Navigating the 'return to the office' backlash

A guide that combines valuable insights with expert experience to help organisations navigate and thrive through change.

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Introduction

While the Covid pandemic undoubtedly accelerated the issue and forced a huge number of businesses to remove barriers to working from home, this remains a topic that many businesses are yet to master.

In March 2025 we brought together a select group of HR and business leaders from a range of sectors and backgrounds, to explore the growing 'return to office backlash' - what's driving it, and what to do about it.

This practical guide combines insights from the roundtable discussion, along with extensive experience in supporting organisations through change. It offers reflections, examples and top tips to help your organisation navigate the challenges of work location with clarity and confidence - now and into the future. You will find some counterintuitive data, that will really make you think, the latest thinking in this space and a model for how we can help you determine the best working location practices for your business, no matter which side of the Remote/Back to the office side of the argument you are more aligned to.

"Redefining the 'new normal' when it comes to the evolving landscape of work can be a complex and time-consuming exercise for leaders. But the unique demands of every business demand an equally personal response – one that works for both the organisation and its people."

Lisa Patel
Head of Health and Talent Solutions, EMEA, Aon

The question everyone wants to know - **"what are other organisations doing?"**

One of the challenges with navigating an issue so visible in the mainstream media is the temptation to look sideways - seeking inspiration, validation, or simply comparison.

At the same time, employees are more informed than ever about how other organisations are approaching work location. Many arrive with strong views or expectations shaped by what they've seen elsewhere - often with a preconceived sense of the 'right' way to do things.

While it's important to design an approach that works for your business and your people, this process often benefits from a more objective lens - especially when internal perspectives are well-established or polarised.

Working models spectrum

100% remote	Work from anywhere	Fluid hybrid
Geographically tethered but no office visits required	Global freedom	Flexible office days

Fixed hybrid	4-day week	100% office
Set office days (lots pf variation in no. of days)	80% time 100% pay	Traditional model

The mainstream media narrative around work models often casts remote-first or "work anywhere" companies as progressive, while those requiring 4–5 days in the office are framed as outdated - frequently sparking talk of employee backlash to the return to the office mandates. But beneath the headlines, what's really happening?

For many organisations, hybrid working has become the default compromise - balancing in-office and remote work. Among participants at our roundtable, 75% operated on a hybrid basis (typically 2–3 days in the office), 20% had role-dependent policies, and 5% were fully office-based.

This aligns with the wider data we have seen in our in-depth research: Global Workplace Analytics reports that 76% of employees work remotely at least part of the time, while **McKinsey & Company found that 52% of workers prefer a hybrid model. But that still leaves 48% who don't.**

For some, hybrid isn't a solution - it's a compromise. And in many cases, it can feel like the "least-worst" option designed to appease the majority, rather than a deliberate, strategic choice.

In an ideal world, the goal isn't compromise - it's clarity. A solution that reflects both business needs and employee expectations.

The real question becomes: **how can organisations structure themselves in a way that supports high performance, attracts and retains top talent, and protects the unique identity of the business and its people?**

(Re-)Establishing your organisational identity and design

What is the identity of your organisation?

? Your purpose

? Your people

? Your values

? Your history

? Your mission

? Your leadership

? Your culture

? Your owners/ shareholders

When you're clear on these elements and the kind of organisation you want to be, you can effectively define your success metrics and deliberately design roles, structures and working practices – even a culture – that align with your objectives. This clarity also helps you communicate expectations clearly to current and prospective employees - essential for (re-) establishing your organisational identity.

Despite the pressures of market forces, organisations need a framework that allows them to operate effectively and efficiently - one that balances individual perspectives with the best interests of the organisation. We can help you find aligned approaches that will bring you and your employees together, that will help you all succeed, without needing to compromise.

This clarity also extends to your location policy. Many businesses have fallen into the trap of adopting location strategies that don't resonate with employees or are based on ill-defined assumptions. Too often, decisions made during Covid were adopted without fully understanding their long-term feasibility. Now, they risk becoming static and misaligned with business needs.

💡 **Top tip:** Be clear about the identity of your organisation. This clarity helps the right people find a fit when you're attracting and retaining talent. But how confident are you that your organisational identity is fully understood and consistently communicated - across all levels, from senior leaders to new hires? Many organisations find value in revisiting this with support, ensuring alignment between what's said, what's felt, and what's experienced by employees.

