

Ordered back to the office? Your boss might be trying to show you the door

As the Great Return to Office (RTO) debate continues to rage across the UK, many workers are investing in new lunchboxes, planning in-office outfits, and preparing for the squeeze of a daily commute.

Temps de lecture : minute

13 August 2024

However, in some organisations, there is more than meets the eye when it comes to such mandates.

A new report from software firm BambooHR reveals that some bosses set return-to-office mandates with the hope of encouraging voluntary turnover. This revelation confirms what many workers have long suspected: RTO mandates are sometimes used as "soft layoffs".

3 jobs to apply for now

- *Product Manager (Technology), Finning International, Cannock*
- *Atlas Support Manager - Technology, Forvis Mazars, London*
- *Application Engineer, GE Aviation, Cheltenham*

The report, which surveyed over 1,500 full-time salaried workers in desk jobs, including 500 HR managers and just over 1,000 in managerial positions, found that about one in five HR professionals (18%) admitted they were hoping for some voluntary turnover among workers after implementing an RTO plan.

Even more tellingly, nearly 37% of all managers in the survey believe their organisation conducted layoffs because fewer workers than anticipated decided to quit due to these mandates.

This suggests that RTO policies are sometimes being used as a strategic tool for workforce reduction, rather than a genuine attempt to boost productivity or company culture.

All-seeing eyes

Beyond workforce reduction, the BambooHR report uncovered another motivating factor behind RTO mandates: surveillance. About a third of all managers (32%) admitted that tracking employees' work habits was a primary reason for their office mandates.

This desire for oversight hasn't gone unnoticed by employees. A significant 42% of all respondents said they feel coming to the office is only to be seen by their boss and other managers.

This perception has led to the rise of phenomena like the "green status effect", where remote workers make efforts to maintain a constant online presence on platforms like Slack or Teams, even when they're not actively working.

One size doesn't fit all

Despite the apparent prevalence of blanket RTO policies, HR experts argue that a more nuanced approach is necessary. Anita Grantham, head of HR at BambooHR, advocates for a two-tiered strategy, likening it to "federal" and "state" level policies.

This approach allows companies to establish overarching values at the "federal" level, while implementing work modes based on each team's

specific needs at the "state" level.

For instance, tech teams might work in-office two days a week for collaboration and spend the rest of the time in deep focus at home, while sales teams may perform best with more in-office time.

"It's hard to manage, but I think it makes much more sense than these broad brush strategies. We don't take one-off approaches on other people processes—why all of a sudden should we be returning to the office?" Grantham argues.

3 more jobs to explore this week

- *Senior Technologist, BP Energy, Reading*
- *Mainframe Sales Director - EMEA, Arrow Electronics Inc., United Kingdom*
- *Senior Product Manager - Logistics Insurance and Claims, Amazon TA, London*

UK companies forging ahead

Despite expert recommendations for flexibility, and multiple reports confirming that hybrid working is better for individuals and business, many UK companies are still pushing forward with stringent RTO policies.

A prime example is global ecommerce company THG, previously known as The Hut Group, which has demanded that staff return to its Manchester head office five-days-a-week from 19 August.

The timing of THG's mandate has raised eyebrows, as it coincides with a mass layoff at the firm, with 171 jobs expected to be affected. This combination of RTO orders and job cuts echoes the findings of the BambooHR report, fueling speculation about the true motives behind such

policies.

As RTOs, and the debate around them continues, it's clear that more nuance is needed in the conversation.

For employees, the key is to stay alert. If your company suddenly implements a strict RTO policy, especially in conjunction with other concerning signs, it could be time to consider your options.

And remember, concerning signs don't need to include obvious falling revenues or stock prices, look for the details: the water cooler breaks and isn't fixed, staff lunches and parties are scaled back, startups begin to share office space or you move to a smaller, less central building entirely. Fresh flowers stop coming at the front desk.

These are all tell-tale signs of cutbacks and savings, and even if you're not ready to aggressively *job hunt* - or you want to see how things play out - it's worth updating your CV, drafting a recent cover letter, and keeping in touch with your network, all preemptively.

[Want a job with better flexibility? Discover thousands of open roles on the Maddyne Job Board today](#)



Read also

Are you happy with the “emotional wage” you’re getting at work?



MADDYNEWS UK

The newsletter you need for all the latest from the startup ecosystem

[SIGN UP](#)

Article by Amanda Kavanagh