

# How Rigid Return-To-Office Mandates Might Cost You Your Best Talent

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As an executive career coach, I don't need news headlines to tell me work is changing: my new client consultation calendar says it all. My schedule is flooded with high-achieving employees looking to jump ship due to restrictive return-to-office mandates. And, the truth is, they make career coaching easy: they're employable, motivated, and ready to leave. In my group coaching community for women, the question dominating every conversation is where work happens—and what that says about power, trust, and choice at every level of leadership. The data corroborates the story I'm seeing play out in my coaching business. Neither full-time remote nor full-time in office is perfect, but the sweet spot is in the middle: flexibility. Unfortunately, when leaders get the balance wrong, they risk losing valuable talent. But it's not too late to get it right.

Leaders often frame return-to-office policies as a way to rebuild culture. In-person work, they hope, can boost engagement and retention, strengthen community, and spark innovation. On the surface, the logic makes sense: the "water cooler conversation" metaphor has come to symbolize those casual, unplanned interactions that can spark creativity and collaboration. Leaders want more of those. And they hope that by bringing people back into the office, they'll get them. Not only that, visibility can feel reassuring in times of uncertainty.

But the numbers reveal something else. Strictly enforcing in-office mandates can erode trust, connection, and engagement—ironically, the very elements leaders are trying to strengthen by bringing employees back to the office. Seventy percent of companies now have formal RTO policies, yet employee engagement in the U.S. has fallen to a 10-year low. Simply bringing people back to desks doesn't guarantee better work or a stronger culture; in some cases, it can have the opposite effect.

The companies that thrive long term will be those that approach culture not as a top-down directive, but as a co-created experience—with leaders and employees shaping it together.

I call this concept "flexible work" rather than RTO, WFH or even hybrid. Instead of a uniform top-down mandate, each employee has a custom-made schedule that they design in collaboration with their manager and team. Here's how it's distinct:

<b>Model</b>	<b>Core Belief</b>	<b>Who Holds the Power</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
RTO (Return-to-Office)	Culture comes from physical proximity.	Leadership	Compliance, not connection.
Work From Home (WFH)	Work can be done anywhere.	Employee	Freedom, but potential isolation.
Classic Hybrid	Balance between home and office is prescribed uniformly by leadership.	Organization	Often one-size-fits-all, still directive.
Flexible Work	Culture and performance come from trust, autonomy, and intentional connection.	Shared—leaders and employees co-create.	Engagement, retention, and belonging.

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## **The Data: What We’re Learning from RTO Mandates**

Productivity doesn’t necessarily improve in the office.

Despite the assumption that in-person work boosts performance, the data tells another story: there is no link between RTO mandates and measurable financial results. In many industries, productivity actually increased with remote flexibility. Physical presence isn’t the only thing that drives performance.

Turnover rises, especially for top performers.

RTO isn’t just unpopular—it’s pushing people away. Essential team members’ intent to stay drops 16% after strict RTO mandates hit, with women’s longer-term commitment even lower. Since the cost of replacing an individual employee can range from one-half to two times that employee’s salary, high turnover gets expensive quickly. Companies with looser guidelines have grown twice as fast as those with strict policies.

Trust and connection can decline with remote and hybrid work.

It’s not all rainbows and butterflies with hybrid and remote work, either. As you might suspect, it’s harder to connect with your coworkers when you’re physically apart. As a result, only 24% of hybrid and remote workers report feeling connected to their organization’s culture.

Flexibility works best.

For workers with high flexibility setups, a significantly higher portion of employees feel connected to organizational culture. The link is clear: trust and autonomy strengthen culture—not rigid mandates.

## **The Leadership Logic Behind RTO and How to Rethink It**

External factors play into RTO orders. Leaders are human. They want what's best for their companies and are having to make big calls based on limited data and gut instinct. Here are some of the most common reasons strict RTO mandates happen, and how leaders might reframe these issues into action.

Visibility bias.

Leaders equate seeing employees with productivity. In fact, 96% say they notice employees' contributions more in the office. Leaders aren't trying to punish employees—they're trying to bolster human connection and performance.

Reframe: Leaders can use this awareness to design outcome-based performance metrics (instead of presence- or activity-based performance metrics), getting reassurance without requiring constant vigilance. Some examples include:

Client satisfaction: Track the tangible impact of employees' work through client surveys, renewal rates, or project outcomes rather than time spent in the office.

Quality of deliverables: Assess work against clear standards for excellence, like accuracy, creativity, completeness, so results speak louder than presence.