Top tip: Gather your data to understand your business more clearly. Let the data inform your decisions, moving beyond personal biases to create transparency and clarity. This is one area where many organisations benefit from external challenge - ensuring assumptions are tested and strategies are aligned.

Another critical theme that emerged from our roundtable discussions, our research and our ongoing work in this area, is trust. If your organisation truly values trust and demonstrates it through actions, the return can be far greater than what any policy or mandate could achieve.

Top tip: Trust is a great place to start. If your approach relies too heavily on policies, contracts, and the threat of disciplinaries, it's only a matter of time before a toxic work environment emerges, and if you're not careful, stays! Consider how actively you're building trust across your organisation. Do your leaders and managers have the capability - and the confidence - to create an environment where trust can thrive?

Deliberate design

Personal preferences and bias, play a significant role in how both employees and business leaders approach to work location and flexibility.

That's why clarity on organisational identity matters. Once you know the kind of organisation you want to be, you can begin designing roles intentionally - based on business needs, not assumptions.

Using the **Five 'W's'** and **One 'H'** approach can help keep location decisions grounded in logic, rather than personal preference. Ask:

Who, What, When, Why, and **How** a role should be performed - before asking **Where**.

This kind of thinking helps uncover the real reasons behind preferences and gives clarity around what's feasible - both for the role and the person performing it. It sounds obvious, but so often when we complete diagnostic reviews in organisations these questions haven't been answered.

It doesn't mean every role can be done remotely, or that one policy fits all. For example, a security guard may need to be on-site, a sales role might require travel to clients, while a software engineer could work effectively in a hybrid model. Making decisions at a role level - rather than an organisational one - demonstrates nuance and deeper consideration of what is best. It leads to a more sophisticated methodology than preference or mandate.

Top tip: When designing roles, avoid defaulting to personal preference on location. Instead, ask: when can the work be done? How can it be done? And where is best for impact? This mindset helps you unlock hidden opportunities - and understand why some employees may feel aggrieved if location flexibility isn't available to them.

Top tip: For every leader fatigued by remote work, there's often an employee for whom it has been a lifeline. From caring responsibilities to disability inclusion and neurodiversity, location flexibility can play a major role in workforce diversity and equity. Decisions can have a deep impact. Think carefully about what you want to achieve here.

Another key consideration is the design of the environment itself. Increasingly, Chief People Officers and HR Directors are being given responsibility for estates and facilities - recognition of their deep understanding of what attracts, engages, and retains talent. At the roundtable we asked our attendees if the location strategy fell in their remit. From this relatively small sample group, there were a lot more role types responsible for this, than would have been typical historically. This is a wide ranging subject that impacts lots of other areas. This is a great example of how important the management of the environment and estates are in your decision making.

As Gen Z engagement consultant Shosannah Davis notes:

"One of the main challenges is that organisations want young people to be in the office more, but don't do a great job creating environments young people are excited about."

This isn't just about younger workers. If you want people in the office, the space needs to work - functionally, emotionally, and practically. Is it worth the commute? Does it support collaboration, creativity, and connection?

And for fully remote workers, the same principles apply.

? Are their working environments safe?

? Are they insured appropriately?

? Are their benefits tailored to their needs?

? Are they regularly communicated with?

? Are they given opportunity to regularly connect with others?

Whether in-office, remote, or hybrid - your people are your responsibility while they're at work.

Top tip: Consider the influence your senior People or HR team has over the environments you expect people to work in. They will have personal preferences too. That includes physical offices, remote setups, and everything in between. Where people work is a strategic issue - not just an operational one.

Focus energy and effort on helping employees to thrive

In a recent NFP survey, the most common benefit people associated with hybrid working was improved work-life balance. But if our focus remains solely on where people work, we risk missing the bigger picture - what really matters is helping people thrive.

From years of studying businesses, we know high-performing organisations consistently offer 7 key elements, (this was backed up by all of our in-depth research on this project):

1 Meaningful work

2 Growth opportunities

3 Connection

4 A focus on wellbeing

5 Autonomy

6 Belonging

7 Flexibility

Top tip: If remote work is part of your model, rethinking daily interaction is key. One business at our Roundtable addressed this by focusing less on location and more on isolation - ensuring no one works entirely alone for more than two consecutive days.

Surprisingly few organisations, including some of those at the Roundtable, talk about investing in their managers to support employee satisfaction. Yet this is often where performance and engagement either flourish or falter.

How many managers have been equipped to lead in virtual environments? To build inclusive, high-trust teams? To recognise unconscious bias toward those they see more often?

