

Morgan McKinley

Part of Org Group

From Hybrid to HQ:

The Impact of Return to Office on
Financial Services Worldwide



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Executive Summary

The Hidden Toll: Compensation Pressure and Talent Risks

Employers should be concerned about the impact of commuting on pay expectations as RTO policies are creating a direct, measurable financial burden on employees. This is already translating into compensation pressure and potential attrition.

With **60%** of employees saying they need higher pay to cover commuting costs, yet only **19%** of employers having received requests so far, this suggests a lag that could soon materialise into widespread pay pressure.

The negative impact of commuting costs is also more commonly experienced by women (**70%**)

than men (**64%**), highlighting a growing equity issue.

Meanwhile, **62%** of jobseekers have rejected roles due to lack of flexibility, and **68%** of on-site workers would prefer hybrid work. In a market where **77%** of employers struggle to attract talent, this creates a real risk of:

- Perceived pay cuts due to lost flexibility
- Reduced competitiveness in hiring
- Increased attrition or disengagement



The Inclusion Gap: Disproportionate Impacts on Women

The data shows that RTO policies are disproportionately increasing stress and burnout among women and caregivers, creating a wellbeing and talent risk:

- **71%** of women report increased stress due to RTO, versus **55%** of men.
- **67%** of caregivers report higher stress, compared to **61%** of non-caregivers.
- **52%** of women have caregiving responsibilities, versus **46%** of men.

Consequently, only **49%** of women are satisfied with current in-office policies, compared to **58%** of men.

Crucially, opting for a full five-day RTO risks widening the gap between male and female employees.

Women are more likely to carry caregiving responsibilities (**52%** versus **46%** for men) and are more negatively impacted by strict in-office requirements.

They also experience lower levels of improved boundaries, culture-building and increased productivity in the office.

Conversely, they experience a higher desire to leave (**59%** versus **54%**), are more likely to need higher pay to cover commuting costs (**70%** versus **64%**), and experience lower levels of productivity when in office (**58%** versus **48%**).

The Strategic Reality: Attrition, Productivity, and Workforce Health

Employers should treat RTO as an important, data-backed decision, not a default policy and ensure that their office experience is built for all of the benefits of in-person work. Here's what the data is signalling:

- **54%** of employees report a higher desire to leave due to RTO.
- **28%** of employers are already seeing increased resignations; **47%** report hiring challenges.
- **51%** of employees report lower productivity in the office, using it more for collaboration than deep work.

- **66%** rank hybrid work as their most valued benefit.

Beyond attrition and diversity impacts, employers also face a material workforce health and performance risks, such as:

- Increased sickness absence driven by stress and fatigue
- Higher levels of burnout, particularly among women and caregivers
- A disengaged workforce, due to lower flexibility and trust

Strategic Recommendations: A Sustainable Path Forward

To mitigate these risks, firms should pivot from mandate-driven policies to outcome-driven strategies:

- **Consider if a full five-day RTO will be an attrition risk:** The key here is to consider the potential impact on productivity, burnout, disengagement and gender disparities.
- **Design policies with inclusion in mind:** This is particularly crucial for women and caregivers,

where the impact is clearly uneven.

- **Address financial friction proactively:** Do this through travel support, flexibility, or compensation adjustments.

Focus on outcomes over presenteeism: Measure performance, not attendance.

The Bottom Line: Balancing Risk and Reward

The question is not whether offices add value, they do. The question is whether mandating a full-time presence creates more risk than reward.

The data strongly suggests that strict RTO policies, especially five-day mandates, risk increasing attrition, widening gender gaps, increasing burnout and disengagement and undermining diversity and inclusion.

For most Financial Services firms, more flexible models will offer a more sustainable balance between performance, wellbeing and retention.

