



HR INSIGHTS

A MORETON & COMPANY HUMAN RESOURCES NEWSLETTER

Addressing Workers' Refusal to Return to the Office

Many employers have instructed employees to return to the office, either full time or for a specified number of days per week. Despite employers' efforts, many employees have refused to give up remote work. In fact, numerous organizations, including large corporations like Amazon, Apple and Twitter, are currently struggling with workers refusing to follow return-to-office (RTO) orders. Employee refusals have caused some organizations to change course and soften RTO orders, while others have doubled down on their efforts to have employees return, threatening to terminate those who don't. The return-to-work battle that has been simmering for the last few years seems to be nearing a boiling point, leaving many employers in a difficult position.

Reasons Behind the Refusal

The COVID-19 pandemic caused many individuals to reprioritize work as a part of their life instead of the main focus. Additionally, during the pandemic, employers permitted employees to work from home out of necessity due to public health considerations and lockdown orders. This allowed employees to experience the benefits of working from home. Workers now prefer these flexible work arrangements because they feel they can remain productive at work but have more resources and personal time for families and hobbies by not having to commute. This has allowed employees to improve their work-life balance and general well-being. In fact, many workers restructured their lives around remote work by relocating to cheaper cities or moving closer to family.

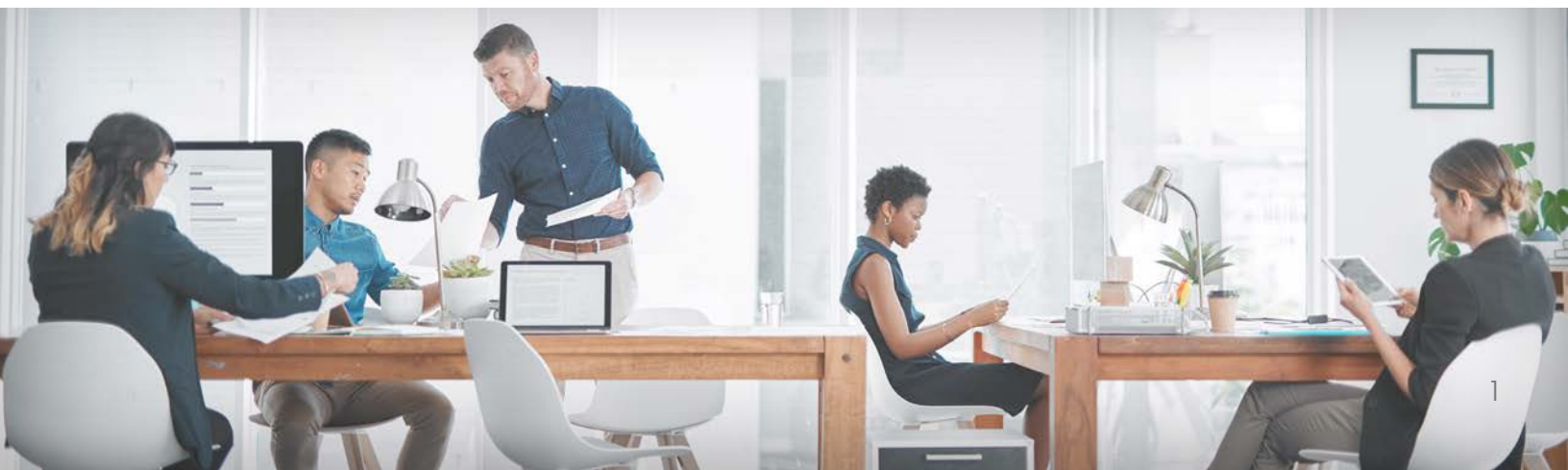
The Push to Return

Employers are concerned that remote and hybrid work arrangements have led to a drop in employee production. According to a Microsoft survey, 85% of leaders believe hybrid work has made it difficult to trust that employees are productive (even though 87% of remote and hybrid employees report they are productive at work). Only 12% of senior leaders have full confidence their employees are productive. Many employers believe that having employees return to in-office work will boost workforce productivity.

