

## BUSINESS INSIDER

### RTO mandates are showing a trust breakdown between bosses and workers

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Forcing workers back to the office could erode some of the trust many employers built with workers during the pandemic. Sean Gallup/Getty Images

- **[Return-to-office mandates](#) risk eroding trust between employees and employers.**
- **Remote work and other flexibility that arose during the pandemic often fostered employee goodwill.**
- **Companies enforcing RTO could lose some workers if the job market strengthens.**

"Trust me, I'm [getting my work done](#)."

That's the sentiment coming from some workers who have bridled at the [return-to-office orders](#) flowing from some C-suites.

Many bosses who call their employees back talk about wanting to boost productivity, teamwork, and [innovation](#). What they don't often talk about is trust.

Yet [trust](#) — or the absence of it, amid reports of sly employees deputizing [Fridays as de facto weekend days](#) — is at the heart of why many bosses are demanding workers resume their commutes, workplace experts told Business Insider.

The surge in remote work during the pandemic engendered goodwill between workers and their employers "in a way that we haven't seen since the old days of retiring from IBM with the gold watch," Dan Kaplan, senior client partner at the recruiting firm Korn Ferry, said.

Now, though, as more CEOs push for workers to return to the office — often against the advice of HR teams, Kaplan said — workers' faith in their employers is also at risk.

"This is going to be studied as a time where companies forfeited the trust that they worked so hard to build," Kaplan told BI.

## **Autonomy breeds employee trust**

Disagreements over how work gets done can erode relationships. PwC has reported that companies that offer remote work but monitor how often [workers show up](#) at the office or track things like when workers log on can diminish workers' sense of trust in their employers.

In early 2024, PwC found in a [survey](#) of some 2,500 workers in the US — a mix of business leaders and employees — that nearly nine in 10 execs said they had a high level of trust in their people, yet only six in 10 workers said that leadership regarded them as highly trusted.

PwC found that when employees feel a sense of autonomy, trust in employers tends to go up. In the survey, for example, seven in 10 workers said flexibility around when they do their work would build trust.

## **Employers have reasons for concern**

Reports about "over-employed" workers holding [multiple remote jobs](#) or others [quiet vacationing](#) — thanks, mouse juggler — are sure to give some leaders heartburn.

That potential abuse of trust by workers has frayed bonds built during the pandemic. When COVID-19 emerged, many bosses checked in on workers, and many employers provided information and resources for workers to help them stay safe, Kaplan said. Often, that included permission to work remotely.

Even as the pandemic ebbed, workers could still focus on family, [go to the gym](#), or walk the dog, he said.

Now, thanks to the tight job market facing many white-collar workers — and [fewer remote roles](#) — employers wanting people back in the office have regained power.

## **Workers got used to WFH**

Peggie Rothe, chief insights and research officer at Leesman, which tracks employee experiences, told BI that when the pandemic hit, employers trusted employees would get their work done from afar. This set many employees' expectations for what life would be like when the pandemic subsided.

In part, many workers wanted to keep their setups because [logging on from home](#) is something people often enjoy, she said.

Rothe also said the pandemic showed that the average home is better at supporting work than the average office. That's left some workers struggling to understand why they'd need to head back to the office every day, she said.

"Unless you communicate a clear why — why do you need your employees to be back — inevitably employees are going to feel like they're not trusted anymore," Rothe said.

Workers who say they don't trust their employer tend — no surprise — to be less happy at work. That dissatisfaction can then cut into [productivity](#), innovation, and teamwork.

### **I can't see you**

Randall Peterson, a professor of organizational behavior at London Business School, told BI that the biggest factor animating CEOs' decisions to call people back to the office is the fear that they can't see their people and that they might be slacking off.

Yet Peterson said one concern for CEOs should be that by making people go back to the office, employers are taking away a way of working that many people have come to see as a right, not a privilege, as was the case before the pandemic.

"The fact you're forcing me back is taking something away from me," he said. "I don't think enough employers have really figured that out yet."

Kaplan, from Korn Ferry, echoed a similar concern. He said if the [US economy heats up](#) as he expects, there's a risk companies could start losing workers who've grown frustrated by bosses taking attendance.

"I suspect the companies that are more flexible are going to look really, really smart in six months," he said.

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