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How should law firms handle return-to-office policies?

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Companies have been in the news for implementing return-to-office mandates in efforts to foster necessary business objectives, including training, team building and overall success. Two studies from the past year offer seemingly different results on the impact of return-to-offices on employee morale.

The University of Pittsburgh’s Katz Graduate School of Business study reported that S&P 500 companies’ mandates caused “a significant decline in employee job satisfaction,” and they do “not result in a significant improvement in firm performance.” The study authors concluded some employees feel more productive when working from home and view return-to-office mandates “as a signal of management power-grabbing and lack of trust in employees.”

In seeming contrast, Thomson Reuters’ *2024 Law Firm Office Attendance Policies Report*—focusing on law firms only—found legal professionals have enthusiastically embraced new hybrid office attendance policies seeking to curtail the extent of remote work.

But these results may not differ from the Katz study as starkly as it seems: Lawyers’ approval of return-to-office policies was driven by the policies’ “high degrees of flexibility and light-touch enforcement”—touchstones also noted in the Katz study. The Thomson Reuters study also reported dissatisfaction with rigid policies requiring disparate in-office time for partners vs. associates, finding such policies engendered the feelings of distrust echoed in the Katz study.

The two studies have some common ground as, according to Thomson Reuters, “both found flexibility and intentions play significant roles in determining employee satisfaction”—perhaps more so than the number of days required to be in-office. It may be that law firms’



(Illustration by Sara Wadford/Shutterstock)

person interactions occur but allow employees some say in the scheduling of where and when they occur.

Mandatory in-person events could run the gamut from purely work-related to purely social and anything in between. For example, requiring certain meetings to be in-person and hosting team or department lunches encourages intentional conversations about professional issues. Including junior employees in client meetings and scheduling time to

more flexible policies have been more successful than other businesses in getting it right.

For both a law firm and its employees to view a return-to-office policy as successful, employee satisfaction must be balanced with the firm's needs regarding workflow and employee training. The Thomson Reuters study reported that the pandemic's "lack of in-person interaction strained professional relationships and connections within many firms, hindered the mentoring of junior staff and complicated the nuances of team dynamics." Indeed, the Emily Post Institute has seen a recent influx of requests for classes training employees in these "rusted" professional communication and behavior skills. A successful return-to-office policy should balance the need for in-person interaction as an engine for professional development and relationship-building with the studies' findings that return-to-office flexibility drives employee satisfaction.

Be flexible

One approach to balancing the needs on both sides could be to mandate that in-

debrief afterward can facilitate on-the-job learning of both substantive and soft skills that can be hard to replicate behind a screen. Requiring face-to-face meetings enhances learning potential, while including employees in the scheduling provides desirable flexibility.

Young lawyers also appreciate serendipitous encounters with lawyers they do not directly work with on active projects, whether it is to bounce ideas off people or simply for watercooler talk. Junior lawyers welcome the chance to simply knock on someone's door to seek impromptu and informational coffee chats with more experienced lawyers from a different practice area. These conversations build and broaden employees' knowledge of and relationships within the firm.

Purely social events provide another avenue for needed relationship-building. A manufacturing employee told the *Washington Post* she looked forward to meeting up with colleagues for activities such as drinks during happy hours, picnics and volleyball games to bond with co-workers outside of the office after the isolation of the pandemic. Employers can consider offering employees some sort of budget to facilitate these efforts at in-person relationship-building.

While there are significant benefits to in-person interactions, employers should consider some remote interactions in the service of flexibility. One firm reported creating a system for scheduling informal "virtual coffee chats" between partners and associates to maintain relationship-building during the pandemic—a practice that has potential in the hybrid work environment as well. Mixing virtual meetups with required face-to-face time helps strike a balance between face-to-face interactions and the flexibility that employees value.

Formal mentoring programs can include a mix of in-person and virtual meetups to likewise enhance learning and relationship-building while preserving flexibility.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to balancing employer and employee needs in today's world of remote and in-person work. An overall approach of mandating some level of in-person interaction, while allowing for scheduling flexibility, may strike the right balance. This approach enables both employers and employees to reap the benefits of in-person interaction while allowing for the flexibility that the Katz and Thomson Reuters studies find drives employee satisfaction in the workplace.

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