

# A LEADER'S COMPLETE GUIDE TO BRINGING YOUR TEAM BACK TO THE OFFICE

A WHITE PAPER BY ECSELL INSTITUTE



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As restrictions and policies across the world loosen, many organizations are facing confusion when it comes to choosing a remote over in-office work environment. Use this comprehensive guide to help determine if going back to the office is right for your team, minimize friction during the return process, and support your team members properly so they can continue to achieve high performance.



# REMOTE OR IN OFFICE: DETERMINING WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOUR TEAM

Since early 2020, many employees have experienced working remotely for the first time. Some have loved the flexibility while others have been missing their in-office environment. But now that most government and company restrictions have dropped, leaders are faced with the sudden decision of determining where their teams should work moving forward. You **can** have your employees return to the office, but **should** you require it? Regardless of what work environment an individual employee may prefer, a shared sentiment is that many feel in limbo and are seeking swift communication from leadership. Here are a few pros and cons of each type of work environment to consider when making your decision.

## REMOTE PROS

- **KEEPING THE STATUS QUO** - You've been doing it for two years, so you likely don't need to make many changes if you are going to remain fully remote. However, if you've never equipped your managers to effectively lead in this specific environment, now is the time to start.
- **A BIGGER HIRING POOL** - When your employees can work from any location, it allows you to recruit and hire people from a much wider geographic area. This can often include accessing unique viewpoints and specialties.
- **YOUR EMPLOYEES MAY PREFER IT** - Many employees like working remotely, often citing increased flexibility and lack of a commute as the primary reasons. According to an Oct. 2021 Gallup study, 37% of employees who have been working from home want to continue working remote full-time.

## REMOTE CONS

- **ACCOUNTABILITY MAY SEEM TOUGHER** - Ecsell research shows remote employees are 31% less likely than their in office counterparts to say their manager holds all team members accountable. Put simply, when employees can't see their peers working, they may be skeptical they're pulling their weight.
- **RECOGNITION IS GIVEN LESS** - Remote employees are 49% less likely to say their manager quickly praises them for a job well done than in office team members. The lack of recognition may simply be a case of out of sight, out of mind.
- **COMMUNICATION CAN SUFFER** - Remote employees are 24% more likely to hold back from openly expressing themselves in team meetings. This lack of open and candid communication may hinder team collaboration.

### IN-OFFICE PROS

- **TEAMWORK IS STRONGER** - In office employees rate the level of support they receive from their peers 18% higher than remote employees, which means they have others they can count on when they need help.
- **COMMUNICATION IS MORE CONSISTENT** - In office employees are 52% more likely than remote employees to reporting having frequent one-to-one meetings with their manager, which means they are receiving more support and guidance.
- **COACHING & DEVELOPMENT HAPPENS MORE OFTEN** - In office employees are 12% more likely than remote employees to say their manager provides stretch opportunities for them, which means they are more likely to develop and improve their skills.

### IN-OFFICE CONS

- **LESS FLEXIBILITY FOR EMPLOYEES** - When they are in the office everyday, employees may not be working more than they would at home, but they certainly have less flexibility about when they get their work done.
- **INCREASED COSTS FOR EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES** - Whether it's companies paying for office space, office equipment and utilities, or employees paying for their gas or work wardrobe, being in person can certainly lead to more costs.
- **YOUR EMPLOYEES MAY NOT PREFER IT** - In the same Gallup survey, 91% of employees who worked from home during the pandemic indicated that they'd like to be able to work from home at least part of the time on a permanent basis.

## HOW TO MAKE AN INFORMED CHOICE

There are clear benefits to both in office and remote work environments, so the only way to make the right decision is to consider what's most important to you, your company and your employees. If you prioritize keeping hard costs as low as possible, expanding your potential employee pool and not disrupting current ways of work, then staying remote may be the best approach for your organization. If you value the accountability, collaboration, support and positive reinforcement that is more prevalent in the office, then you may want to consider bringing your employees back to the workplace.

Many are looking for the best of both worlds by implementing a hybrid approach. This could mean that employees are expected in the office on specific days but work remotely on others, or that employees have the freedom to dictate their own in-office schedule. In fact, this hybrid approach is what most employees prefer. According to the Gallup study referenced above, 54% of employees who worked remotely during the pandemic say they'd like to be in the office some of the time, but not all of the time. This hybrid approach can offer the flexibility that many employees crave, but also lead to some of the benefits that come from regular, in-person interactions with their colleagues. With these clear benefits comes some unique challenges, so we will discuss how to overcome those in the next section of this guide.



# ADDRESSING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Allowing team members to work from home some days and in the office on others can truly give companies and employees the best of both worlds by providing a flexible, yet collaborative way of working. However, with these clear benefits comes a set of unique challenges. It's important to establish best practices for managing long-term in this new environment from the beginning to set your teams up for success. Use the below ideas to help you proactively address some of the issues that may arise in your new, hybrid environment.