Other reasons employers want employees to return to the office include:

- Culture-building
- Collaboration
- Employee engagement
- Mentoring purposes
- Creativity
- Innovation

Organizations believe these activities are easier and more effective in the office. For example, according to research from Gartner, 61% of HR leaders feel that flexible work arrangements are negatively impacting employee engagement.





The Problem With RTO Orders

There are multiple reasons why RTO orders have not been successful. For one, workers have become accustomed to greater flexibility afforded by remote and hybrid work arrangements. According to Harvard Business Review, 65% of employees prefer to work remotely. Employee attitudes surrounding remote and hybrid work arrangements have resulted in some workers refusing to return to the office or not fully complying with RTO orders (e.g., going into the office a few days per week instead of the mandated amount).

With the potential of recession, many employers have informed their employees that they must return to in-office work or risk termination. For some of these individuals, even threats of termination are not persuasive enough to fully comply with RTO orders. A survey by Reli Exchange found that 40% of employees said they would find a new job if they were fired for not returning to the office, compared to 11% who would ask for their job back.

In the cases of employees returning to the office, they find that offices are largely empty. So, even when workers go into the office, many of their team members aren't there, leaving employees feeling like they don't gain anything by going to the office other than the hassle of a commute. Consequently, some workers have decreased the amount of time they spend in the office or stopped going in altogether. According to a recent Slack study, some workers who have returned to in-office work have experienced difficulties focusing, increased stress levels and less work satisfaction. This is leading to many workers questioning the benefits of in-office work.

Even when employers have mandated employees' return to the office, several have acquiesced to employee demands and refusals to return. Many employers have either backed down completely when asking employees to return or softened their demands. This is in large part due to the tight labor market. These employers fear that pressuring employees to return to work in the office would result in employees quitting en masse or a damaged reputation as well as hampering future recruitment efforts.

What Can Be Done

Employees' refusal to return to the office has highlighted the different understandings between employees and employers concerning the purpose of the office. While the majority of U.S. workers do not work from home, there is a battle being fought over the future of the workplace. Bringing employees back to the office ineffectively could result in reduced employee motivation, productivity and loyalty while increasing turnover. While every organization is unique, consider the following strategies when asking employees to return to the office:

- Determine the reasons why employees need to return.** Before the pandemic, in-office work was standard but not necessarily productive. While in-office work may be necessary for some positions or organizations, that does not hold true across all industries. Before asking employees to return to the office, employers should determine why they want this change and clearly articulate those reasons. They should explore how having people in the office will help achieve the organization's goals. For example, if collaboration is the main reason to have employees return, organizations need to establish guidelines to ensure collaboration happens in the office.



- **Obtain employee input.** How employers bring workers back into the office is just as important as whether they do. If employees feel they're being asked to do something unsustainable (i.e., return to the office full-time after fully-remote work), many may look for new opportunities or simply bide their time until new opportunities arise, reducing overall workforce productivity. By asking for employee input, employers are more likely to obtain buy-in and see a positive response to RTO orders.
- **Provide clear and concise guidelines.** Employees tend to judge an organization based on their culture, values and requirements. Since the pandemic, when, where and how employees work have come to represent an organization's values. Employers should establish policies regarding in-person work requirements that provide employees with a clear understanding of why they are being asked to return to the office and other work-related expectations, including how many days per week employees must work in the office. When employers clearly communicate their expectations, employees are more likely to comply. If employers decide to embrace hybrid work arrangements, they should ensure employees aren't spending time on tasks in the office that could be performed at home.
- **Support employees during the transition.** Employers should give employees notice and time to prepare to return to the office. For best results, employers should consider announcing RTO orders several weeks in advance. Since this transition may be difficult for some employees, employers can provide coaching or classes to help employees prepare for and readjust to in-office work.
- **Consider providing employees with a choice.** Some organizations need individuals working in the office every day due to business needs. But for many, hybrid work may be a better solution. Flexible work arrangements have been shown to lead to increased innovation, positive workplace culture and increased employee well-being. Providing workers with a greater level of choice in terms of where and how they work can increase engagement, loyalty and overall employee satisfaction.



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