

## Return to Work: A Challenge

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As organizations more broadly are requiring or strongly encouraging some version of physical return to work, Group 360's proprietary research on return-to-work challenges highlighted three significant themes related to return-to-work difficulty. The results were remarkably consistent for all levels of individuals, industries, and geography (with some concentration in the Midwest). The three most commonly raised issues are as follows: Cost of Commute, Time at Work, and Tradeoffs.

Commuting, in general, is a significantly greater financial burden in June 2022 to many individuals than it was in February 2020, the last time the majority of employees regularly commuted to an office. Out-of-pocket expenses related to commuting have nearly doubled. Costs of travel have increased drastically as gas and car repair prices rise. Additionally, there is a major car availability shortage that is felt by professionals all over the country. If people sold their cars during the pandemic, they may be facing trouble purchasing or even finding a new one at a reasonable price. Many professionals do not want to spend the money it takes to commute, while the perception that the incremental value of being together physically with colleagues is 'not worth it'.

Furthermore, going into an office means that the hours once spent making extravagant breakfasts, reading bedtime stories, and relaxing are now used for getting ready and commuting. Group 360 found that professionals use about 1.5 hours to 3.5 hours to get ready and commute to work. For work from home employees, this valuable time could be dedicated to making client calls, writing emails, or doing research. Many professionals are worried that companies will expect them to work the same extended hours, while *also* having to commute to an office. Work from home employees were additionally offered the flexibility to use day-time hours, the traditional nine to five, on personal matters, while alternatively being able to get work done during normally 'off hour' times. The flexibility offered to work from home employees to do 'off hour' interactions was often a result of perceived tradeoffs for daytime hours that might have been used personally.

As companies ask individuals to return to in-person work, particularly this summer, families with children will face challenges embracing this year's summer schedules. For the past two summers, Group 360 has found that parents could integrate interaction with their children into their busy professional lives, since both parties spent most of their day at home. For example, instead of taking a lunch break with a colleague, parents were able to make lunch for and eat with their children. Additionally, professionals were able to take important calls over Zoom allowing for extended family vacations/remote work. Some additional factors that have played a role in return-to-work difficulty include dealing with COVID exposures, reduction of work-life balance, lack of motivation, inability to meet Social Distancing standards in the office, and the overall sentiment that people feel they can perform the same job at home as they do in the office. These additional factors can be felt

by all professionals in some capacity, not just individuals with families. For these reasons and many more, individuals, particularly parents, are weary about returning to in-person work in any capacity.

To reduce return-to-office resistance, James R. Bailey and Scheherazade Rehman, both professors and contributors to the Harvard Business Review, established a multi-step plan to convince resisters of the importance of in-person work. Bailey and Rehman argue that companies need to differentiate and expose both active and passive supporters from resisters. Companies need to understand the qualms of the resisters. Then, they need to convince neutral parties of the importance of working in an office environment. Lastly, they need to make all passive supporters active by explaining exactly how working in an office environment will help the entire organization. Once all of the supporters are convinced, they must be given a platform to convince the resisters. Support from peers is often more powerful than a top-down approach. Employees will not feel like they are just being told what to do, but they will actually be convinced why one approach is better than the other. A professional will feel like a peer is more likely to understand his or her exact problems with returning to an office. For example, two younger employees that have just started a family will have more in common than a more senior employee whose children are all off to college.

However, if a fully in-person approach is unfeasible, a hybrid approach is another great option. For instance, 52 percent of professionals prefer a hybrid work environment (Keane and Heiser). Jim Keane and Todd Heiser, writers for the Harvard Business Review, argue that for a hybrid environment to be successful, companies need to better integrate remote and in-person employees. Currently, during meetings, the in-person and remote attendees are very separated: the in-person attendees are sitting around a long table, while the remote attendees are just shown on a screen in the front of a room. Keane and Heiser argue that each remote attendee should be represented by their own device. This could be done by “placing monitors on rolling carts that can easily be moved around” (Keane and Heiser). This integration gives each remote employee a distinct voice. They will not be able to hide behind a tiny square on a screen.

Shifting to a hybrid work environment will take a lot of time to master. Constant change will continue to occur for a very long time, and this needs to be accepted and embraced by all employees. Working will never look the exact same as it did pre-pandemic, but that is ok. Companies will continue to find new and innovative ways to embrace collaboration with employees all over the world. During the height of the pandemic, “full-time work-from-home employees saw a drop of 37% in average collaboration time” (Keane and Heiser). Keane and Heiser assert that office designs will continue to change to promote collaboration. Open spaces may now be better suited for meetings to accommodate for larger technology and flexibility. Alternatively, working from home has made people more comfortable working in a private environment, so closed spaces will encourage individual productivity. Additionally, closed environments are better for reducing the disturbance of video calls between employees.

Despite a company's best efforts to convince resisters of the benefits of returning to in-person work and/or supporting a hybrid environment, many voluntary and involuntary separations will occur. Many professionals will leave their current companies in order to find ones that will continue to allow them to work from home. On the other hand, some companies will fire those who refuse to return to the office. The tension between a fully

remote, hybrid, and in-person model will facilitate a significant amount of career transition as individuals voluntarily shift to organizations and roles that are aligned with their needs; conversely, organizations that find resistance to their needs and desires are already discussing involuntary separation for individuals not complying.

<https://hbr.org/2021/07/4-strategies-for-building-a-hybrid-workplace-that-works>  
<https://hbr.org/2022/02/how-to-overcome-return-to-office-resistance>