Building this capability doesn't happen by chance. It takes deliberate investment in leadership development - especially in communication, inclusion, and performance management for dispersed teams.

Almost every tension around workplace location links back to one of three things:

✅ Gaps in leadership capability

✅ Inconsistent management practices

✅ A lack of thoughtfully designed spaces - virtual or physical - for collaboration

Top tip: Focus your energy on the conditions that help people thrive. Equip managers to play an active role in creating them. Investment in leadership capability often yields greater results than continuing to debate location.

Hope

A Gallup survey (Feb 2025) found that the top quality employees seek from their managers today is **hope**. If that's true, we really have a Pandora's box to deal with. It's a big ask. Mindful Leadership consultant, Katy Mitchell, recently broke it down into three core challenges:

Three core challenges:	**Which leads to:**
🚩 A lack of direction	❌ Disengagement
🚩 A lack of control	❌ Burnout
🚩 A lack of autonomy	❌ Disconnection

Katy's advice? Focus on:

Action	**Optimism**	**Strategy**

At our Roundtable, one guest reframed the concept of hope as *inspiration*. For years, we've spoken about the importance of inspirational leadership - perhaps this is where the opportunity lies.

But the answer may also be more practical. The modern employee experience is shaped by key daily touchpoints - like autonomy, clarity, trust, and connection. When these are strong, the conditions for hope are already in place.

However we frame it - hope, inspiration, or engagement - one thing is clear: **employee experience matters**. And leadership is critical in shaping it.

Generational considerations

When thinking about a multigenerational workforce, a number of assumptions often come to mind:

1 Gen Z expects flexibility, while Baby Boomers prefer structure

2 Digital fluency varies across generations

3 Not everyone has a dedicated home workspace

4 Caring responsibilities differ by life stage

5 Younger employees seek mentoring and connection

6 Reported wellbeing varies - 21% in Gen Z vs 7% in Baby Boomers

But recent data challenges some of these generalisations.

✅ According to the CIPD, **78% of employers** agree that younger workers value flexibility

✅ Yet, the Office for National Statistics found that, **those aged 16–29 are the least likely to work in a hybrid way**

✅ And Nicholas Bloom of Stanford reports that **20–29 year-olds are the least enthusiastic about fully remote working**

✅ Additionally, **23% of 18–34 year-olds** say their home setup makes remote work difficult, compared to only **4% of 45–54 year-olds**

So, what's really going on?

In reality, preferences around work location are shaped more by **identity, context,** and **need** than by generation alone. What matters most is that people understand what to expect from the organisation - what's flexible, what's fixed, and what's open to influence.

Clarity and transparency around expectations can help bridge generational differences and create a shared understanding of how, where, and why work happens.

Thriving employees = thriving customers

Introducing a new employee lifecycle model

At both NFP and AON, we support people and businesses at every stage of the employee lifecycle - **"from hire to retire".** And one thing we've learned is that real impact doesn't just come from major transformations (although that can be a great platform for change), instead it comes from consistent, deliberate and well considered positive interventions.

At its core, every interaction is an intervention.

That's why we've rethought the traditional employee lifecycle, **from this…**

The employee lifecycle

- Attraction
- Recruitment
- Onboarding
- Development
- Retention
- Separation

Employee experience (EX)

Employee touchpoints

Ways of working (systems & processes)

Culture & behaviours

Vision & values

- Attract
- Recruit
- Onboard
- Engage
- Develop
- Perform
- Reward
- Offboard & advocacy

Meaningful work | Growth | Connection | Wellbeing | Autonomy | Belonging | Flexibility

Customer experience (CX)

…to this; a more comprehensive model that better defines the complex employment journey your people can take.

The standard model presents a neat, linear sequence of stages - each one appearing equal and occurring in order. But in reality, that's not how people experience work. Take retention, for example: typically positioned as a late-stage metric in the old employee lifecycle, when in fact, it really should begin on day one of a potential employee being identified. It's part of the onboarding process. They start off in tandem.

By shifting away from a step-by-step view and anchoring the lifecycle in broader organisational principles, we move towards a more holistic, experience-led model.

At the centre of this new approach are your vision and values - the drivers of culture and behaviour. Each layer, from onboarding to growth to transition, must be intentionally designed and regularly reviewed. When these inner layers are aligned, they influence every aspect of the employee experience (EX) - because every touchpoint matters. If you treat each element of the new employee lifecycle as an independent spinning disk, the key is to know which element your impacting, when you are working with your teams and your people, and to know what impact it will have through each of the other disks.