- Kurt Schreurs
Chief Revenue Officer
Recruitment Solutions
Morgan McKinley

Key Insights From the Survey

Employee Insights

01

The Office Is a Collaboration Catalyst for Employees

Employees acknowledge a clear social dividend to office work, with **57%** of respondents citing enhanced collaboration as the primary benefit, followed by culture-building (**35%**) and mentorship opportunities (**34%**). For Financial Services, the office remains a vital hub for professional development and team cohesion that digital tools haven't fully replicated.

02

Commuting Is Impacting Finances & Health

Some **63%** of employees report higher levels of stress or burnout from increased in-office time, while **60%** cite the need for higher pay to cover commuting costs. With the most common salary band being **US\$58,000 - \$87,250**, these travel expenses are being felt as a functional pay cut. Firms may need to add subsidies or salary adjustments to address this.

03

Increased In-Office Time Is Impacting Retention

Perhaps the most alarming statistic for HR leaders is that **54%** of employees report an increased desire to leave their current role due to in-office requirements. With nearly **45%** of the workforce located in large firms (**1,000+** employees), these organisations are at risk of losing a lot of institutional knowledge to firms that offer more flexible arrangements.

04

Stricter Mandates Negatively Impact Women

Increased expectations disproportionately impact women, who are more likely to earn less and have caregiving responsibilities (**52%** versus **46%** of men). As a result, only **49%** of women feel satisfied with current policies. With **71%** reporting increased stress and **59%** expressing a desire to leave, strict mandates will only increase this.

Key Insights From the Survey



05

Employees Report Lower Productivity in the Office

While **20%** of employees see the office as a place for increased productivity, **51%** report lower levels of productivity when there. Employees likely view the office as a place for “soft” work (socialising, meetings, and culture), not “hard” work (deep focus and technical analysis). Similarly, a worrying **13%** of employees felt that a full RTO policy would result in a productivity loss.

Employer Insights

06

The Office Is a Culture & Collaboration Centre

A staggering **82%** of employers identify enhanced collaboration as the primary benefit of in-office work, while **71%** see it as central to culture-building. Similarly, nearly **60%** see the office as an important venue for learning and mentorship opportunities for their employees, while **39%** of respondents believe that it creates increased productivity for employees.

07

Retention Is a Worry With Increased In-Office Days

While employers see the benefits of the office, they are also experiencing drawbacks, including employee pushback (**55%**) and recruitment challenges (**47%**). Nearly one in three have experienced increased resignations (**28%**) as a result of stricter in-office obligations. There may be a limit to mandates if a lack of flexibility results in talent loss.

08

Three Days Seems to be the Happy Medium

The data indicates that Financial Services has reached a point of policy stabilisation. Some **33%** of employers have settled on a 3-day mandate and nearly **80%** say their requirements will stay the same over the next year. Most firms have concluded that this mix will satisfy leadership’s desire for culture, without triggering the exodus they fear from a 5-day requirement.

Key Insights From the Survey



09

Offering Less Flexibility Is Narrowing Talent Pools

Some **47%** of employers report recruitment challenges and **55%** are managing employee pushback. Firms are effectively paying a “flexibility tax.” By enforcing office presence, they are narrowing their candidate pools, making it significantly harder to compete for elite talent who may be being headhunted by remote-first competitors or ones with more flexibility.

