

HR Insights

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Addressing Workers' Refusal to Return to the Office

Many employers have instructed employees to return to the office, either full time or for a specified number of days per week. Despite employers' efforts, many employees have refused to return to in-office work. In fact, numerous organizations, including large corporations like Amazon, Apple and Twitter, are currently struggling with workers refusing to follow return-to-office (RTO) orders. Employee refusals have caused some organizations to change course and soften RTO orders, while others have doubled down on their efforts to have employees return, threatening to terminate those who don't. The return-to-work battle that has been simmering for the last few years seems to be nearing a boiling point, leaving many employers in a difficult position.

This article explores why employers are struggling with RTO orders and what they can do about it.

Reasons Employees Refuse to Return

While some employees have returned to the office in response to RTO orders, many have not. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many individuals to reprioritize work as a part of their life instead of the main focus. Additionally, during the pandemic, employers permitted employees to work from home out of necessity due to public health considerations and lockdown orders. This allowed employees to experience the benefits of working from home. Workers now prefer these flexible work arrangements because they feel they can remain productive at work but have more resources and personal time for families and hobbies by not having to commute. This has allowed employees to improve their work-life balance and general well-being. In fact, many

workers restructured their lives around remote work by relocating to cheaper cities or moving closer to family.

Reasons Employers Want Employees to Return

Employers are concerned that remote and hybrid work arrangements have led to a drop in employee production. According to a Microsoft survey, 85% of leaders believe hybrid work has made it difficult to be confident that employees are productive (even though 87% of remote and hybrid employees report they are productive at work). Only 12% of senior leaders have full confidence their employees are productive. Many employers believe that having employees return to in-office work will boost workforce productivity.

Other reasons employers want employees to return to the office include:

- Culture-building
- Collaboration
- Employee engagement
- Mentoring purposes
- Creativity
- Innovation



Organizations believe these activities are easier and more effective in the office. For example, according to research from Gartner, 61% of HR leaders feel that flexible work arrangements are negatively impacting employee engagement. Therefore, employers believe employee engagement will improve by returning to in-office settings.

Why RTO Orders Are Not Working

There are multiple reasons why RTO orders have not been successful. For one, workers have become accustomed to greater flexibility afforded by remote and hybrid work arrangements. According to Harvard Business Review, 65% of employees prefer to work remotely. Employee attitudes surrounding remote and hybrid work arrangements have resulted in some workers refusing to return to the office or not fully complying with RTO orders (e.g., going into the office a few days per week instead of the mandated amount).

With the potential of recession, many employers have informed their employees that they must return to in-office work or risk termination. For some of these individuals, even threats of termination are not persuading them to fully comply with RTO orders. A survey by insurance and financial services platform Reli Exchange found that 40% of employees said they would find a new job if they were fired for not returning to the office, compared to 11% who would ask for their job back.

In the cases of employees returning to the office, they mostly find that offices are largely empty. So, even when workers go into the office, many of their team members aren't there, leaving employees feeling they don't gain anything by going to the office other than the hassle of a commute. Consequently, some workers have decreased the amount of time they spend in the office or stopped going in altogether. Additionally, according to a recent Slack study, some workers who have returned to in-office work have experienced difficulties focusing, increased stress levels and less work satisfaction. This is leading to many workers questioning the benefits of in-office work.

Further, even when employers have mandated employees' return to the office, several have acquiesced to employee demands and refusals to return. Employers

have either backed down completely when asking employees to return or softened their demands. This is in large part due to the tight labor market. Many employers fear that pressuring employees to return to in-office work would result in employees quitting in mass or would damage their organization's reputation, hampering future recruitment efforts.

Considerations for Addressing Employees' Refusal to Return to the Office

Employees' refusal to return to the office has highlighted the different understandings between employees and employers concerning the purpose of the office. While the majority of U.S. workers do not work from home, there's currently a battle about where employees will perform their work in the future. This is a tricky issue for several organizations that requires balancing various considerations. If bringing employees back to the office is not executed properly, it could result in reduced employee motivation, productivity and loyalty in addition to increased turnover. While every organization is unique, employers can consider the following strategies when asking employees to return to the office:

- **Determine the reasons why employees need to return.** In many instances, workers return to the office because they are told to, not because there's a particular reason for them to do so. Before the pandemic, in-office work was standard but not necessarily the most effective way to perform work. While in-office work may be necessary for some organizations or positions, it may be outdated for some industries and professions. Before asking employees to return to the office, employers should determine why they want employees in the office and clearly articulate those reasons. They should explore whether having people in the office will help achieve the organization's goals. For example, if collaboration is the main reason to have employees return, organizations need to establish guidelines to ensure collaboration happens in the office.

- **Obtain employee input.** How employers bring workers back into the office is just as important as whether they do. If employees feel they're being asked to do something unsustainable (i.e., return to the office full-time), many may look for new opportunities. Employees who don't may simply bide their time until new opportunities arise, reducing overall workforce productivity. By asking for employee input, employers are more likely to obtain buy-in and have employees respond positively to RTO orders.
- **Provide clear guidelines.** Employees tend to judge an organization based on their culture, values and requirements. Since the pandemic, when, where and how employees work have come to represent an organization's values. Employers should establish policies regarding in-person work requirements that provide employees with a clear understanding of why they are being asked to return to the office and other work-related expectations, including how many days per week employees must work in the office. When employers clearly communicate their expectations, employees are more likely to comply. Additionally, if employers decide to embrace hybrid work arrangements, they should ensure employees aren't spending time on tasks in the office that could be performed at home.
- **Support employees during the transition.** Employers should give employees notice and time to prepare to return to the office. For best results, employers should consider announcing RTO orders several weeks in advance. Since this transition may be difficult for some employees, employers can provide coaching or classes to help employees prepare for and readjust to in-office work.
- **Consider providing employees with a choice.** Some organizations need individuals working in the office every day due to business needs. But for many, hybrid work may be a better solution. Flexible work

arrangements have been shown to lead to increased innovation, positive workplace culture and increased employee well-being. Providing workers with a greater level of choice in terms of where and how they work can increase engagement, loyalty and employee satisfaction.

Takeaway

Workers' refusal to return to the office signals a significant change in work culture and employee expectations. While the majority of U.S. workers do not work from home, for those who do, there's currently a battle about where they'll work in the future. By considering the reasons why employers want employees to return to in-office work and communicating those reasons to employees, employers are more likely to experience less pushback from employees.

Contact Parrott Benefit Group today for additional workplace resources.