

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Return to Office (RTO) Mandates Present an Opportunity for Employers to Re-Invest in Employee Well-Being

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A Clear Shift From Fully Flexible

As we head into 2025, many organizations have publicly stated their return to office (RTO) plans. A quick glance at recent headlines indicates a trend is moving toward more restrictive hybrid requirements or even full-time in-office mandates.

Recent survey results support the headlines:

- 1 The number of organizations allowing fully flexible work arrangements has **decreased from 31% in Q1 2023, to 25% in Q4 of 2024¹**
- 2 Conversely, structured hybrid arrangements where employees are required to spend a minimum number of days in the office are becoming increasingly popular among U.S. organizations – with an **increase in adoption from 20% of employers in Q1 2023, to 43% in Q4 of 2024¹**
- 3 A large **majority of CEOs (83%) predict a full return to office in the next three years**, up from 64% surveyed last year.²

While only 32% of companies had full-time in-office policies as of Q4 2024¹, this number is likely to increase in 2025 as a few major employers move in this direction and with the new White House administration's expressed desire to have federal workers return to the office³.

A Misalignment With Employee Preference

Employee sentiment on the topic of workplace flexibility is fairly settled, with a majority of employees (53%) who have remote-capable jobs preferring hybrid arrangements, 27% preferring exclusively remote arrangements and only 21% preferring fully onsite arrangements.⁴ In fact, when remote workers were asked to choose their top benefits of working from home, 60% selected “no commute,” 44% responded “save on gas and lunch costs,” and 42% appreciated having “flexibility over when they work.”⁵ A similar study found that “improved work/life balance,” “more efficient use of time” and “less burn-out or fatigue at work” were cited as the top three advantages of hybrid work according to hybrid employees.⁴ Other studies also indicate that younger workers and workers with caregiving responsibilities show a greater affinity for hybrid or fully remote working arrangements.⁶

Despite this prevalent preference for remote and hybrid work, the sentiment among many business leaders is quite different. In a September 2023 survey, 35% of business leaders say the need for increased in-person collaboration is the primary driver behind their RTO strategy and nearly all employers (92%) listed increased in-person collaboration as one of the top three benefits of employees returning to the office.⁷ Some leaders also hold the view that in-person workers are “better leaders, easier to train, and require less supervision.”⁸

RTO is An Opportunity to Spotlight Employee Well-Being

The disconnect between employee preference for greater workplace flexibility and leadership desire for greater in-office attendance provides a unique opportunity for organizations to re-imagine and re-invest in well-being programs to support workers as they return to the office. If executed properly, a strong emphasis on a healthy workplace environment can accelerate the organization's RTO objectives while giving employees the support they

need. The goal is that employees returning to the office feel cared for and appreciated as they make the transition — and realize the intended benefits of their return.

To further illustrate this point, here are six focus areas where employers can re-invest to support employee well-being as they roll out their RTO plans, along with examples of ideas organizations can implement in each category.

Focus Area	Examples of Benefits/Perks/Policies	Rationale
1 Commuter Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commuter benefit accounts Transportation subsidies 	Employees returning to the office are likely to incur costs of commuting such as gas, mileage, toll charges, train and/or bus fares.
2 Physical Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Onsite/near-site fitness centers Onsite/near-site fitness classes, walking/biking trails Subsidized healthy meals and wellness rooms 	Give employees a reason to come back to the office by creating a healthy workplace environment that inspires physical activity.
3 Manager / Supervisor Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop flexible work policies that empower managers and supervisors with greater discretion to accommodate the individual needs of their employees 	Rigidity may be the enemy of success here — give leaders room to make adjustments to your RTO strategy to support individual needs.
4 Caregiver Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Caregiver leave Back-up care Elder care Lifestyle spending accounts Onsite/near-site daycare Caregiver concierge or navigator programs Caregiver discounts for child and pet care 	Many employers with caregiver employees will face significant disruptions that will negatively impact productivity. Providing effective caregiver support is critical.
5 Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-imagined Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) Onsite/virtual counseling and mental health coaching Manager and employee mental health trainings Mental health anti-stigma workplace initiatives 	Some employees will welcome RTO, while this change will be difficult for others. Ensuring the availability of effective mental health support resources and a positive workplace culture will yield positive mental health benefits.
6 Social Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employee Resource Groups Affinity Groups Team physical activity challenges Peer-to-peer support networks 	Tapping into the promise of positive social connections and community at work can create more excitement and optimism about the organization's RTO plan.



Understandably, the well-being considerations highlighted above are just some of the components of successful RTO planning. From a broader sense, the overall design of the RTO plan must allow for effective collaboration across teams, expanded opportunities for learning and development (especially for less experienced colleagues) and support the organization's short and long-term goals and mission.

Organizations designing RTO strategies in 2025 are motivated by a myriad of factors, including the desire to increase collaboration and productivity. While these

objectives are well-intentioned, there's no doubt that RTO could be disruptive to some employees as they navigate new arrangements around their new (or restored) routines. Returning to the office could also mean navigating a new dynamic of social connections in the workplace for previously remote employees. With this reality in mind, organizations with RTO plans in 2025 should enhance their well-being programs as a strategic lever to sustainably bring employees back onsite. To put it simply, a renewed investment and focus on employee well-being can bridge the gap between employee expectations and employer priorities as organizations implement their RTO initiatives.

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