

Gartner Research

Tactics to Bring Employees Back- to-Office Without Disengaging Them

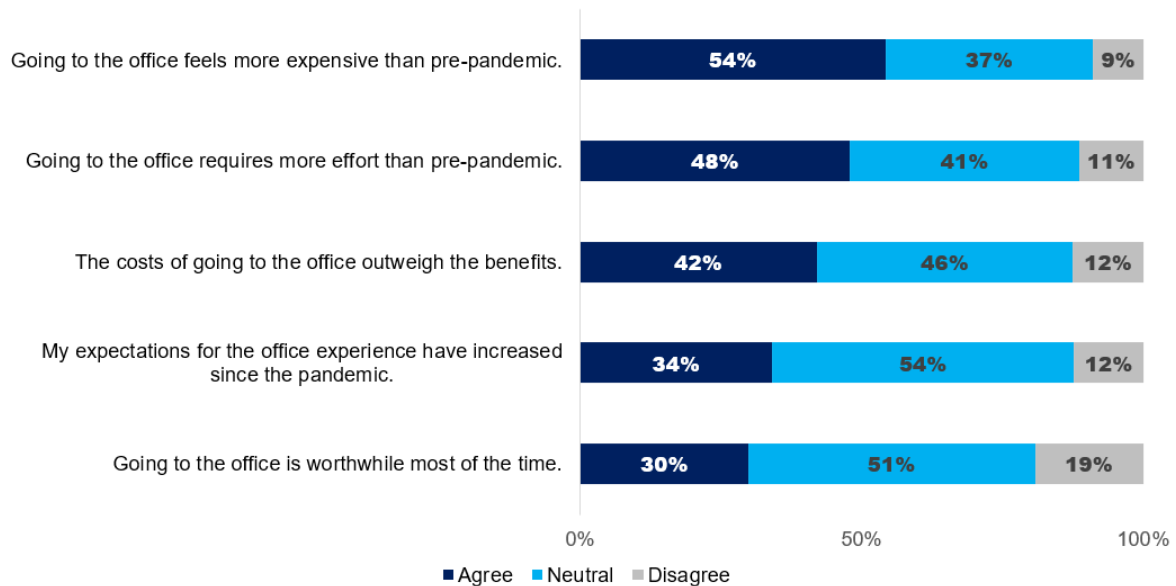
Tactics to Bring Employees Back-to-Office Without Disengaging Them

Amid back-to-office mandates, leaders are eager to see employees return to the workplace. However, forcing them to return is a major disengagement driver. HR professionals must work with leaders to ensure the return to the office is compelling and aligned to a specific work objective.

After nearly three years of adjusting to the COVID-19-pandemic-driven work disruption, many organizations are mandating a return to office. Our research shows the top drivers of an organization's return to workplace policy includes leadership concerns about collaboration, culture, creativity and engagement. ¹

However, the pandemic has made hybrid work the default preference for employees, and they are reluctant to return. Seventy-five percent of hybrid or remote workers say their expectations for working flexibly have increased since the beginning of the pandemic. ² Also, employees do not have positive sentiments on the value of returning to office. Fifty-four percent of employees say going to the office feels more expensive compared to prepandemic, and 48% say it requires more effort. Only 30% of employees say going to the office is worthwhile most of the time (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Return-to-Office Employee Sentiment

Return-to-Office Employee Sentiment

n = 3,524 Location-Agnostic Workers
 Source: 2022 Gartner Hybrid Collaboration Survey

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Organizations that decide to take the route of a “hard return” — that is, mandating employees to work on-site for most of the workweek — expose themselves to serious employee attrition risks. Our research shows organizations that force their employees back to a fully on-site arrangement could lose one in three employees.² Hence, forcing employees back to the office may not be a compelling proposition. To get employees to use the office more often, organizations should make it a place they want to go to.

To make the office a compelling place employees want to use, HR professionals must:

- **Understand employees’ office preferences and pain points.** HR professionals must work with HR leaders to effectively shape their organization’s back-to-office transition approach by understanding employees’ office preferences and pain points— why employees want to use the office as well as the barriers they face to using the office.
- **Implement tactics for a compelling back-to-office experience.** HR professionals must help HR leaders implement tactics to facilitate an effective back-to-office experience for employees, by prioritizing efforts to redesign and reposition the office space based on employees’ office preferences and pain points, feasibility of delivering on employee needs and achievement of team/company goals.