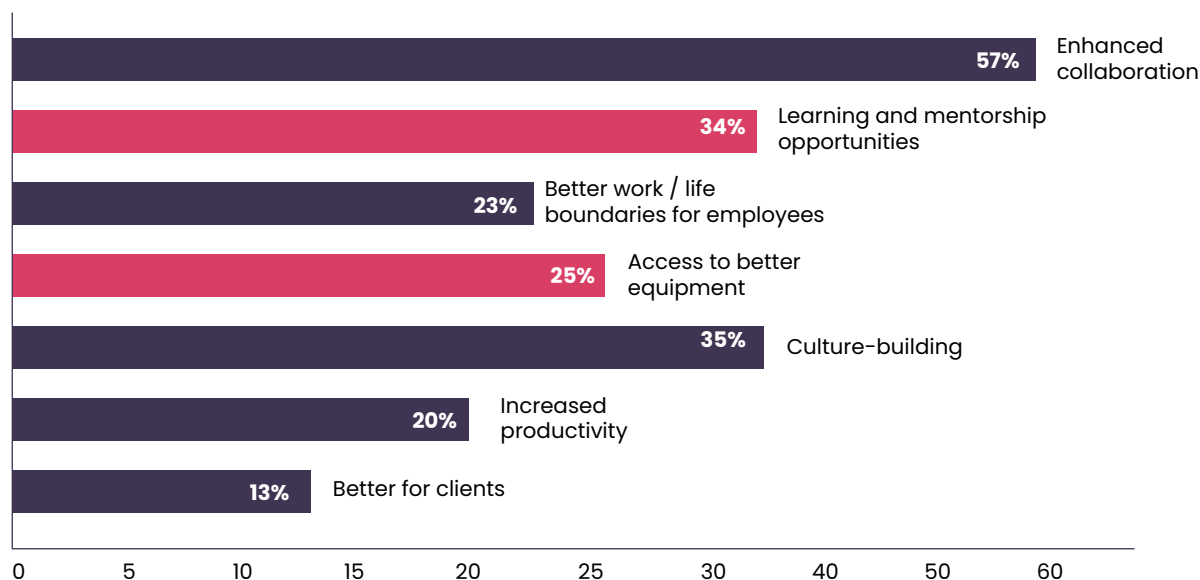




Insights From Employees

Insight #1: The Office Is a Collaboration Catalyst for Employees

Figure 1.1: Benefits Experienced With In-Office Working, as Reported by Employees



Other, please specify' answers:

None/nothing : 7%

Despite the heated debate surrounding return-to-office (RTO) mandates, employees have identified one undeniable advantage to being back at their desks: the social dividend. For the global workforce in Financial Services, the physical office has transitioned from a place of work to a strategic place to collaborate with their colleagues.

When asked to identify the tangible benefits of working in an office, **57%** of employees (i.e. the clear majority) pointed to enhanced collaboration. In an industry dominated by Accounting & Finance (**49%**) and Banking & Financial Services (**27%**), where complex problem-solving and regulatory precision are paramount, the communication of an office environment remains difficult to replicate on a screen.

The data suggests that the office serves three primary social functions: **57%** value the ease of spontaneous collaboration, **35%** see the office as important for culture-building and **34%** highlight learning and mentorship as a key benefit, particularly vital for the **24%** of respondents in the 25–34 age bracket looking to accelerate their career growth.

The insight here: There is, however, a catch. While the majority praise the collaboration the office provides, **52%** (**Figure 3.1**) of employees report an increased desire to leave due to current policies, and **63%** (**Figure 2.1**) cite higher levels of stress or burnout.

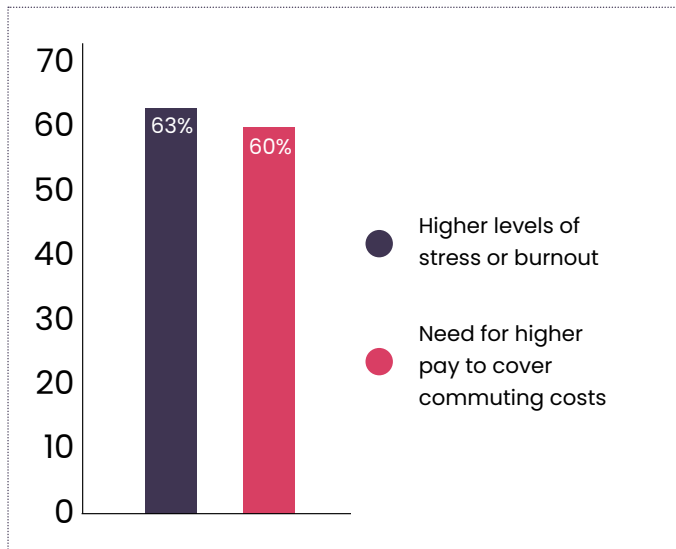
The Message for Leadership:

To maximise this “collaboration catalyst” without triggering an exodus, firms must ensure that the days spent in-office are purpose-built for the things that employees value: mentorship, culture, and complex teamwork, rather than just sitting in a cubicle on calls.

