ASSESS360

RTO Without Regret: HR's Guide to Reduce Friction, Retain Talent, and Rebuild Culture

The Reality of RTO: HR Leaders Caught in the Middle

Many HR leaders must implement return-to-office (RTO) policies imposed by executives, government regulations, or board directives—often with little room for employee input. Balancing these mandates with workforce realities is challenging, as rigid, top-down policies clash with employees' growing expectations for flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance.

Without thoughtfully listening to employees along the way, HR leaders risk fueling disengagement, turnover, and negative press. Even if you didn't choose the RTO mandate, your implementation strategy will shape your organization's culture. **This toolkit helps HR and Talent leaders turn top-down directives into catalysts for higher engagement, stronger trust, and lasting resilience.**

The Risks of Rushing into Action

Here are the common pitfalls when RTO is rushed without meaningful employee input:

Turnover Surges: Rigid RTO mandates can lead to increased voluntary departures, as employees cite a lack of trust and autonomy
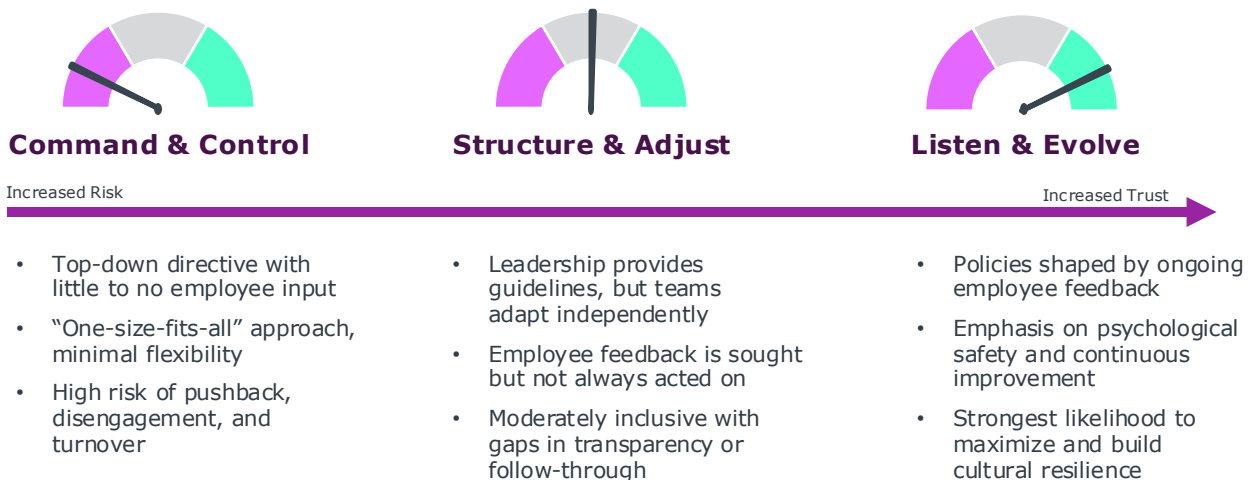
Productivity Plummets: "Fauxductivity"[1] rises when employees feel forced into environments that stifle their best performance

Tailored Support Declines: Universal policies may overlook differences in job functions, caregiving needs, and disabilities

Reputation Crumbles: Mishandled RTO implementations can trigger internal pushback, public petitions, and negative media coverage

Your RTO Implementation Style Can Make or Break Your Workplace Culture

How you implement RTO policies determines whether your culture suffers or thrives. A spectrum of approaches exists—from inflexible, top-down mandates that risk disengagement to dynamic, employee-informed strategies that drive trust and innovation.

Command & Control

Increased Risk →

- Top-down directive with little to no employee input
- "One-size-fits-all" approach, minimal flexibility
- High risk of pushback, disengagement, and turnover

Structure & Adjust

- Leadership provides guidelines, but teams adapt independently
- Employee feedback is sought but not always acted on
- Moderately inclusive with gaps in transparency or follow-through

Listen & Evolve

Increased Trust

- Policies shaped by ongoing employee feedback
- Emphasis on psychological safety and continuous improvement
- Strongest likelihood to maximize and build cultural resilience

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1) According to SHRM, fauxductivity occurs when employees engage in the performative behavior of "looking busy" and working at full capacity while limiting their contributions to a bare minimum.

Without Employee Input, RTO Mandates Can Backfire

Mishandling RTO policies can result in internal resistance, talent loss, and negative public perception. Headlines are filled with stories of companies that introduced strict return-to-office policies, only to face spikes in attrition and negative media coverage. **Instead of framing the end of remote or hybrid work as a rigid, top-down mandate, HR leaders must ensure employees' perspectives are heard and factored into the transition process.**

The High Cost of Ignoring Employee Sentiment

People who feel forced to return to the office without consideration of their needs are more likely to check out, struggle with productivity, or seek new opportunities. Taking the time to understand and address their concerns could mean the difference between a smooth transition and a high-profile retention crisis.

