

# How to Implement an Effective Return-to-Office Strategy

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While many companies have embraced remote-work arrangements, others have identified a need to bring employees back to the workplace, whether in a hybrid or entirely in-person fashion. Once the decision has been made to have employees return to the company office, a plan should be created to prepare for and minimize disruptions to the business.

Keep in mind that remote work has led many workers to feel less stressed by having more control over their lives, whether that's greater availability to care for school-age children, increased time for meal planning and exercise, or healthier budgets due to reduced transportation and clothing costs. Losing those benefits may be disempowering and bring about added stress, which can lead to lower performance and worse mental and physical health. Employers will do more harm than good not to recognize and plan for those factors.

The following guidance can help employers develop and implement a return-to-office (RTO) strategy that is both empathetic and effective.

## **Define the Reasons for Returning to the Office**

While leadership may feel the reasons for returning to the office are obvious, those who have been successfully working remotely may not see the benefits.

Vague assumptions about lost productivity and collaboration won't be supported by what employees are experiencing every day. Clear and transparent reasoning will be respected and trusted—even if not agreed with—putting the onus on employees to re-evaluate their own reluctance to return.

Steps to consider:

- Use internal data to tie the in-office requirement to business objectives. Which objectives does a return support, and how? Draw clear lines as to how the return to the office will enhance outcomes. For example, if a strategic objective for the company is to offer

innovative, cutting-edge products, having employees collaborating face-to-face can be more effective by allowing for more organic idea-sharing and brainstorming.

- Re-establish employee motivation for in-office work. People want meaningful jobs, so remind them how working at the same location has provided purpose in the past and will continue to do so. Were business relationships and social connections easier to grow in person? Is employees' ability to mentor young workers, or to be mentored by those above them, more impactful by sharing day-to-day interactions? Is the shared energy of being with others something the employer will actively use for new initiatives and culture improvements?
- Review the importance of new-employee onboarding, which research has shown is more effective when done in person. If available, offer data showing that employees who have onboarded in person have a greater likelihood of higher performance and a lower rate of turnover than those who onboarded remotely.
- Evaluate the use of incentives to encourage employees to return to the office by helping offset both commuting costs and the loss of scheduling flexibility. Incentives can range from actual payments to such common perks as free meals and onsite day care.
- Be prepared to provide assistance to employees who feel that a return to a physical location directly impacts their work/life balance and ability to care for themselves and others, including children, parents and other relatives.
- Relate the impact of remote work to the health of the community. Are nearby businesses struggling with fewer people coming into offices who would buy their products and services? Will the failure of those businesses negatively affect the success of the employer (reduced municipal tax revenue for the community, difficulties recruiting to the area, etc.), potentially causing internal job losses?

## **Conduct a Risk Assessment**

Before establishing an RTO strategy, an employer should perform a risk assessment for data analysis. Social distancing and hand sanitizer are no longer top of mind, and while safety measures and protocols should still be in place, analyzing potential challenges to the business, such as mass resignations or union organizing, will be key to an effective return strategy.

Surveying managers regarding their staffing concerns is a good place to start. Employee surveys may also prove useful—but as always, be aware of the negative impact of surveying without related follow-up action, as ignoring employee concerns can breed mistrust and disloyalty.

Steps to consider:

- Project both voluntary and involuntary employee terminations based on your return strategy, to assess staffing needs. Include anticipated employee retention costs.

- Consider the risk of union organizing due to a negative response to the return requirements.
- Investigate potential discrimination charges based on the possibility of workers with disabilities having to return; one protected class being more negatively affected than another; etc.
- Predict the impact on employee morale and any related costs needed to improve it.
- Ascertain whether the organization's culture might be negatively impacted and the costs to abate those effects.
- Determine recruiting challenges, such as a reduced labor pool due to the lack of, or limited, remote work, resulting in increased compensation levels to attract top talent.
- Assess the strength of your health and wellness benefits to mitigate increased employee stress and related physical and mental health issues.

## Develop the RTO Strategy

Using a data-informed approach, design a return strategy that best meets business objectives, employee concerns and risk abatement. Will the employer require a full five days in the office, a standardized three days in office and two at home, or a set number of expected days in the office at the manager's and/or employee's discretion? What are the exceptions to the in-office requirement, such as workers who need disability accommodations, employees currently living out-of-state or a set distance from the office, or other criteria? Also determine whether the return will occur in phases and how much notice is necessary to best support a successful return.

The strategy should also consider whether rewards or punishments will be used to enforce the return to the office. Either approach should be distributed equally, e.g., rewarding entire departments when a certain percentage of their employees return, or strictly enforcing the return-to-office policy and associated consequences to avoid allegations of favoritism.

Steps to consider:

- Make sure time in the office is well spent. Asking employees to return to the office only to sit at their desks for virtual meetings will likely not be well received.
- Determine whether new collaborative spaces will be created or whether there are other ways office space can be leveraged to support the objectives for returning to the office.
- Examine monetary incentives that may ameliorate certain risks found in the analysis. While leadership may find this unnecessary, consider it a cost of doing business and attach criteria as warranted. For example, offering a one-time bonus to employees can help cover expenses that a return to the office will bring, such as vehicle maintenance/repair and wardrobe updates.
- Evaluate consequences for nonreturning employees. Will there be a hard requirement to return by a certain date to remain employed, or will other options be available, such as a

required return to the office only for certain jobs? If employees have the option to continue working remotely, will that impact eligibility for promotions or other opportunities?

## **Establish and Deploy a Communication Strategy**

All communications should be clear and consistent. A good strategy will include separate messaging for people managers who will support and guide employees through the process, as well as information for all employees on key points and where to turn for more details. Ensure the RTO strategy is conveyed from the top down and that people managers are not left alone to handle the disruption.

Don't underestimate the fear and anxiety some employees may have about returning to the office. Ongoing communication, especially with empathetic messaging, will keep employees informed and on target to meet company expectations, which can reduce stress.

Steps to consider:

- Compose initial communications for email messaging, an intranet resource page or any other communication methods commonly used by the employer.
- Prepare additional messages to quickly respond to developments such as employee backlash, issues for those who relocated during the pandemic, and warnings regarding noncompliance with company expectations.
- Include positive messaging on goals and progress, such as in-office occupancy milestones and any related incentives; successful employee events; health and wellness support; and positive organizational culture or other business objective gains. Be inclusive of those who continue to work remotely to avoid a growing disconnect among remote, hybrid and in-person workers.

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