Insight #2: Commuting Is Impacting Finances & Health



Figure 2.1: Negatives Connected to Commuting Experienced as a Result of an Increase in In-Office Working, as Reported by Employees



Negatives Associated With an Increase in In-Office Time According to Employees: 'Other, Please Specify' Answers

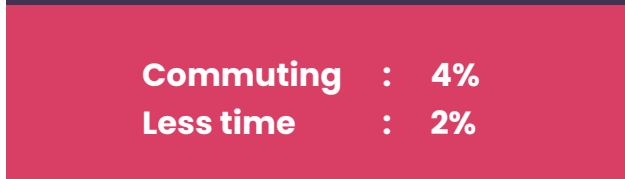


Figure 2.2: Negatives Experienced as a Result of an Increase in In-Office Working, as Reported by Employees*

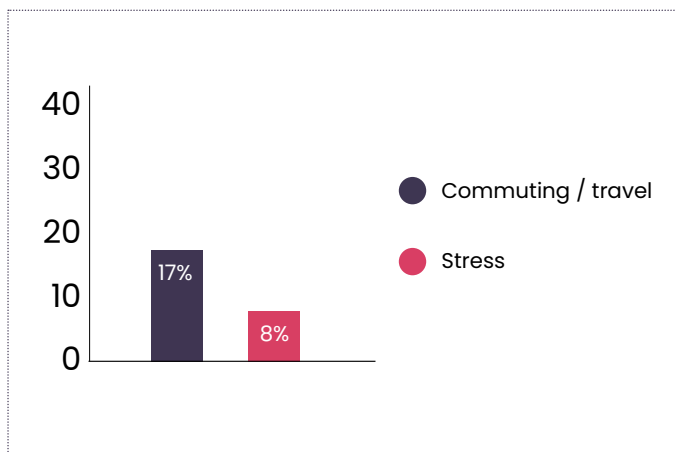
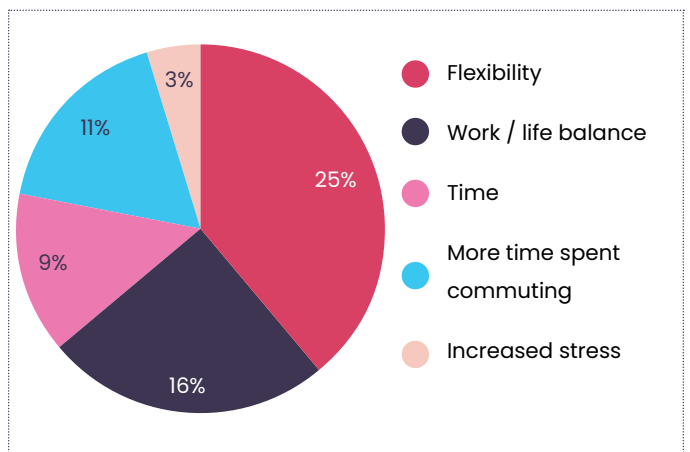


Figure 2.3: What Would be Lost From a Full RTO, as Reported by Employees*



***Note:** *As these particular questions were set up as open questions i.e. we didn't give respondents a limited 'multiple choice' list to pick from but rather they were allowed to answer in their own words, there is less alignment on specific answers.

As the Financial Services sector shifts back to the headquarters, a significant friction point has emerged. It's no longer just about where the work happens, but what it costs employees to get there, both in currency and in wellbeing. The data suggests that for many professionals, this may feel less like a professional homecoming and more like an added "commuter tax" on their lives.

