

BACK TO OFFICE: WILL IT WORK?

Is office essential for work? Return to office is a minefield that employees and employers are negotiating as they weigh the benefits of flexibility vs physical presence



Illustration ZAHID

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According to the roster they drew up, J Vinayaka's firm expected him to turn up at office only in September. But the 35-year-old Android developer had no intention of waiting another six months to get to the workplace he had joined — virtually — a year ago. So, soon after his arrival in a Bengaluru tech park, reopened its doors in April, Vinayaka was there, working through a video conference that said, "Happy 2B Home. Together as One." Just a recreational area with badminton and football tables and peeing at a photo booth with the company logo, holding a sign saying #BeOfficeFree.

As far as finding out the real cause for employees returning to office (TO) goes, this might play before what tech giants like Google in the US are planning to provide content by pop star Lizzo awaits, reports The New York Times. But Vinayaka was headstrong. "They give me all these welcome goodies — a company mug, sweets, costume plant desks. It was awesome," says the engineering prodigy. Despite the warm hugs (living of being in office, the Andhra native will be heading back to his hometown of Karimnagar and intends to work from there till September. When remote work ends, he hopes he can work from home (WFH) at least some days of the week. "I like the hybrid model, where you can come off if you want to and if you don't," he says.

Having spent one day a week at the NCR office of his firm Four years since mid-March, associate Varun Singh (major change on request) is not convinced of the utility of even the occasional visit. "My team, there is no point being in office as our work can be done from anywhere. We are going away for the option because the leadership wants to project a certain image," says Singh. It's hard to disagree with office perks like having less space crutch. "I don't have my own desk," he says. But what about the lunch time camaraderie and water cooler chats some was eloquent about? For Singh, it's not worth the cost. "The convenience," Narain. Getting so much work done as I do from home."

With the Omicron surge ebbing and the bulk of their workforce vaccinated, many companies are asking

I'll miss the convenience of remote working. But I'm looking forward to going to office and building some real connections. How much of that can you do on Zoom?"
GAYATHRI SATHIAN, 23,
 relocating for new job in Bengaluru

An office definitely helps you separate work from personal life and focus better — I'm seeing that particularly as a new mom"
HENA MENDOTA, cofounder, Basis, Bengaluru



start to return to office. But they are still figuring out what and when, where, how often and how to ensure their employees of the option of it. A minefield company across the world are gingerly navigating. "While the last two years have focused the myth that productivity hinges on being in office, the management view in many firms is that physical presence is important to foster innovation and company culture, improve collaboration and create a sense of belonging after two years of WFH. All this, they hope, may also stem attention, which, in certain sectors like IT, are at record levels. Human resources teams are thus working overtime to make an exit out of the "first day in office," managers have been given budgets to take teams out for meals and your LinkedIn feed is probably awash with shiny happy #BackToOffice videos. Some firms have also made their way to onboarding to new employees an arduous one, says Manjita Gangadhar, COO of employment and assistance firm ITJobnet.

But conversations with employees, employer and experts in recruitment and organisational behaviour reveal that the incentive people prefer to choose is the flexibility to choose when to go to office, which the pandemic unexpectedly bestowed on many white-collar staff. For the first time, even those enthusiastic about going to office are less so about doing so every single working day. An Debdutta, professor of practice — organisational behaviour at IIM, IIM Bangalore, puts it. "Now that they themselves have tested blood, they don't want to give that up."

SOME TRAVELED SOFTLY, OTHERS LESS SO

This desire for flexibility is not confined to Gen Z. Manjita Singh, rewards consulting leader at Mercer India, saw this when she visited the premises of a client. Pre-pandemic, it was a large company along with flexibility that now, not more than 15% of the leadership was coming in since it was voluntary. The HR team told her: "If anything, the younger employees seem keener to come to office, having enjoyed office life and connections with friends at work," says Singh. Gayatri Sathian would agree. The 23-year-old is in the midst of relocating from Mumbai to Bengaluru for her new job. "I'll miss the convenience of remote working when you are your own master. But a lot of my peers are also eager to build connections in the real world and

work from an office or a co-working space," she says. The amuse of contrast that flexible working hours give is an attraction for employees, agrees social psychologist Anita Chaudhry. "But some have also said they would like to go back to the office so there's no mixing of professional and personal lives," she says. The boundary setting in a park Hitesha Mehta, cofounder of fintech startup Basis, is appreciating since on Day 1 of the company's trial of being in office two days a week, despite the traffic being "a time sink." "An office helps you separate work from your personal life — it helps you focus better. I'm seeing that particularly as a new mom," she says, while also adding that WFH had helped make her transition from maternity leave easier.

According to recruitment site Indeed, employees across regions are comfortable with some degree of flexibility, with the portal seeing a 17.5% increase in searches for remote, flexible work in October-March. Also, a survey by Indeed revealed there is a gender split, with more women seeking opportunities that offer hybrid and remote work. "There is a strong preference among women for jobs that offer flexibility with 68% of women job-seekers looking at remote and hybrid work options, while for men, it's 38%," says Sashi Koshi, head of sales, Indeed India.