Understand Employees' Office Preferences and Pain Points

To effectively shape the organization's back-to-office transition approach, HR professionals must work with HR leaders to rethink the purpose, form and function of offices, offering employees a different and more compelling on-site experience than the one prepandemic. They can do so by understanding employees' office preferences and pain points — that is, what attracts employees to use the office and the barriers that keep them away.

Our research indicates employees' top reasons for using the office are varied. The top three reasons include:

- Building relationships with colleagues and managers
- Collaborating with others
- Using equipment, tools or supplies that are only available on-site

Other factors include changing up routines, being visible to senior leaders, learning from others and leveraging the office for focused and deep thought work (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Top Three Reasons Why Employees Use the Office

Top Three Reasons Why Employees Use the Office



n = 3,524 Location-Agnostic Workers
Source: 2022 Gartner Hybrid Collaboration Survey

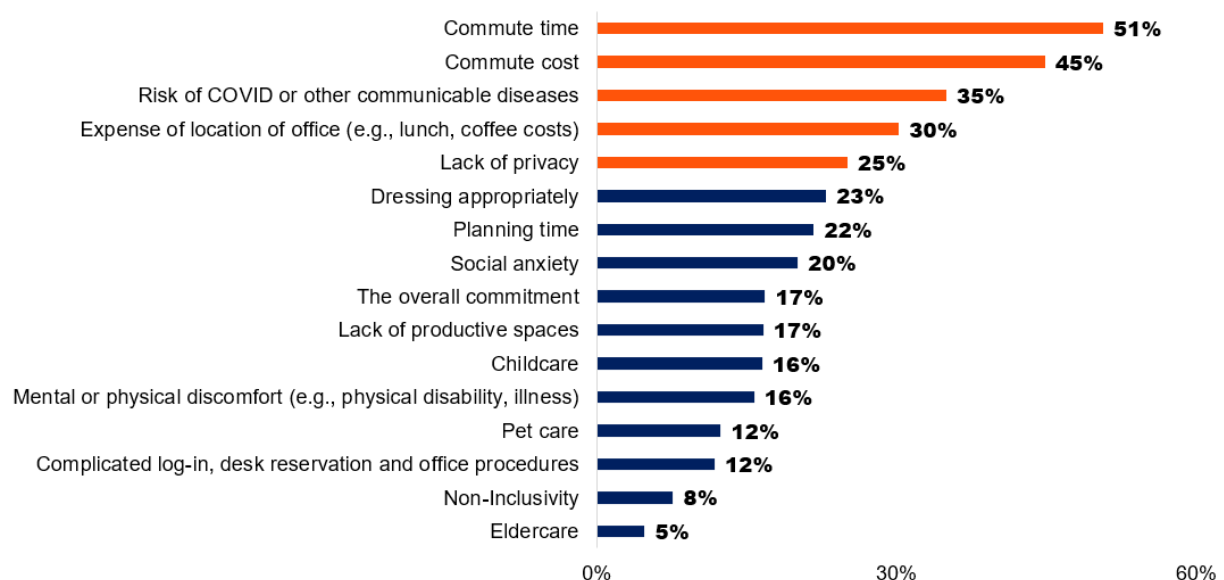
Apart from factors that attract employees to use the office, employees also face multiple barriers. The top three barriers employees face to using the office include:

- Commute time
- Commute cost
- The risk of COVID-19 or other communicable diseases

Other barriers include location-related costs (e.g., buying lunch or coffee), lack of privacy, dressing appropriately and planning time (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Top Five Barriers Employees Face to Using the Office

Top Five Barriers Employees Face to Using the Office



n = 3,524 Location-Agnostic Workers
Source: 2022 Gartner Hybrid Collaboration Survey

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Implement Tactics for a Compelling Back-to-Office Experience

After understanding employees' office preferences and pain points, organizations must focus on crafting and implementing tactics for a compelling back-to-office experience. HR professionals must work closely with HR leaders to prioritize efforts to redesign and reposition the office space based on what attracts employees to use the office as well as the barriers that keep them away, feasibility of delivering on employee needs and achievement of team/company goals.

