



Wisdom of the Crowd: The Return to Office Debate

Community

Employment and Labor

Law Department Management



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In a recent facilitated discussion, 48 ACC members talked about how their organizations are approaching work-from-home policies, what they are worried about, and how they are moving forward. The dialogue was conducted under the Chatham House Rule so no speakers nor organizations are identified.

The COVID-19 pandemic is receding ever further into the distance. And yet, it seems like the aftershocks are still occurring. One prominent reminder is the return-to-office debate. ACC members felt hybrid work is here to stay, with an increasing trend toward mandatory days in the office.

Where things stand

Office policy has to start with leadership

An organization's leadership needs to set the tone. They need to ask: What are our customers expecting of us? Is in-person collaboration needed?

Leadership needs to quantify the productivity of retaining an office against the cost of rent. It's a fact that offices are largely sitting empty a few days a week. While it may be easy to calculate rent costs, it's much harder to the impact of in-office on culture and retention.

Once a decision has been made, leaderships needs to model it. If they have settled on a heavy office presence, they need to show why it's so important for everyone to be present.

There's workforce tension

Whether it's generational friction between in-office Boomers and Gen Z workers who prefer to work from home, or from white-collar workers working from desks and blue collar workers in a factory, there is considerable angst in the ranks.

Being flexible and trying to please everyone is a difficult task. But while difficult, it's not impossible. Empathy is key to finding that balance.

There's wide industry variance

Certain industries always require in-person workers. From retail to factories to research-and-design, there are job functions that need someone to be physically present.

Potential problems

Hiring

Employees who were hired during the pandemic are tied to the promises made to them during their initial hiring. Some employees are fully remote, hundreds of miles from the nearest office. Unless the company wants to relocate them or replace them, there has to be a policy to address their positions.

The flexibility of remote work has, it seems, allowed for greater economic, geographic, and gender diversity. There's a concern that mandatory in-office policies could reduce the employee pool.



Some workers find remote management frustrating. Chay_Tes / Shutterstock.com

Being clear about in-office requirements is required for job postings now.

Management

New hires need to understand what's expected of them and how they will be evaluated. Some are looking for mentorship and recognition, which requires being seen. It can be tricky to manage remotely and supervisors are struggling to find the right approach. Many ACC members noted that it takes longer to establish trust when managing remotely.

But there are problems with employees who don't come into the office on a regular basis. Many of these employees have home commitments that make it difficult for them to keep a "normal" office schedule.

Some members felt these developments were part of the shift in power from management to employees.

Political pressure

Companies with downtown offices are being pressured to get their employees into the office to boost tax revenue and justify the cost of rent to board members.

The future of work

There's a consensus: Hybrid and remote work is here to stay. Clear communication, especially about the benefits of office engagement, flexibility to allow for collaboration, and excellent technology support will help organizations as they find their way forward.

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