Peer feedback: Incorporate structured peer evaluations to capture the value of collaboration, reliability, and cross-functional contribution.

Engagement scores: Use pulse surveys or engagement data to gauge how invested employees feel in their work and team.

Inexperience with hybrid leadership.

Few leaders have been trained to lead a hybrid team. It requires new skills: running meetings where employees are both physically present and joining remotely, evaluating performance based on deliverables rather than day-to-day visibility, and keeping communication flowing even when the office isn't full. Without these skills, many default to what they know: calling everyone back in person.

Reframe: Teaching managers hybrid leadership skills can turn uncertainty into trust and engagement, and make them more effective.

Train your managers to lead hybrid teams. Provide sessions on running meetings with in-office and remote participants, focus on outcomes instead of observation, and help them understand how to maintain the right cadence of communication across locations.

Learn from others. Shadow organizations that are doing hybrid well to see what works. Borrow tips and tricks for your own team.

Encourage innovation. Give managers and teams the freedom to experiment with new tools and technology. If they feel empowered to shape how they work, their flexible environment will be successful.

Culture nostalgia.

Many people long for the office energy where they built their careers. Less than 6% of U.S. employees worked from home full-time before the pandemic, but now, it's the norm. The workforce has changed, and so has the definition of work culture.

Reframe: Times have changed, but the energy and connection that made in-office work meaningful don't have to be lost. Flexible workplaces allow companies to preserve what was special about those moments—collaboration, camaraderie, and creativity—while also supporting employee productivity, autonomy, and well-being. Here are some suggestions:

- Select 1–3 in-office days a week for your team or company
- Plan a quarterly off-site with your team
- Run “work from anywhere” weeks a couple of times a year
- Host hybrid all-hands meetings
- Use office time intentionally

Real estate cost pressure.

Long leases or underused office spaces may create financial pressure. Leaders may feel compelled to bring people back to the office so the space isn't wasted.

Reframe: The real cost to watch isn't office space—it's talent loss. Compared to the price of turnover driven by inflexible RTO mandates, the investment in flexibility is comparatively minimal. Think of the office as a cultural hub for purposeful gatherings, not a mandatory destination. Here are a few examples:

- Quarterly town halls that bring the whole organization together for learning and alignment
- Brainstorming or pitch prep to hone in on problems and sharpen skills in a high-energy collaborative setting
- Orientation for new hires to build belonging from day one
- A destination for local businesses in your community to gather and collaborate
- Celebrations and milestone events to reinforce purpose and lift up successes

Equity and fairness.

Not all roles can be hybrid or remote, of course. When flexibility is unevenly applied or rules are not universally enforced, credibility can erode.

Reframe: Leaders can offset this by introducing other options for autonomy—like staggered schedules, project-based flexibility or compressed weeks—where possible to maintain fairness and trust. Here are a few ways to do this:

Survey your workers. Ask them what types of flexibility they value most—and design options around their needs.

Communicate the “why.” Be transparent about which roles and tasks require in-office work and how those decisions connect to organizational goals.

Check in regularly. See what’s working, and where more flexibility is needed for your in-office team.

Offer special perks to employees whose jobs require them to be in-office every day, like free daily lunch. The key here is to ask those employees which perks would be most meaningful to them.

### **What Forward-Thinking Companies Are Doing Differently**

Some companies aren’t just talking about strengthening culture—they’re designing for it.

Airbnb has turned flexibility into strategy. Its 2022 “Live and Work From Anywhere” policy lets employees choose where they live and work with no pay penalties. CEO Brian Chesky has reframed flexibility as a trust-based culture choice, not a perk. The payoff: lower turnover, increased diversity, and serious buzz—more than 800,000 people have visited Airbnb’s careers page after the policy was announced.

Salesforce has built structure into flexibility. Employees pick from three models: in-office, hybrid, and remote. It’s working: 92% say their teams collaborate effectively in a flex environment and 94% of employees are willing to go the extra mile to get the job done.

Bank of America has focused on family. It offers back-up childcare and reimbursement for ongoing care expenses. This matters: 86% of working parents say childcare benefits make them more likely to stick with their employer.

The future of culture isn’t about where people sit. It’s about how companies build trust, flexibility, and real support into the employee experience—by listening to employees.

### **What Leaders Need to Know**

Good office culture lives in the gray zone of flexibility, not the extremes of full-time WFH or rigid RTO. Companies that master this sweet spot retain talented employees. Flexibility earns worker loyalty, engagement, and performance in a way that no mandate ever could.