

BEYOND THE MANDATE

The Memo Is Not a Plan: Why Return-to-Office Mandates Keep Failing

What eighteen months of distributed work taught us about change — and why we are unlearning it at the worst possible moment

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1. When the Calendar Invite Arrived

The email went out on a Monday morning. The subject line was gentle — "Our Return Together" — and the tone was warm for three paragraphs. Near the bottom, in bold, sat the part everyone actually read: from the first of next month, all colleagues back in the building three days a week, Tuesdays to Thursdays. By lunchtime the real conversation had moved to the places the email could not reach — the side messages, the one-to-ones, the quiet exchanges between people who had spent eighteen months learning to work in an entirely new way and had just been told, in the space of three short paragraphs, that the experiment was over.

I have watched a version of this scene play out in a great many organisations this year, and the details are almost the only thing that changes. Two days or three. "Anchor days" or "core hours." Badge readers or an honour system. The shape underneath is always the same: a decision is announced, a date is set, and then the organisation discovers — slowly, and at some expense — that announcing a change and achieving one are not the same act.

This is the argument I want to make. The return to the office is the largest, most personal, and most emotionally charged change most organisations have attempted in a decade, and we are running it as though it were a facilities memo. A mandate is a decision; change is everything that has to happen after the decision for it to become real. We have written the decision and skipped the change, and then we are surprised when the building fills up and nothing we hoped for follows the people through the door.

2. The Category Error

Ask where the return-to-office plan lives in most organisations right now and the answer tells you why it is struggling. It lives with facilities, or with HR operations, or with a property team counting desks and staggering floors. These are capable functions doing exactly what they were asked. But the question they have been handed — how do we get people back into the building safely and fairly — is a logistics question wrapped around a change problem, and the change problem is the one nobody owns.

We know how to do change. The discipline is not a secret. You build a case for change that a reasonable person can accept. You assemble a coalition of leaders and respected peers who carry it credibly. You take seriously the question every affected person asks in private – what does this mean for me – and you answer it honestly rather than hoping it goes unasked. You name what people are being asked to give up, because loss unacknowledged does not disappear; it goes underground and comes back as attrition. None of this is exotic. Most of the organisations now struggling with the return have change methodologies sitting on a shelf that would have told them all of it.

So why is the method absent? Because leaders do not recognise this as change at all. And that is the category error at the heart of the failure.

The return is not being managed badly as change. For the most part it is not being managed as change at all – it has been filed under policy, and policy is announced, not led.

There is a deeper reason the error is so easy to make. The office used to be the default. In 2019, coming in was simply what one did, and working from home was the exception that required a reason. Somewhere in the last eighteen months that default quietly inverted for a great many roles. Distributed work stopped being the emergency arrangement and became the water people swim in – the way the day is shaped, the reason a parent can do the school run, the ninety minutes of commuting that turned back into ninety minutes of life. To ask people to return is therefore not to restore a norm. It is to ask them to change again, away from a default they did not choose but have thoroughly adapted to. A leader who believes they are calling people back to normal, while their people experience being asked to leave the arrangement that has become normal, is not going to manage the gap between those two views – because they cannot see that the gap exists.

3. The Anchor Day That Anchored Nothing

Let me be concrete, because this is where the abstraction usually hides the damage. Consider the organisation that mandates three days, Tuesday to Thursday, in the name of collaboration and culture. Reasonable intent. But it sets the rule at the level of the enterprise and leaves the choice of which days to teams – or worse, to individuals. The predictable result: the building is busy on Wednesday and half-empty on Monday and Friday, and on the busy day your particular team is scattered across different floors, different sites, and in a surprising number of cases different cities, because "three days in an office" was never the same as "three days with the people you work with." People commute for an hour to sit in a booked meeting room and take video calls with colleagues who have also commuted to their offices. The office is full. No one is working together. The anchor day anchors nothing.

I know of one organisation where the quarterly engagement pulse fell fourteen points in the three months after a blanket three-day rule was introduced, and the steepest decline sat squarely among the high performers it could least afford to lose – the people with the most options, watching a change that felt, to them, like a statement of distrust. That is the mechanism worth sitting with. The mandate did not fail because people dislike offices. It

failed because it delivered attendance while promising collaboration, and then measured the thing it could count rather than the thing it wanted.

4. Attendance Is Not the Outcome

Here is the quiet substitution that undoes most return-to-office efforts. The real goals are hard to measure — collaboration, the apprenticeship of junior colleagues, the culture that is supposed to live in a shared room, the serendipitous conversation that solves a problem nobody had scheduled. Attendance is easy to measure. So attendance becomes the target, and the moment a proxy becomes the target, people optimise for the proxy. They come in on the required days and do exactly the work they would have done at home, headphones on, calendar full, contributing nothing to the collaboration the whole exercise was meant to produce. The badge data looks wonderful. The outcome the badge data was standing in for never arrives.

