

Returning to the Office Post-Pandemic: Challenges and Recommendations

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Dr Kuldeep Kaur, Dr Mamun Ala and Dr Syed Mohyuddin, Australian Institute of Business

One of the biggest challenges organisations face in mid-2022 is getting employees back to the office. While employers are excited to open the door to welcome employees, the employees do not seem to be as eager to return to the physical workspace. Many of these employees have been working from home for almost two years and have enjoyed this freedom, resulting in employees' disconnecting from their office spaces. Employees feel successful while working from home on the roles which are not considered on-desk roles, and now they do not trust the [suspicious reasons companies are giving for calling them back](#).

Many organisations are now bringing up a 'hybrid' future incorporating remote work and office time as the return-to-work approach. However, some companies want employees back in the office full-time or for more extended periods – and more frequently – than they had anticipated or hoped. Pushback movements from employees who want to keep their work-from-home privileges are just getting started as employers begin to reveal their post-pandemic visions for work ([Gupta, 2021](#)).

Leaders of even the most successful organisations are playing softly and using hard tactics to fill out the office spaces. Apple CEO Tim Cook planned a slow return to the office, starting from one day a week to three days, but even then, many Apple employees are unhappy to return to work. This [call-back-to-office movement has resulted in Apple losing top executives](#) to competitors and many more planning to quit the company. On the other hand, some leaders have gone to great lengths and [threatened the employees](#) to return to the office or otherwise face the consequences. One such example is Elon Musk's (CEO of Tesla) recent email to the executive staff forcing them to return to work (a minimum of 40 hours) or find a job elsewhere. Similar emails have been sent by Cathy Merrill (CEO of Washingtonian magazine) and James Gorman (CEO of Morgan Stanley) to their employees, threatening job security if they refused to return to the office.

In this article, we try to explore why employers push employees back to the office and why the employees resist going back to the office. We also discussed some recommendations for leaders to successfully transition the employees back to the office.

Concerns of Employers

It is quite [difficult for the employers](#) to bring employees back to the office, as remote work can be a very polarising issue in a scenario where many employees may believe that working from home is more productive, safer and comfortable. Although working from home provides many advantages to individual employees, there are also benefits for the organisations when employees physically return to work from the office. According to [Markman \(2021\)](#), working from home creates difficulties for new employees to understand and adjust to the organisational culture. It is also quite hard for employees to conduct collaborative teamwork while working remotely, as it requires a lot of pre-scheduled online meetings and discipline among the team members compared to on-site teams. Further, employees feel more sense of working towards the same organisational purpose while working in the office. Therefore, these reasons reinforce employers' concerns about employees who are resistant to return to the office in the post-COVID environment.

Sean Bisceglia, CEO of Curion, a US-based consumer product research and insights company, stated that during the pandemic, as employees worked from home, their productivity went sky high. Employees were sending emails late at night and early in the morning, which made him worried about his employees burning out. He also stated that he wanted his employees to return to office work as they were missing the spontaneity and ingenuity of creativity when working in a face-to-face physical environment ([Vasel, 2021](#)). Employers' primary concerns are not employee productivity under such conditions; their main concerns are about impacts these new working realities have on the organisational culture, especially for the learnings of the new employees. Further, since working in physically interactive office environments fosters innovation and productivity, employers are concerned about the detrimental effect of working from home on organisational development.

Concerns of Employees

Remote working was a [pleasant experience](#) for many individuals, if it meant being away from their toxic company culture. These employees perceive that they have more control over their work and are now hesitant to return to a surveillance environment. With the employers' initial signals that working from home will stay longer, many have relocated away from big cities. Employees do not trust the employers' reasons for returning to the office.

A survey of 5,889 American employed adults conducted in January 2022 by [Pew Research Center](#) reveals that 64% of participants believe that they are more productive while working from home and that balancing work with personal life is more manageable. Interestingly, most of these workers value flexibility more than co-worker connection. Women also reported more productivity (51% vs. 37%) and increased career advancement opportunities (19% vs 9%) as compared to men. Among those who had never worked remotely before the pandemic and presently work from home, 60% feel less connected to their co-workers.

Another survey of 1,000 workers conducted by Wakefield Research (in collaboration with [Envoy](#)) in early 2021 reveals that 66% of employees are reluctant to return to the physical workplace as they are concerned about their health and safety. About half of the participants (48%) preferred a hybrid work model. Many workers (47%) reported the likelihood of quitting their job, and others (41%) reported being ready to accept a new job with lower pay if the employer did not offer a hybrid work model after the pandemic. These results are concerning for employee-employer relationships and need to be addressed by both parties.

Recommendations

Leaders must reflect on their strategy during the pandemic while asking employees to work from home, whether in command style, request style, or working together to find the best solution and identify the lessons learned from all these styles. As workplaces reopen, managers should remember that many employees have worked from home for almost two years. Their mindset has changed, and they feel disconnected and isolated from the office. The after-effects of the pandemic, such as mental health issues and stress-associated behaviours (such as those related to family or finances), have not receded yet ([Orfei et al., 2022](#)). Therefore, resistance to change is a common reaction and needs to be addressed appropriately.

According to [Dierickx and Clark, 2021](#), excellent employee communication and allowing people to vent work-related concerns are crucial, and teams must adopt new tools and hybrid work patterns to restore business culture and collaboration. Leaders should create an environment where employees with rusty social skills can reconnect. Small gestures like praising the employee's previous in-office gestures, hosting "return to work" happy hours or group meals matter. Building trust by clearing doubts about employee safety, office protocols and expectations will enable nervous employees to visualise their return.

While hybrid workplaces will stay longer than expected and should now be considered as "new normal", leaders must abandon the conventional ["monitoring and managing"](#) strategy. Organisations can rely on technology such as AI-powered training and performance measurement, time monitoring technologies, facial recognition technologies, and passive monitoring tools to ensure staff productivity (while protecting employees' privacy). Remote technology can also be helpful in employee education and skills training to fulfil in-person criteria. Indulging in the transparent dialogue between both the parties, focusing on building trust and creating a supportive environment for the employees' will reap benefits for both the parties.



Dr Kuldeep Kaur

Lecturer in leadership, Australian Institute of Business.

Kuldeep is an enthusiastic lecturer and a competent researcher. She has previously worked at the University of South Australia and Flinders University and has over a seven-year of experience working in the industry. Her research focuses on job attitudes and employee behaviour.



Dr. Mamun Ala

Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Mamun is Lecturer in Strategic Management and International Business at the Australian Institute of Business. He also serves as the AIB Ethics Committee Coordinator and Indigenous Student Academic Mentor. With a PhD in Applied Economics (International trade regulation) from the University of South Australia (UniSA) and an MPhil in Management, Mamun taught eight years at UniSA and three years at Flinders University.



Syed Mohyuddin

Discipline Leader, Australian Institute of Business

Syed is a senior lecturer at AIB. He holds a PhD in Management from Curtin Business School, Curtin University, Perth (Western Australia). He has over ten years' experience teaching human resources and management courses in various universities. His PhD research work was related to the challenges faced by skilled migrants to achieve professional recognition in Australian organisations.