Companies large and small are in experimentation mode. Some have set organisations to visit mandates to come in two or three days a week, while others are letting teams and managers thrash out the details. "Except those who need to be physically present like shop-floor employees, all others are working hybrid or are on

Other than those whose jobs need them to be physically present, all our employees can opt for hybrid or even 100% WFH, if their role allows it"
S VENKATESH,
 group president HR, RPG Enterprises



100% WFH, if their role allows it," says S Venkatesh, group president HR, RPG Enterprises, PMCO major employer in the IT services space. "We have adopted a case-by-case location flexibility option for remote work."

IT talent hubs like Bengaluru and Mysuru are leading in continuing with the hybrid model. Andhra Pradesh has not set a universal date for employees to RTO. "When it comes to the future of work, we believe there is one size fits all and our approach here, when and where we work will vary by business, team and the type of work we do," says Lakshmi C, CEO and lead HR, Accenture in India. Pooja Dindoriya, managing director at Strategy Analytics says

Our internal survey showed over 80% employees wanted flexibility while those who wanted to return full-time and those who never wanted to return were in single digits"
GIRISH MENON,
 head HR, Swiggy



would that over 80% employees would like the flexibility of WFH. "One thing was clear: if we could trust employees in the last two years, why not continue that and make it flexible for them?" says Girish Menon, head HR, Swiggy. Accordingly, employees have been put in role-based buckets, with those who work from a desk having the option to work from anywhere, but they have to report every quarter for a 7-day, in-person "jumpstart". Existence major Flipkart, which proposed its corporate office in phases, has adopted a hybrid model with teams having the discretion to decide details. "This model is a combination of employees working remotely and from the office on different days of the week, allowing teams to decide the days that work best for them," says Chief People Officer Kirubha Rajaganan.

Nashad Forbes, cofounder of Forbes Marshall, was surprised to find employees coming to office most days when they pitched a mandatory one-day-a-week in office. "It being in flexibility makes employees more productive," he says. Pune-based engineering firm Thermax has adapted a role-based model. "We are not allowing permanent WFH as company culture gets impacted but we are also not mandating how many days employees spend in office. Our focus is on measuring outcomes instead of time in office," says HR chief, Jaswant Bhatia. At the Hyderabad office of US firm Sainix, employees come in two days a week, to ramped up to three next month. "Employees don't like perks being taken away. We have clarity that this model works so I don't think we

The last two years have proven that work is not getting impacted without office. What's got impacted is an employee's connect with the firm, manager, their team, a sense of belonging"
MANSEE SINGHAL,
 rewards consulting leader, Mercer India



REMOTE LEVEL CHOOSING
 with Hybrid/Remote Options

Entry and Junior: 60-70%
Mid: 35-55%
Senior: 30%

MICROSOFT WORK TREND INDEX MARCH 2022

45% of hybrid employees find the biggest challenge when and why to return to the office or work remotely

32% of leaders in India say relationship-building is an essential element of having work hybrid or remote

73% of business leaders are new employees aren't enough support to be during hybrid/remote

RTO ROLLOUT
WHAT COMPANIES ARE DOING

YES: From April, top 50,000 employees of office three a week; by mid-FY23, all employees to work from office

InfoSys: A phase return to office for those in base location coming to office three, looking at hybrid in long term

M&M: Nearly full return to office was on a case-by-case basis, final call after three months

Swiggy: Non-based, those in desk can WFH; work remotely full-time for 2-3 days, 20% permanent

Flipkart: Combination of WFH and March with teams deciding which days

RPG Enterprises: Those who job from them to be physically present can opt for 100% WFH

will go back to five-days in office," says Hitesh Chelavani.

In contrast, all employees at Mahindra are back in office from April 1 with WFH provided where needed," says group HR head, T. Jayaraman. "In the first few months, On Thursday, chair man answered a video of employees back in office. "Screeners are not substitute for a warm hug. But we will be there," says Jayaraman. He says remote and WFH options may lead. Conversely, the lack of desire out employees, who will instead full-time mandatory work will be a better option. A mid-management Mumbai-based conglomerate, for one of the basis of the daily commute his "I've applied for a mandate from the condition of anonymity."

As the RTO experiment rolls on, the learnings. For one, companies will need to maintain equity and fairness. "We're seeing jobs in multiple firms, says IIM's Datta. There will also be of proximity bias. "A section of the office is going to be more visible to the citizens, which might create pressure. Follow suit."

For now, flexibility is the way word. "If we people aren't given a lot of leeway in person, but some people do, and nothing to do with productivity," Kulkarni, cofounder of the startup "The way to go is to offer more flexibility, is to need to look over someone's shoulder. As a newly two-year, unprecedented moment comes to an end, organisations must listen. Like what is the very point of the work, especially in office when you are less so, like what will my manager that over a week and my immediate (the one concern that is not just the milestone but the work itself) or health, or assume the pandemic is over," says C. S. Srinivasan, CEO of the consulting firm, Mercer India.