(Looking for more information on how to support your remote-only employees? Check out our white paper, [2 Major Challenges of Remote Management & 3 Ways to Overcome Them.](#))

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## **Plan for effective team communication.**

Team communication is easiest when all team members are on equal footing. So the best way to ensure effective team communication is to schedule group meetings on the days that everyone is in the office. But that's not always realistic in a hybrid environment, as there will inevitably be times when some employees are meeting face-to-face in a conference room and others are joining from outside the office. To ensure that remote team members don't get pushed out of the discussion, be sure that video conferencing is always available and that all in office team members are visible on camera. Also, impromptu meetings will happen more often when employees are in office. After all, being able to communicate face-to-face is one of the major benefits of being there. When those unplanned meetings occur, make sure to always end them with a plan of how you are going to share relevant information from the meeting with team members that weren't in office that day.

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## **Don't leave team members out of recognition.**

As shared earlier, when team members are working remotely, they don't receive as much timely recognition from their manager as when they are in the office. Simply put, the accomplishments of out of office employees are often out of sight, out of mind. To ensure that your team members who aren't in office on a given day aren't left out of recognition, schedule a few minutes at the end of each work day to call or send a DM to out of office team members that had a success. By making this a habit, you will ensure that you remember to appreciate all employees' worthy contributions.

### 3

#### **Be more open about individual performance metrics.**

When employees can't see their peers working alongside them each day, they can become more skeptical that everyone on the team is pulling their own weight. This is why it's especially important in a hybrid environment to be open about individual performance metrics. This certainly doesn't mean publicly sharing performance reviews, but it does mean reviewing objective performance numbers that employees should be hitting during team meetings. This could include looking at things like percent to sales goal, client retention numbers, marketing leads brought in, errors reported, or any other measurable results. By doing this, managers can ensure all employees understand the team's progress towards the goal and how each person is contributing to it. But even more importantly, they can also create a more team collaborative environment. Because when employees know what their peers are trying to accomplish, they can provide better ideas and support to help them.

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**Whether your team is remote, hybrid, or in-office, it's critical that your leaders are equipped for their specific environment. Each setting has their own challenges that require different leadership skills.**



# THE KEYS TO BRINGING YOUR TEAM BACK TO THE OFFICE EFFECTIVELY

Once you've made the decision to bring your employees back to the office, whether full-time or hybrid, you'll want to immediately start the planning process to ensure it goes smoothly. For many team members, this will be the first time in two years that they've interacted with their colleagues face-to-face, which makes their return to the office a big moment. In many ways, it will be a re-introduction to your company culture. Through careful planning, you can make this moment positive for everyone. Use the below steps to address all the key factors that ensure a smooth return to the office.



**1. CHOOSE THE RIGHT DAY** - Picking the right day will help your team members have a great re-introduction to the office environment. Here are a few factors to consider in making sure you get the date right.

- **Ensure plenty of advance notice** - For many team members, heading back into the office will mean a major shift to their lives. They may need to make different childcare arrangements. They may have to make adjustments to their schedule. They may need to make purchases, such as a reliable car for their commute or work clothes. Or they may just need time to mentally prepare for what this means to their typical day. Having more time to deal with these changes will help ease their transition, so Ecsell recommends giving employees at least 45 days notice before they will be required to be back in the office.
- **Consider staggered return dates** - Depending on the size of your company, you may want to consider a return to the office with staggered dates for different teams, rather than bringing everyone back at once. This can help to lessen the likelihood of an unforeseen issue disrupting your entire company. And it can help make the first day back feel a little less overwhelming to employees, as they don't have to interact with everyone all at once.
- **Pay attention to important dates** - Be careful to avoid scheduling your return to the office date with other dates of higher stress for your employees, such as a major product launch or the start of a significant company-wide initiative. Also consider avoiding dates that may be important or stressful to employees personally, such as school start or end dates. You want to avoid employees conflating other stressors with their return to the office.



**2. BEGIN YOUR PRE-RETURN COMMUNICATION** - Once you've chosen your return date or dates, the next step is to let your employees know. To get your return to work communication right, consider the following factors:

- **Determine method of communication** - The best way to stave off confusion or rumors is to announce the return to the office to all employees at the same time. An all-company, virtual meeting is ideal so you can fully share the reasons for the return to the office, as well as convey your excitement about being able to see employees in person again. If an all-company meeting isn't feasible, an alternative would be an all-company e-mail. While you can't capture your excitement as easily in an e-mail, it is an efficient and clear way to get the information out there.
- **Define clear expectations** - An essential part of the pre-return communication is making your expectations clear. Do all employees have to return? What is the return date for each team? If you are using a hybrid approach, how many days per week will employees need to be in the office? Are these in office days expected to be the same days of the week for all employees? You'll want to have definite answers to all these questions and share them directly in your initial communication so expectations are clear right from the start.
- **Share how you will support employees' return** - If you are planning any special benefits to ease employees' return to the office, you will want to clearly articulate those as well. For example, some companies offer a stipend to fully or partially cover childcare costs. Others offer reimbursement for parking or commute costs. If you are going to try to cover some of the additional costs employees may incur coming back to the office, be sure to explain that in detail. On the flip side, if you don't plan to offer any benefits or support, be prepared to explain why.
- **Address individual concerns or questions** - Inevitably, you will have team members with questions, particularly if they have reservations about returning to the office. These questions are best addressed individually, so have your front-line managers proactively schedule one-to-one follow-up meetings with each employee after the all-company return to office announcement is made. And to prepare for these individual conversations, be sure to anticipate and equip your managers with clear answers to likely questions. For example, some employees might ask for an exception to being required to come back, want to spend less days in the office or want to return to the office on a different date. Your managers will need clear direction on how to handle these requests.

When bringing your team back to the office, the biggest difference between success and failure will be **how you make employees feel as they return.**







**3. MAKE THE FIRST DAY GREAT** - For many employees, the office environment after a prolonged absence will feel a little strange and unfamiliar. Even interacting with their colleagues in a face-to-face setting may feel awkward at first. It's like their first day all over again! So just like you'd put in extra effort to make new employees feel

welcome, comfortable and excited on their first day, you will want to ensure that the return to office creates those same feelings for all your team members. Here are some ideas to consider to make their first day a great day:

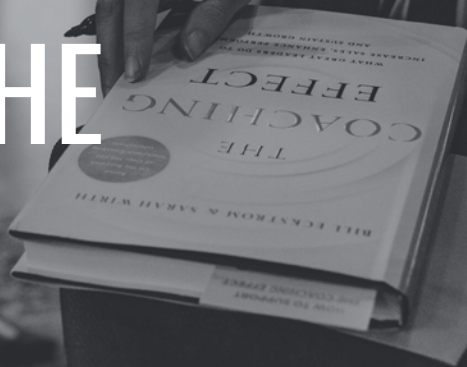
- **Plan a warm welcome** - Consider beginning employees' first day back in the office with an all-company breakfast. This can be a fun way to create positive energy and allow employees to start interacting with their peers again in a less formal way. Likewise, you could plan an FAC at the end of their first week in office to celebrate being back together. You want employees to feel the benefits of being in office right away, and company social gatherings are one of the best ways to do this.
- **Show your appreciation** - A simple way to show employees that you are glad they are back is to have managers leave a personal note and small token of appreciation on each of their team members' desks on their first morning in the office. Being greeted in such a thoughtful way sets a positive, fun and welcome tone right off the bat.
- **Interact in person as much as possible** - Being able to talk to others face-to-face is one of the biggest benefits to being in office, so take advantage of it. Make an extra effort to stop by an employee's desk to talk with them rather than sending them a DM. Plan a team meeting to hash out an idea rather than going back and forth over email. Celebrate that you can communicate more easily by actually doing it in person. However, be mindful that your interactions don't become disruptions or distractions.
- **Re-establish schedules and norms** - In office routines, schedules and norms are different from remote ones. So be sure to set the tone on the first day back regarding how the workday may look different now that employees are in person again. For example, you may need to schedule a little more time between meetings so people can travel from one conference room to another. Also, if you have a hybrid environment, be sure to have a plan for how team communication should happen if some are out of the office and others are in person.

## CONCLUSION

Above all, when it comes to bringing your employees back to the workplace, whether all of the time or part of the time, remember that the biggest difference between success and failure is likely to be how you make employees feel as they return. All the logistics and planning won't matter if you don't take the time to show employees how much you care about them, how excited you are to see them and how much you value them as people. In this way, you and other company leaders are the keys to the success of bringing your employees back to the office because you are one of the main reasons that they will want to be there.

Want more help to minimize turnover and maximize performance during your back-to-office transition? [Schedule a free consultation with Ecsell Institute today.](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Sarah Wirth is president of Ecsell Institute, as well as one of the world's foremost authorities in metric-based performance coaching and growth.

She has 20+ years of experience in employee assessment, leadership development, sales executive coaching, and customer service. Sarah joined Ecsell Institute in 2011 to help executive leaders, sales managers, athletic coaches, teachers, and more to master how coaching done correctly is the #1 enhancer of performance. Her best-selling book, *The Coaching Effect*, was written to bring Ecsell Institute's mission to more people.

Ecsell Institute is the only organization that quantifies leadership effectiveness and educates on the impact leadership has on employee performance. We are the world's foremost authority in metric-based leadership research, having studied over 300,000 coaching interactions in the workplace and authoring the best-selling book, *The Coaching Effect*.

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