

# Bosses are increasingly forcing workers back into the office—but evidence suggests it could backfire

July 29 2024, by Gemma Dale and Professor Matthew Tucker

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[Tesco, Boots and Barclays](#) have joined the growing number of companies trying to force employees back to the office after several

years of remote working that began with the pandemic. They're likely to be in for a battle.

While some bosses have argued remote work is responsible for [reduced innovation](#), [productivity issues](#) and [lack of creativity](#), many employees believe it is good for [their well-being and work-life balance](#).

Some organizations have already found that simply mandating workers show up [full time](#) or for a set [number of days](#) a week isn't enough, and have introduced policies to discourage and even punish remote working, such as excluding people [from promotion](#).

The problem is that there's limited evidence demonstrating that mandated in-[office](#) working is significantly better for an organization than remote working, and plenty showing that forcing employees into the office can have a detrimental effect. But many bosses retain a presumption that working from home is worse.

Research has found mandates [don't improve company or employee performance](#). [And other work](#) has shown that back to the office mandates can make it much harder to retain staff, with women and millennials identified as being more likely to quit. This doesn't just apply to rank and file workers, either. Other evidence suggests it can lead to [a loss of senior talent](#) as well.

These studies, which include surveys on employee "stay" intentions as well as company financial performance assessments and employee job satisfaction data, suggest that forcing employees back to the office may result in a commercial risk.

The evidence on the effectiveness or otherwise of hybrid work is still emerging. Despite concerns about productivity, employees generally rate themselves as at least, [if not more, productive](#) when working from home

compared to the office. And [early research](#) indicates that two days a week working from home does not impact performance.

There is no clear evidence to suggest how many days in the office are the "right" number, however. [One study found](#) that around two days a week in the office was the sweet spot for hybrid work. But the authors stressed the need for organizations to do their own data analysis, noting the likelihood of differences depending on each situation.

There is evidence emerging about when in-person time really does count. Microsoft has identified [three critical points](#) where this brings benefits. These are when new starters begin work, kicking off projects and strengthening team cohesion.

However, while in-person work is good for building and maintaining relationships, [it isn't essential](#) for effective collaboration as long as organizations put effort into promoting communication networks between employees.

## **Productivity paranoia**

If all this conflicts with what bosses think, it may be because of a lack of a consistent definition of productivity. Many organizations don't have effective systems for assessing and measuring it. Instead, managers may rely on faux productivity measures such as time spent at a desk or in meetings.

Manchester United's [return to office mandate](#) was accompanied by a justification that email traffic was lower on a Friday when people were working from home. But this assumes that emails are a good measure of productivity, and many would probably argue they are not.

Arguments for returning to the office also often appear driven by

manager preference and experience. Seb James, the UK managing director of Boots, said, "I know this has been true for me" when arguing informal meetings in person were [more effective](#) than formal remote meetings.

This has long been the case. Jack Nilles, the academic who first identified the potential for "telecommuting," [argued in the 1990s](#) that the biggest barrier to adoption of [remote work](#) would not be technology, but management attitudes and beliefs. Social psychologist Douglas McGregor called this [Theory X](#)—the idea that employees will, if given the opportunity, do as little as they can get away with, hence the need for supervision and penalties.

Today, Microsoft calls this [productivity paranoia](#), finding that 85% of leaders say that hybrid work makes it difficult to have confidence that [employees](#) are being productive. To address these concerns, managers need to rethink what they mean by [productivity](#)—and how they can measure it through meaningful objectives.

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