46% of remote workers said they're likely to resign if called back to the office full-time

4.6x Employees who feel heard are more empowered to do their best work

36% of senior-level job seekers said an RTO mandate influenced their decision to leave their job

$1.9T The annual cost of lost productivity for disengaged employees in the United States

Learning from Others' Missteps

Companies that ignored employee input in their RTO rollout have faced major setbacks—higher turnover, disengagement, and reputational harm. However, those that engaged employees early and used structured listening strategies have been able to drive alignment and avoid costly missteps.

Rushed and Rigid RTO Rollout	Employee-Informed Transition
A major tech company mandated a full workforce return without consulting employees or HR leaders. Within six months, they experienced: • Sharp increase in resignations • Plummeting engagement scores and participation • Public protests calling out unfair treatment	A leading financial services company took a data-driven approach to RTO, leveraging structured employee listening to guide their transition strategy. Their results: • Notable increase in retention • Productivity and engagement stabilized • Employees felt more agency in the process
Employees left for more flexible employers	**Employees reported higher trust in leadership**

Sources: Liu, Jennifer, "What's in Store for Remote Work and RTO in 2025: 'Hybrid Will Be Dominant,' Says Expert," CNBC, February 2, 2025; Harter, Jim, "In New Workplace, U.S. Employee Engagement Stagnates," Gallup.com, March 25, 2025; Dyer, Chris, "Fostering Positivity: Creating a Workplace Environment That Employees Don't Want to Leave," Fast Company, September 10, 2024; "Gartner HR Research Finds One-Third of Executives Given a Return-to-Office Mandate Plan to Leave Their Employer," Gartner Newsroom, May 9, 2024.

RTO Readiness Checklist

Is Your Transition Strategy Setting You Up for Success?

Bringing employees back to the office isn't just an operational shift—it's a cultural one. Companies that fail to engage employees in the process risk losing top talent, especially in a market where flexibility is often a non-negotiable for high-performers. Use this checklist to see if your organization is prioritizing employee input or relying on a one-size-fits-all approach. **No matter your score, there's always room to improve.**

Before Transition

❑ Have we identified different workforce segments (e.g., caregivers, neurodivergent talent, people with disabilities, high-performers) to understand their needs?

❑ Have we equipped managers with training or resources to hold meaningful RTO discussions with their teams?

During Transition

❑ Are we clearly communicating the "why" behind RTO decisions to build trust?

❑ Are we offering any degree of flexibility (e.g., team-based scheduling, partial remote options) to balance leadership goals with employee realities?

❑ Are we tracking early warning signs of disengagement or burnout (e.g., higher absenteeism, lower productivity metrics)?

After Transition

❑ Do we have a plan to continuously gather employee feedback post-RTO?

❑ Are we regularly updating employees on any changes or adjustments based on their input?

❑ Have we identified the key productivity and engagement KPIs to monitor for long-term impact?

INTERPRETING YOUR RESULTS   Sum of checks assigned across all three categories:

RTO Implementation Style

Command & Control (score range 0–3)	**Structure & Adjust** (score range 4–6)	**Listen & Evolve** (score range 7–8)
Your RTO approach is likely rigid and top-down, leaving little room for employee input. Without adjustments, employees may see this transition as a power move rather than a business decision—leading to long-term trust erosion.	You're making strides in engaging employees, but gaps remain in communication, flexibility, or post-implementation follow-up. Employees may comply, but they don't necessarily feel heard, which could lead to simmering discontent.	Your RTO strategy is employee-informed, adaptive, and transparent. Employees feel their voices matter, and your organization is balancing leadership priorities with workforce realities. Sustained success depends on maintaining two-way communication—keep refining policies based on feedback to stay ahead.

Supporting Employees Through Significant Change

Tap into Reactions and Expectations with Seramount Voice Sessions

Forward-thinking HR leaders aren't just enforcing mandates; they're using real-time employee voice data to shape RTO policies that build trust and alignment.

Pulse Check: Listen, Diagnose, and Act

In times of rapid change, employees often feel their voices don't matter. Here's how to prioritize employee well-being during your RTO transition:

- Strengthen feedback loops: Don't just collect employee input—clearly communicate how it's shaping policy adjustments.
- Expand flexibility where possible: Even small accommodations (e.g., team-based scheduling, occasional remote work) can increase morale and retention.
- Track early warning signs: Keep an eye on absenteeism, productivity shifts, and employee sentiment trends to catch burnout before it escalates.

Our Three-Step Approach to Employee Listening

Assess360's Employee Voice Sessions (EVSs) go deeper than quick pulse surveys, capturing unfiltered, actionable insight about returning to the office. These virtual listening sessions combine the power of focus groups and the reach of engagement surveys in an anonymous, psychologically safe environment. With our three-step approach to employee listening, HR leaders can avoid backlash and retain top talent in the midst of change.

1	**2**	**3**
DESIGN	LISTEN	SYNTHESIZE
Kick-Off and Planning	**Employee Voice Sessions (EVSs)**	**Key Findings and Insights**
We tailor questions from our cutting-edge research on workplace culture to your unique context	Anonymous, solutions-oriented forums empower employees to share unfiltered perspectives	We deliver detailed findings with clear steps to address employee concerns

> " … I've never seen another tool that can gather employee insights in such an engaging way."
>
> -Chief Culture Officer, Global Insurance Company

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