Making Returning To Office (RTO) Work

by Susan R. Vroman and Tiffany Danko

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There's a choice for RTO to work: Risk mandating office returns, or employ empathy in change management.

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Many companies and organizations today face the choice of formalizing flexible work policies or **requiring employees to return to the office** (RTO). From **Apple** to **Zoom**, **reversals in short-term pandemic policy** are causing disruption and **dissent**, with some like **Amazon** going so far as to authorize firing for recalcitrant workers. For companies seeking to bring employees back to the office, there is a choice to make: mandate RTO and **deal with the risks**, or employ **empathy in creating change** management plans. We recommend the latter.

Change Without a Plan

Many analysts have dissected the shifts to hybrid and remote work as well as the current trend to drive workers back to the office. Even the **federal government** is following the trend, with a stronger push to mandate a minimum number of days in office. With over 90% of **employers** expected to implement a return to office process by 2024, RTO is being driven by both internal drivers and external pressures.

Employee productivity is generally not the primary reason to resume office work, given that most indications are that U.S. worker **productivity actually went up since 2020**. Hybrid and remote work was very attractive to many employees; beyond the obvious benefit of less commuting, many groups **saw and felt gains** in representation, inclusion, and well-being. RTO, however, is being driven by **less-tangible** concepts than productivity perceived to have resulted from this work model, such as reduced communication and collaboration, less building of social capital, lack of cohesiveness of organizational

mission, and reduced professional development and learning. From an organizational perspective, Kim Pelzar, a Strategic Human Resources Consultant at Dogan-Pelzar Solutions, shared that it is "really hard to establish a culture virtually, or for organic mentorship to happen." In addition, she stated there are ongoing challenges in a remote/hybrid workplace of always-on expectations, combating employee loneliness, and there can be inequities in access to professional development as well.

Compounding these challenges is the fact that many of the processes we consider foundational to change management were not part of either the shift to hybrid and remote work, or the RTO process. **Often organizations** did not **take the opportunity** to **establish formal structures and processes** to successfully implement sustainable flexible work. **Surveys** indicate almost 50% of organizations have unclear or informal guidelines for flexible work (including hybrid and remote work), and almost 50% of employees did not know or understand the guidelines that did exist. This has been clear in the significant **challenges** that emerged with the RTO process, from coordination of in-office times to the actual requirements of RTO. In many cases, this was a result of the same **problems** extant in the recent hybrid/remote workplace processes- the lack of strategic planning and specific change management techniques to ensure adequate communication and understanding from employees, clear policies and requirements, and coordinated efforts across the organization. Pelzar suggests that "everyone made mistakes, now is the time to make a concerted and deliberate effort on what work will look like and formalize how things will operate, however that works best for the organization." In short, there needs to be a change management strategy.

Implications of Change

When you change work policies, it is highly probable that employees will experience **loss aversion**: what they are losing will outweigh potential gains and advantages, regardless of positive potential. As a result, the most likely effect of organizational change will be resistance. In the case of RTO, **resistance** arises due to both a desire to keep the flexibility that has been afforded to them and an uncertainty and fear of losing control. "If you want

to make a change, you need to address the concerns of the people you are impacting," suggests Kate Roloff, Lecturer of Management at Bentley University, "and this needs to come first, throughout, and after."

Stemming from the concept of **procedural fairness**, resistance to change can be mitigated through **demonstrated leadership support** ensuring that participants are part of the process and their feedback is incorporated. A related concept, **psychological safety**, is impaired when change happens without an explanation and when workers do not understand what is going on. "There are going to be negative emotions any time there is change, you need to give people the space for that," said Roloff, "fairness is one way of doing that while maintaining their trust."

In the realm of RTO, if you breach the trust and fairness thresholds, it is very likely that there will be consequences. "You will lose people, especially your top talent who are highly mobile" warned Roloff. Instead of bracing for impact, we asked several industry leaders for their thoughts for organizations planning to call employees back to the office.

What to do if you're considering RTO

1. Know why you're making the change.

When asked the question of how to plan for a change like returning to the office, the answer was unanimous: "If you're going to make a change, you need a reason" said Roloff.

Michael Klompus, Chief People Officer for UNICEF USA, "If you're going to make a change, you need to be able to answer the questions 'what problem are you solving' or 'what are you missing that *this* is the answer?'" If there is not a clear answer to these questions, it is time to pause. The way to garner trust is to have a very clear reason for why you are making changes and what the picture of the world will look like afterwards, as well as why you think it is important to create *that* picture.

It is equally important to be able to explain why you think the targeted change is appropriate.

Jeri Herman, Chief People Officer of Cengage Group, "to say 'I don't have any data that we need to return to the office, but I just know… that's frightening." She explained that not having a data-backed reason is essentially that management just "wants to see what you are doing." This kind of sentiment is the opposite of trust or psychological safety.

Herman added "time in the office can be the lever to fix things, but are you sure it is the right lever to pull?" It is crucial that you are basing your decisions to act on measured data, and that you have conveyed this to the population. As Klompus asserted, "you need to be able to explain why do you think this" to all of your stakeholders. So, if you have data that indicates that there are teams or departments that are not producing, meeting, or exceeding set expectations, study what is going on to identify potential levers to pull. Without that correlation, stop and ask why you are making the change.

2. Set Clear Expectations

Understanding that employees are seeking procedural fairness, it is important to ensure that the company values and mission are incorporated in major change initiatives. If there is a sense of dissonance, trust will be lost. And without trust, there is little hope for success.