This is why the number of days is the wrong thing to argue about. An organisation that wins the fight for three days and loses the thing those days were for has not succeeded; it has merely paid for the failure in commuting time and goodwill.

5. The Case for the Office — Taken Seriously

It would be easy, and dishonest, to argue as though the office had no value and the mandate were pure managerial nostalgia. That is not my view, and it is not the strongest version of the other side.

The office earns its keep in ways distributed work genuinely strains. The apprenticeship of early-career people is the clearest: much of what a junior colleague learns is absorbed sideways, by overhearing how a difficult call is handled, by the unplanned five minutes after a meeting, by proximity to people more experienced than themselves — and eighteen months of remote onboarding has left a cohort visibly short of exactly that. Weak ties fray over video; the loose connections across an organisation, the people you would never book a call with but would happily talk to by a kettle, are precisely what a screen does not reproduce. And hybrid carries a real equity hazard: when some are in the room and some are on the screen, the screen too often becomes the second tier, and influence quietly concentrates among the physically present. These are serious arguments. Anyone dismissing them has not been paying attention.

But notice what they are arguments for. They are arguments for collaboration, for learning, for connection, for equity of voice. They are not arguments for a blanket three-day rule imposed by memo — because a mandate is a remarkably blunt instrument for producing any of them. Agreeing that the office has value is not the same as agreeing that compulsory attendance is how that value is realised. The stronger the case for what the office can do, the more damning it is to pursue it through a mechanism that reliably delivers bodies in a building and nothing else.

“The office will have to earn the commute it once commanded by right.”

6. Running It as Change

If the return were treated as the change programme it actually is, it would look markedly different — and not more expensive, only more honest.

- It would begin from the job to be done, not the number of days. What, specifically, do we want to happen in a shared room that is not happening now — the onboarding, the cross-team problem-solving, the moments of culture — and how many days does that actually require? The answer is rarely a round enterprise-wide number.
- It would set the intent centrally and the pattern locally. A team that needs to be together on the same two days to do its work should be able to choose those days, rather than commuting into a building to be alone in a crowd. Uniformity is easy to administer and almost perfectly designed to destroy the collaboration it claims to protect.
- It would make the office earn the commute. If people are to give up ninety minutes each way, the day has to be worth the journey — designed for the things that only happen in person, not merely the desk they already have at home with a longer trip attached.
- It would name the loss out loud. Leaders who acknowledge, plainly, that they are asking people to give something up — and who explain why it is nonetheless worth it — will be believed far more readily than those who insist nothing is really being taken away.
- It would measure the outcome, not the turnstile. Collaboration, retention of the people who matter most, the confidence of the newest joiners — imperfect measures, but measures of the thing itself rather than its most convenient proxy.

The contrast is stark when the two logics are set side by side.

Mandate logic	Change logic
Decide the number of days and announce it	Decide the outcome and work back to the pattern
Uniform rule across the enterprise	Common intent, team-level design
Success = attendance on required days	Success = the collaboration attendance was meant to enable
Loss is denied or left unspoken	Loss is named, and the trade is made openly
Measured by the badge reader	Measured by the outcome it stands in for

None of this is soft. It is more demanding than issuing a mandate, because it requires leaders to know what they actually want from the office and to make a genuine case for it,

rather than reaching for the authority to compel and calling the resulting attendance a success.

7. What This Moment Is Really Telling Us

The return to the office is a mirror, and the reflection is not entirely flattering. The speed with which so many organisations reached for the mandate — the memo, the date, the badge reader — tells us how thin our change capability had quietly become. We were fluent in the vocabulary of change and much less fluent in its practice; we could recite the importance of the case for change and the coalition and the honest naming of loss, and then, when a hard change actually arrived, we skipped every step of it and hoped that authority would do the work that leadership was supposed to do.

There is still time to do this well, and as I write, the timing is oddly forgiving — dates are slipping into next year across the board, plans are being redrawn, and few organisations have committed so hard that they cannot change course. That grace will not last. The distinction that will matter is simple to state and difficult to live: the organisations that treat the return as change will keep their people and, in time, get some real value from the office; the organisations that treat it as a memo will keep their policy and lose the very people the policy was meant to bring back together. A building full of resentful, disengaged, quietly-job-hunting colleagues is not a return to anything worth returning to.

The question was never really how many days. It was whether we still remember how to lead people through a change they did not ask for — and this, of all the changes we have faced, is the one that will not be survived by memo.