Below is a list of tactics that organizations can leverage to attract employees and provide a compelling back-to-office experience (see Table 1).

Organizations must take a pragmatic, future-focused approach by prioritizing employee needs and expectations and adjusting their physical workplaces to be safe, experience-based and immersive destinations. They should focus on promoting the office as a location for strengthening employee and team bonds and enhancing employee well-being and connection to culture, which will eventually aid in building a higher-performing, more engaged workforce that looks forward to coming to the office.

Table 1: Purpose of Office Space for Employees and Tactics to Attract Them Back to Office

Office Purpose	Tactics to Attract Employees Back to Office
Collaboration and Networking	■ Encourage managers/teams to leverage the office for brainstorming, workshops, team building exercises and more to boost purposeful collaboration opportunities for employees. ■ Encourage high-priority and high-impact in-person meetings and catch-ups at the office. Discussions regarding performance, career opportunities and changes to an employee's tasks or reporting lines are better face-to-face. ■ Expand the onboarding process to include developing critical networks, fast-tracking team formation and fostering culture and value immersion activities, in office. ■ Connect employees in office through shared experiences, circumstances and interests inside and outside of work to help broaden networks beyond their immediate teams. For example, consider in-office networking initiatives geared toward employees who are starting a career, are new to the company, are concentrated in specific locations or enjoy participating in specific activities outside of work. ■ Dedicate office space specifically for innovation. Think hubs, labs and interactive spaces facilitate innovation, collaboration and networking.
Learning, Growth and Development	■ Offer employees immersive on-the-job and in-office development opportunities through group-based skills acquisition, shadowing, coaching and mentoring. ■ Create touchpoints with career options to make it seamless for employees to see how the experience of one "destination" compares with another by using gig marketplaces and tech platforms to connect employees with short-term rotations or project opportunities, in office.

Office Purpose

Tactics to Attract Employees Back to Office

Socializing

- Build a committee in charge of organizing social activities in the office like team building activities, sports events, celebrating birthdays and festivals, highlighting employee success stories/achievements and more.
- Consider replacing cafeterias and cafes that encourage employees to grab a quick snack and get back to their computers with more intimate dining spaces that enhance social connection and team bonds and provide a respite from the social isolation of remote work.

Well-Being

- Organize in-office yoga and meditation sessions that nurture employees and support their physical and mental well-being.
- Destigmatize mental health by celebrating companywide in-office mental health days and organizing counseling sessions for employees with mental health experts in office.
- Provide full-spectrum in-office food and services to employees.

Commute Cost and
Safety of Transit
*** (barrier)*

- Provide employees with cab services and/or parking spaces (in case of a personal vehicle) at subsidized costs to encourage safe and convenient travel to the office.

Caretaker
Responsibilities
*** (barrier)*

- Organize meetups/sessions in office for employees with parental responsibilities to share experiences and learn from each other.
- Provide employees who are parents with subsidized childcare services and daycare benefits.
- Connect employees with organizations providing respite care services and elderly care assistance.

Gartner Client Resources Recommended by the Author

- Return-to-Office Employee Benchmarks
- 3 Personas to Consider for Back-to-Office Transition Planning
- Hybrid and Flexible Work Policy Library
- A Good Return-to-Office Strategy Requires Good Communication and Incentives

Notes

¹ Benchmark With Gartner: Preparing for 2023, Workforce Planning, Talent Trends and Predictions (14 December 2022); n = 145 HR leaders. This webinar is part of a monthly series of live benchmarking sessions covering the top internal and external concerns that impact key talent decisions HR Leaders need to make. These sessions enable HR leaders to discuss stands their peers are taking on timely, critical topics. There is a global representation of attendees across a spectrum of industries with a focus on North America. Results from these sessions are compiled into a final benchmarking report.

² 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work Employee Survey. This survey was conducted to better understand how employees are adapting to a new remote work dominant context. The research was conducted online from 4 through 21 December 2021 with over 4,000 employees with representation from various geographies, industries and functions and was designed and developed by Gartner's HR practice research team.

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