As highlighted previously, based on our research and experience, healthy, high-performing businesses consistently offer:

1. Meaningful work

2. Growth opportunities

3. Connection

4. A focus on wellbeing

5. Autonomy

6. A sense of belonging

7. Flexibility

Together, these form the foundation of a strong EX - one that directly influences your customer experience (CX). The two are deeply connected. From the moment a new hire begins contributing, their experience starts shaping your customer outcomes.

This is why early touchpoints are so important - and commercially significant.

Aon's latest research shows that **50% of employees with less than six months' service are already considering leaving.** Once they reach the two-year mark, that risk drops significantly. Retention, engagement, and productivity all take root in those early moments.

Top tip: The traditional employee lifecycle no longer reflects today's reality. Focus on EX - and recognise how it drives CX. Every interaction with your people matters.

As Aon puts it in their Global Employee sentiment paper (February 2025), *"Loyalty is hard earned, but it starts with helping people feel valued."* At six months in, it's no longer just the employee on probation - it's your business, too. That mindset shift is crucial: because when early experience falters, so does performance, morale, and ultimately, customer satisfaction.

Top tip: Prioritise the first two years of employment. It's not just good practice - it's smart business. Employees who feel supported and connected early on are more likely to stay, succeed, and contribute measurable value. By getting it right in the first two years, you set the foundations, behaviours and expectations for each year that follows.

How clearly does your organisation understand the link between those early experiences and long-term outcomes - and how confidently is it influencing them?

CX versus EX and what it means for your culture

It's now entirely feasible to measure how **customer experience (CX)** and **employee experience (EX)** interact - and what that tells you about business performance, inside and out.

While neither concept is new, their impact is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. From absence policies to communication rhythms, from onboarding to offboarding - every detail contributes to how people experience your organisation, whether as employees or customers.

In many ways, CX and EX function like **UX (User Experience):**

It's about intentionally designing, measuring and managing how it feels to interact with your organisation.

And this is, ultimately, what your **culture** is.

A popular definition of culture is:

> *"The set of values, behaviours, beliefs, attitudes, systems and roles that influence behaviour."*

When culture is strong and healthy, EX and CX follow suit.

When it's under strain, these are often the first signals that something needs attention.

How clearly does your organisation understand the experience it's creating? And how deliberately is it shaping that experience?

This is often where organisations uncover their **greatest opportunities for growth.**

Final thoughts

Below, you'll find a model outlining how we can support you in answering the key questions your business needs to know when setting a work location approach - with clarity, confidence, and a tailored approach that reflects both your business goals and the evolving needs of your people. The frameworks and mapping exercises we use are designed to bring structure and momentum to what can often feel like a reactive or fragmented conversation.

Five years from now, the real question won't be, what did we do post-Covid? It will be, did we use the moment when we looked back five years from the first lockdown to redesign work in a way that made us stronger?

Where your people work is your organisation's choice. Whether they choose to stay, perform, and grow within that model - that's your people's choice.

The organisations getting this right aren't treating work location as a policy to enforce. They're treating it as a strategic opportunity - to shape culture, unlock performance, and strengthen retention.

Is your organisation making decisions based on what's possible - or on what's truly right for the future you want to build?

"There is no single answer that will satisfy workforces at scale. Instead, our research spotlights the need for personalisation, to look deeper and listen to the actual needs of people in markedly different contexts – whether that is location, life stage, generation, or career. Organisations should embrace tailored approaches to deliver value for their people while also aligning against business goals."

Lambros Lambrou
CEO, Human Capital, Aon
AON Employee Sentiment report

NFP's approach to building your best work model for your business and employees

A framework for mapping your work location model

NFP has developed a framework to help you assess your organisation and determine the best work model for your business and employees. We specialise in supporting organisations through change and have created effective strategies for a range of businesses. For more information or to discuss further, visit nfp.co.uk/people-and-talent or contact our Director of Organisational Transformation, Steve Foulger, at steve.foulger@nfp.co.uk.

Step 1 Organisational Identity assessment

Step 2 Organisational Intent assessment

Step 3 Gauge employee perspective

Step 4 Evaluate organisational options

Step 5 Assess employee experience and organisational impact

Step 6 Establish common ground

Step 7 Align management and leadership

Step 8 Set organisation location strategy

Step 9 Implement location strategy

Step 10 Future proof organisation

Step 1
**Organisational Identity
assessment (planning)**
Establish "as is" strategy. Complete initial
People, Plan and Place assessment.
Identify problem statements and
assess against best practice.

