

Back to the Office: Balancing Business Goals and Employee Needs



The Return-to-Office Dilemma: Balancing Company Needs and Talent Expectations



The workplace is still in flux. The initial scramble to implement remote work policies during the pandemic has diminished, but now there are deeper decisions to make. How do companies balance business needs with an ongoing employee demand for flexibility?

83% of employees worldwide still want hybrid work. They've tasted flexibility and autonomy, and they want more. At the same time, companies are worried about maintaining collaboration, productivity, and company culture in the age of hybrid work.

There's no easy solution.

Finding the right strategy is equally complex worldwide, as candidates continue to prioritise flexibility and work-life balance.

Ultimately, if you want to attract and retain the right talent in 2025, you'll need to quickly develop your **RTO roadmap**.



The Current Landscape: Flexibility Everywhere



The workplace today has changed dramatically. Once, remote and hybrid work was just an emergency response to a complex situation; now, it's what talented candidates expect.

Of course, hybrid maturity varies worldwide.

In the UK, about 28% of adults follow a hybrid schedule. In the US, more than 50% of employees are hybrid workers. According to the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 37% of Australians worked from home at least once a week throughout 2023, a significant increase from the pre-pandemic level of just 13% of full-time workers.

Adoption is even higher among knowledge-based professionals, with 96% of Australian knowledge-based workers working hybrid or fully remote and 69% of employers now offering hybrid work arrangements.

28%

IN THE UK

**FOLLOW A HYBRID
SCHEDULE**

The main reason for the shift is a change in candidate priorities. Employees don't just want a wage anymore; they want to work with companies that don't treat their health, well-being, or personal priorities as an afterthought.

However, while empowering, hybrid models can be complex. Flexibility is liberating for some employees, while others struggle to find a balance between their work and home lives. At the same time, leaders struggle to preserve the benefits of in-person collaboration in a hybrid setting.

The Business Case for the Office Return



On the surface, the demand for hybrid work seems great for businesses. They benefit from happier employees who suffer less burnout and feel more engaged. Plus, many companies have found that hybrid work can reduce operational costs at scale.

However, hybrid work also has challenges.

Although teams embrace technology to help bridge communication gaps, collaboration still thrives in the office. [A Stanford University study even found that teams working in physical offices generate 15% more ideas than remote workers.](#)

When employees share a physical space, interactions are more organic and dynamic. Quick hallway chats turn into game-changing ideas, and a junior employee gains invaluable mentorship by brainstorming with a seasoned professional.

A [STANFORD UNIVERSITY STUDY](#)
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Equity among team members can also improve. Many leaders struggle to give remote workers the attention they offer in-person staff. Proximity bias can be a real problem, particularly for companies with larger teams.

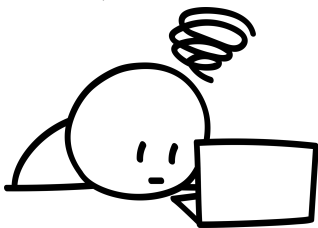
However, it's not just human connections and company culture that benefit from RTO mandates. Physical spaces cost money. Globally, companies spend billions on real estate, furniture, utilities, and infrastructure annually. These spaces weren't designed to house people; they were built to enable focus, collaboration, and innovation. Walking away from those investments is difficult, particularly when budgets are tight.

The Talent Perspective: Shifting Priorities



From the perspective of employees, things that used to be considered perks (flexible hours, remote options, and autonomy) are now crucial. A Guardian global survey found that work-life balance is the most important factor for any employee choosing a role, even ranking higher than salary.

Demand for flexibility is even higher among certain cohorts. Millennials and Generation Z employees crave mental wellbeing, meaning, and freedom in their roles. They want to design professions that work for them, rather than just accepting jobs that pay the bills.



Burnout is rampant, and candidates view companies that offer flexible and remote work options as more willing to actively support their mental health. They're also more likely to see those companies as innovators in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion. When companies can hire team members from anywhere, they align teams from numerous different backgrounds and walks of life.

Simply ignoring that employees today choose workplaces that align with their lives (not the other way around) isn't an option. That's why so many rigid return-to-office mandates have failed, causing massive turnover, workplace tension, and higher recruitment costs.



Developing Your RTO Strategy: Decision-Making Ideas



Simply asking employees to return to the office full-time won't work for most employers.

The truth is, no single model fits every team, role, or person. The companies that get the right results are the ones that don't just roll out rules. They build flexible frameworks grounded in trust, data, and understanding. Here's how to start building your strategy.

- ★ Ask yourself why it matters before asking people to show up at a desk. What value does the office add for them, not just for the business?
- ★ Some types of work thrive in an in-person environment. Employees who need to interact regularly with colleagues or customers, or mentor other staff members, benefit from real-world human connections. But not every task requires a dedicated desk.
- ★ Deep-focus work, writing, coding, and data analysis can often be done better from the quiet of home. Define which roles need an in-office environment, and exactly how frequently team members need to be in the office to get the best results.

Once you've gathered the "what" and the "why," you can start shaping a flexible model that respects both business goals and individual work styles.

Remember, your RTO policies don't have to be carved in stone; they can evolve with your people and your business.



RTO Policy Implementation: Ideas for Success

A good return-to-office policy on paper means nothing if it lands flat in practice. Implementation isn't just about sending out emails and updating your online schedule. Here are some top tips for initiating an RTO mandate that doesn't drive your top people away.

Start Small with Pilot and Phase-In Approaches

Change in the workplace is easier to manage when it's delivered in small doses. Rather than rolling out a full company-wide policy overnight, start with pilot programs. Select a few diverse teams and test various hybrid models.

Remember, different teams may work better with other frameworks. The product team could excel with two in-office days a week, while the marketing team prefers a fully remote setup with regular monthly sync-ups. Track what works, and use that to guide you.



RTO Policy Implementation: Ideas for Success



Invest in Tools that Support Flexibility

If you're asking people to work in new ways, you need to give them the tools to do so correctly. This could include smart scheduling platforms, digital calendars, virtual collaboration tools, and desk booking and space management systems.

Experiment with project management tools and cutting-edge communication solutions designed to bring people together in inclusive, immersive video meetings. Ask your team members what kind of technology they need to work more effectively wherever they are, and give your business leaders the resources to track performance metrics for all employees.



RTO Policy Implementation: Ideas for Success

Measure What Matters and Keep Evolving

A return-to-office strategy shouldn't be a one-and-done decision. It should be alive, and adaptive, informed by real results and honest feedback.

Track what really matters:

- ✓ Are people engaged?
- ✓ Are teams collaborating better?
- ✓ Has productivity improved, or dropped?
- ✓ Are we losing good people because of our policies?

Use surveys, retention data, performance insights, and regular pulse checks. Build a rhythm of reflection. Adjust when needed. The best leaders in 2025 aren't chasing perfection, they're staying curious, agile, and open. The right RTO strategy shouldn't actually be about "going back", but about moving forward. The workplace and your employees will continue to change, and there's no one-size-fits-all answer to keeping both your stakeholders and your teams happy.

The only way to thrive is to experiment. Use data and insights to guide your decisions, and resist the urge to stunt flexibility to avoid complexity.

Recognise that productivity doesn't always come from presence, and remember that putting your employees needs first often pays off more than you'd think.



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