

8 Ways HR Can Overcome Pushback During the Return to the Office

By Arlene S. Hirsch

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A growing number of employers are bringing employees back onsite full time. While some workers welcome the return, others are more ambivalent about the prospect. In a recent McKinsey study, 29 percent of respondents said they would consider looking for a new job if their employers insisted they work onsite full time. This attitude challenges employers to find ways to bring employees back without triggering mass resignations or damaging morale.

Consider this cautionary tale: When Tesla CEO Elon Musk demanded that all employees begin working onsite at least 40 hours per week within seven days or quit, 40 percent of the company's 100,000 employees were expected to quit or be fired, according to news reports. Musk's approach reinforced findings from a recent Gallup poll showing that only about 25 percent of employees strongly believe their employers care about them—a significant drop from their experience during the height of the pandemic.

"Threats are not usually the best way to retain talented employees or build loyalty," said Marilyn Puder-York, an executive coach in Stamford, Conn.

"Forcing employees into the office without an adjustment period, safety measures or concrete plan will not only be overwhelming, but can harm the culture and morale," agreed Heidi Lynne Kurter, HR manager at Digital.ai, a Boston-based technology company.

As more organizations bring employees back onsite, HR professionals can counter negative pushback by creating a culture of caring that prioritizes employee well-being in the following ways:

1. Model and Lead with Empathy

"Senior-level executives don't always realize the impact of their words and actions on their employees or the challenges that they face," Puder-York said.

Brian Elliott, the executive leader of Slack's research consortium, Future Forum, points to "a troubling double standard" among executives who promote in-person work for their teams but prefer flexible, hybrid arrangements for themselves. Elliott attributes this approach to the fact that executives have more resources and autonomy available to them and may not understand the challenges most employees face.

Puder-York describes this as an "empathy deficit." "The art of empathy is to be able to put yourself in the other person's shoes and then use that understanding to motivate them to do what you want them to do," she said.

"Leaders who work by a double standard send the message that they only care about themselves and that their employees don't matter," said Cynthia Adams, global president of products, certification and community at Leadership Circle, a Utah-based consulting firm. "If [employees feel] they don't matter, they start looking for a new job," she added.

Leadership Circle collects feedback from employees at all levels to help leaders gain more self-awareness, as well as insights into the impact of their actions on others.

2. Communicate Your Intentions Clearly and Compassionately

"The last two years have reinforced to us that if we take care of our people, they take care of the business. Communication has been key, and bringing employees along on the journey has been vital," said Sue Hagstrom, senior vice president of HR and talent at Colle McVoy, a Minneapolis-based creative agency. "We've included employees in the process, as well as updated them on our research, insights, considerations and decision-making."

At Digital.ai, "employees need to understand the reasoning behind the decision and have enough time to acclimate to the change," Kurter said. She encourages employers to communicate their intentions early and often using multiple vehicles such as texts, e-mails and Slack channels to share information.

When Curion, a consumer insights company in Chicago, decided to bring everyone back onsite full time, CEO Sean Bisceglia was clear about the reasons why. "The whole creativity has kind of been gutted without people being together," he said. "I've seen a big cultural effect of connecting to your co-workers."

3. Develop a Plan of Action

"Employers shouldn't feel rushed to bring their employees back into the office without a detailed plan of action," Kurter said. However, "there is no one-size-fits all approach," said Cassie Whitlock, director of HR at BambooHR, a Utah-based HR software company. "You need to look at the needs of the business, available resources and individual readiness."

That said, experts agree that a plan of action should include:

- The impact on business outcomes. Consider how the decision to reopen the office can benefit customers and employees and then develop a transition plan that is mutually beneficial.
- Resource limits. For example, at BambooHR, it would be impossible to bring back all 700 of its IT employees in one day, Whitlock said. Instead, a staggered approach works best.
- Individual readiness. "Make sure you stay in tune with employee needs and communicate your transition plans early," Whitlock said. "Leave time for employees to give feedback or share personal constraints."

4. Prioritize Safety

Multiple research studies show that the majority of employees who typically work in an office are hesitant to return until they feel safe. To create a sense of safety, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines can be used to develop and revise policies and protocols on vaccines, masking, social distancing and isolation, among other factors.

After these protocols have been reviewed and implemented, it's critical to train supervisors and managers and insist that all employees adhere to safety protocols or suffer consequences, experts advise.

5. Focus on Mental Health

"The increased stress, anxiety and burnout that employees experienced during the pandemic are likely to continue as offices reopen because there is so much uncertainty about the future," said Alex Simmons, co-founder and CEO of Boon Health, a Detroit-area coaching platform focused on personal and professional development.

A 2021 study by Mind Share Partners found that employee mental health deteriorated during the pandemic in part because of poor communication practices and a low sense of connection to, or support from, colleagues and managers. By creating an open culture that normalizes discussions of mental health and providing employees with a range of resources, companies can show that they care about the mental health of their employees, said Bernie Wong, senior manager of insights at Mind Share Partners in San Francisco.

While many organizations rely on employee assistance program (EAP) services to provide mental health counseling, Simmons encourages companies to offer a range of behavioral health tools, including manager training, mental health apps, coaching and EAPs. BambooHR, for example, created an Anxiety and Stress Slack channel where employees can share their feelings and concerns. "Employees find it reassuring to know that their co-workers are having similar feelings," Whitlock said.

"Coaching is an alternative approach for people who aren't comfortable with therapy," Simmons said. "It's a more private way to destigmatize discussions of mental health and show employees that you are invested in them."

6. Benefits and Perks

"Employees need to understand what they are getting in return for the sacrifices they are making," Kurter said. She recommends expanding child care benefits, commuting and meal subsidies, and other perks.

When CEO David Solomon insisted that all Goldman Sachs employees return to the office on a full-time basis, concerns about turnover and morale prompted the company to expand its PTO benefits and increase starting salaries for new hires. Other organizations are bringing back perks that were popular before the pandemic, such as gym memberships and onsite cafeterias, while others are adding new perks to make working in the office more appealing.

Whitlock encourages HR to use a strategic approach to benefits that prioritizes employee well-being and addresses their unique post-pandemic needs. You can improve the quality of commuting time, for example, by offering subscriptions to audiobooks, she said.

7. Build Momentum

"Employees often underestimate the benefits of working face-to face," said sociologist Tracy Brower, author of *The Secrets of Happiness at Work* (Simple Truths, 2021). Working together in person can foster a sense of community, connection and belonging.

"Employee expectations have changed," Brower said. "If you are insisting that your employees come into the office full time, the office has to meet their needs for connection more than it did before."

At Leadership Circle, "we needed to remind people what they like about working together," Adams said. "We began that process by bringing employees back into the office one day a week. Every time they come in, they are surprised at how much fun it is."

"We had all tested the limits of what it means to work seemingly around the clock in the virtual setting," Hagstrom said. "We knew we needed to change this, and the best way was to bring us together for the connections, mentorship, camaraderie and support we had been missing while working 100 percent virtually."

8. Offer Flexibility

When BambooHR conducted an internal survey to better understand employee needs and concerns, flexibility was a top priority. Companies that are eliminating remote-work options can still offer flexible scheduling by offering employees a choice of shifts, as well as compressed shifts and shorter workweeks, Whitlock said, adding that employers should also focus on quality of work rather than quantity of time spent working.

During the pandemic, the boundary between home and work was often erased and, as a result, many employees were working longer hours. As they transition back into the office, "this is also an opportunity to do a hard reset on the number of hours worked," Whitlock said.

"After this transition period has ended, you need to make sure that the changes you make are sustainable and that you continue to prioritize the well-being of your employees."

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