Step 2
**Organisational Intent
assessment (planning)**
Define the "to be" state. Clarify strategy,
purpose, and what success looks like.
What do you want the organisation to
be? What do you have to achieve?

Step 3
Gauge employee perspective (planning)
Identify and understand employee
needs through surveys, focus
groups, and data. Map roles against
organisational design and culture.

Step 4
**Evaluate organisational
options (planning)**
Analyse infrastructure, InfoSec, legal/
regulatory implications, and logistical
feasibility for location flexibility.

Step 5
**Assess employee experience and
organisational impact (planning)**
Map current EX, productivity, and CX.
Identify barriers to collaboration.
Complete cost/benefit analysis. Define
success measures and ensure scalability,
sustainability, and commerciality.

Step 6
Establish common ground (planning)
Ensure model(s) are maximising Employee Experience (EX), Client/Customer/End user Experience. Align solutions with employee, client, and customer needs. Ensure inclusivity and shared benefits. Look for win-wins.

Step 7
Align management and leadership (planning)
Reassess changes required and establish project plan for change. Ensure managers and leaders know what is coming, what needs to be communicated, and what their role is and leadership expectations.

Step 8
Set organisation location strategy (implementation)
Review physical location design including home working. Map thriving culture dynamics. Prioritise key focuses. Measure impact. Gather feedback. Measure success.

Step 9
Implement location strategy (implementation)
Assign ownership, activate plans, and ensure teams are equipped. Launch communications, training, policy updates, and support. Monitor and adjust.

Step 10
Future proof organisation (evaluation and evolution)
Continue to implement, test, pilot and improve. Ensure engagement and adherence. Update approach. Communicate iterations. Revise success KPI's.

Conclusion

As the world of work continues to shift, the most effective organisations will be those that stay curious, stay connected, and stay intentional. Designing a location strategy isn't just a response to today's challenges, it's a chance to reimagine how your people work, thrive, and grow for years to come.

If you'd like support in shaping a location strategy that works for your people and your business, we'd love to help. Get in touch for a conversation tailored to where you are - and where you want to be.

Below are our top 10 lessons to take from this guide:

1 **Stay objective.** Assess your organisational design without personal bias - especially around work location.

2 **Map it out.** A clear understanding of your context enables better, more informed decisions.

3 **Find common ground.** This isn't about compromise - it's about designing win-wins for your people and your business.

4 **Prioritise thriving.** Focus on helping your people succeed, not just where they sit.

5 **Design with intent.** Don't drift - be deliberate in shaping your organisation's structure and ways of working.

6 **Challenge assumptions.** Hybrid and "work from anywhere" are not risk-free defaults. They require careful consideration.

7 **Think bigger.** Location is one factor - high-performance models take a broader view.

8 **Link EX and CX.** Employee experience shapes customer outcomes. Treat every intervention as a lever.

9 **Diagnose the real issue.** If the challenge is leadership, management or collaboration - start there, not with location.

10 **Rethink the lifecycle.** The traditional employee journey no longer applies. Build touchpoints that matter, right from the start.

Our hire to retire model

1 **Talent Acquisition** - From developing your strategy and your recruiters training to uncovering talent aligned with your business and its goals, we're more than an agency; we're your end-to-end partner in securing the right people.

2 **Organisational Change/ Transformation** - From focused change projects to full-scale transformation, we support businesses through complex transitions - helping you engage your people, mitigate risks, and shape a future-ready organisation.

3 **Employee Benefits** - Our specialist brokers can help ensure your reward strategy supports attraction, retention, and wellbeing - wherever your people are based.

4 **People Development** - Whether it's manager training or reshaping leadership mindset, our Learning & Organisational Development specialists can design and deliver coaching, training, or full transformation programmes.

5 **HR/People Services** - We can act as your HR team or as an extension of it. From global businesses to fast-growing scale-ups, we provide flexible, retained support shaped entirely around your structure, needs, and culture.

6 **Career Transition** - Whether employees are moving internally, exiting the business or planning their next steps, we offer structured support and coaching for each point of their journey.

How we can help your organisation

At NFP we're equipped to support your People and Risk needs - wherever your people work, and whatever stage your business is at. We offer practical, strategic interventions that deliver real impact. As we're tool, model and approach agnostic, we can help you in a way that makes sense for you, your business and your people, whatever you need to achieve.

🌐 nfp.co.uk/people-and-talent

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