pressure on the teams that support them. None of these decisions is necessarily wrong, but all of them need to be seen holistically.

The evening worked because of the mix around the table. The property view met the operational view. Workplace design met organisational culture. Technology met professional judgement. People disagreed without becoming defensive, and nobody needed to dominate for the conversation to have real energy.

By the time coffee arrived, the original question had changed. We were no longer asking where people work best or how much activity a business can count. We were asking whether our organisations are becoming more capable, more thoughtful and better able to create value without exhausting the people who make that possible.

Productivity is not simply doing more. It is creating better outcomes without quietly moving the cost somewhere else.

Questions worth taking back to your business

Area	Question
Outcome	What are we genuinely trying to improve, and for whom?
Measures	Are we counting activity because it is easy, or measuring the result that matters?
Hidden cost	Where has the work, pressure or risk moved when we claim an efficiency?
Place	Which activities are better together, and have we designed the workplace around them?
Learning	How will less experienced people observe, practise and develop judgement?
Technology	Who checks the answer, protects the data and owns the consequence?
Capacity	What higher value work will fill the time released by technology?

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