"What is crucial to understand and ensure is clear is company expectations," shared an internal communications manager at a hospitality company. If a company says it values families then requires employees to come in five days a week without exception, employees will recognize this is not consistent and the decision for RTO will feel arbitrary. Furthermore, employees will **make sense** of what is happening in regards to enacting company values. Respect and care of people is a conscious choice.

At an organizational and leadership level, demonstrating a consideration for the employee experience and how changes to policy impact employees has a strong effect. Whether you use listening sessions, surveys, or hard data, RTO, like any major change to organizational processes, has to include both an understanding of and response to how the change impacts employees. Including stakeholder feedback and ensuring that the changes are perceived in alignment with the organization's values and mission can reduce a potential

negative personnel impacts. Communicating deliberate positive outcomes, like increased hands-on mentorship or professional development opportunities may even make your **strategy** a recruitment and retention tool.

3. Communicate early, throughout, and often

If you are considering a change to your work-place policy, or formalizing your informal processes that have developed, involve your employees through communications. Klompus asserts the path to change begins with knowing why you will change, then "overcommunicate the purpose for doing it and acknowledge what this will result in." On top of this, he recommends giving a clear runway for employees to reconcile the change and how they will adapt, if they choose to.

When UNICEF USA first went remote post Covid, it began a process of regular, bi-modal communication. In addition to town-hall broadcasted meetings and regular communications via Facebook/MetaWorkplace, it created and administered a survey each month to learn about employee wellbeing, needs, and general headspace. After each survey, with the spirit of transparency and learning, employees received reports of actual results and trended data. As the time came for employees to re-engage in their field-based work, Klompus recounted "we wanted to ensure employees had the space and grace to do what they needed" to feel and be organized returning to business as-the-new-normal. While there is not a requirement for any in-office work, as operations resumed, they were not met with resistance. Employees had seen how their voiced concerns were considered, and they felt respected.

The model of surveying employees to gather feedback, hesitations, hope and challenges is highly recommended starting early in the process. Before policies are even designed, look at the data or other indicators that RTO may eventually be appropriate, and communicate what you are thinking. For example, if employees feel that the culture is not the same as it once was, Pelzar suggests "ask them to give input on what they felt the culture was, what is missed, and how they feel they can try to get it back."

Using bi-modal communication will provide natural channels to share when and how data points indicate RTO as being an appropriate avenue to pursue, or not. It is also important to consider that either you will share the reasons for RTO, or your employees will **make sense of your actions on their own**, and gossip is rarely a positive force when it comes to organizational change.

4. Ensure you have what you need

If RTO is determined to be the best avenue to pursue, it is important to ensure you are ready in all aspects of operations. If employees will not come in all five days, you will need to determine **what is the right number** for your operations, and how. Considerations like what will the core hours be, how will time be used (working independently versus meetings), and how productive will employees be expected to be (versus when they had the time to focus at home).

Evaluating your organization's **physical space and capacity for RTO** is an important element. Do you have collaboration spaces appropriate for groups that may be in office for meetings and work groups? For the companies that downsized their leases, determining the distribution of basics like seats, desks, phones, and Wi-Fi capacity is a fundamental task when determining when and how employees should RTO. Even small things that nonetheless impact office culture like how stocked the office kitchen will be kept should be considered, along with if the office will incentive RTO with things like free breakfasts or food-trucks at lunch.

Beyond physical capacity, it is important to also consider how benefits may need to be revisited. From childcare, eldercare and petcare to providing gym access (beyond home Peloton subscriptions), employees may both want and need new means to support a lifestyle that requires leaving home. In addition, just because an employee works in the office does not rule-out flex-time options, so that PTO is not needed to go to a doctors appointment or attend a school play just because your organization has implemented RTO.

5. If it doesn't work, press pause

If your organization does decide to bring people back to the office, a final suggestion is to understand there may be some hiccups. If you are met with enough resistance or issues, it is OK to press "time out."

When it was considering a partial RTO, UNICEF USA gathered enough feedback to substantiate that employees truly felt they were performing better in hybrid modalities. While there are Intentional Engagement Days when leaders visit geographical hubs and meet with the staff there, employees living near office may come in to work as a choice.

At Cengage, there are teams that are working in hybrid mode and the leader has been able to articulate the reasons why it is important to do so, creating a compelling reason for people to gather. The "pull" vs. the "push" has been well received by the team. For most employees, going into the office on a regular basis is a personal choice, and while most do not, those who are grateful for the option.

Choosing to bring employees back to the office is not an easy or clear cut choice. The bottom line seems to be, if you are going to mandate RTO, you need to have a reason – and communicate it. Leading change effectively "involves treating people with fairness, respect, and asking for feedback before change happens," posits Roloff. While seemingly intuitive, when done right you will have your greatest potential for success.

Susan R. Vroman (Follow)

Susan's research interests include the impact leadership enactment has on organizational culture and employee engagement, with specific focus on supporting flexible work arrangements. Susan worked for over 20 years as an organizational effectiveness and strategic human resource management executive and advisor.

Tiffany Danko

Tiffany Danko is an Adjunct Professor at Bovard College, University of Southern California, and a Rear Admiral for the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve and has led multi-disciplinary efforts in emergency management, maritime and homeland security, intelligence, and international affairs. Her research focuses on leadership as well as homeland security and emergency management concerns.