The two highest-ranking negatives were "Stress / burnout" at **63%** and "Commuting costs" at **60%**. These highlight that employees are both tired and feel the financial pinch of a decision they didn't necessarily choose. The following data was

gathered via open-ended responses and reflects the "top-of-mind" anxieties for employees:

The Sacrifice of a Full RTO

- **Flexibility (25%):** The ability to manage a high-stakes career alongside personal obligations is seen as the primary loss.
- **Work / life balance (16%):** The "always-on" nature of finance is exacerbated when travel time is added back into the equation.
- **Lower productivity (13%: Figure 4.2):** Contrary to traditional management beliefs, many employees feel the office is a place of interruption, not deep work.
- **The "time tax" (20% combined):** Between "Less time" (9%) and "More time commuting" (11%), a fifth of employees would regret the loss of personal time, potentially resulting in higher levels of stress for 3%.

The Message for Leadership:

These figures may represent a potential talent crisis. With over half of employees expressing an increased desire to leave due to these pressures (more on that in the next chapter), the HQ must offer more to justify the commute. If this commuters' tax isn't offset by either an increase in compensation or a meaningful improvement in office culture, firms may risk losing their most productive talent to more flexible competitors in the sector.



Insight #3: Increased In-Office Time Is Impacting Retention



Figure 3.1: Negatives Connected to Retention Experienced With In-Office Working, as Reported by Employees

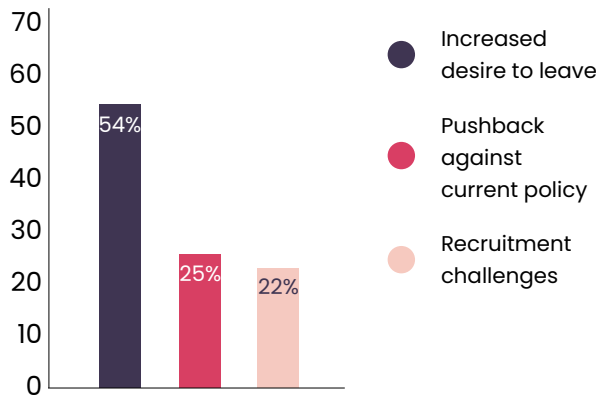
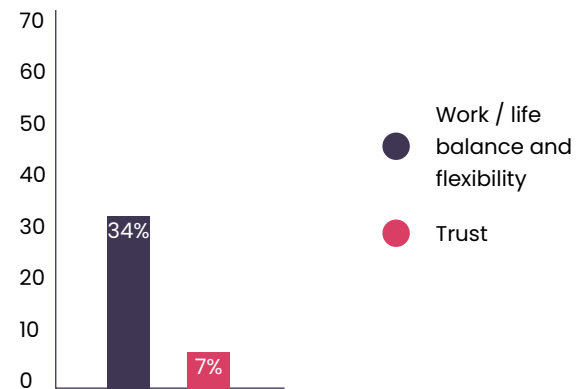


Figure 3.2: What Would be Lost From a Full RTO, as Reported by Employees*



***Note:** As this particular question was set up as an open question, there is less alignment on specific answers.

And as we know from our 2025 Workplace Trends Report, **66%** of employees surveyed worldwide rank hybrid working as their most valued benefit, followed by flexible working hours (**66%**) and remote working options (**55%**). Interestingly, **62%** of jobseekers say they have rejected a job offer due to a lack of flexible work arrangements.

And the data from this survey reflects this sentiment. The most jarring takeaway for leadership should be that over half of employees (**54%**) expressed an increased desire to leave as one of the negative impacts of an increase in

in-office expectations. Meanwhile, **22%** expressed experiencing recruitment challenges as another drawback.

In an industry where specialised expertise is both hard to hire and replace, this represents a potential “brain drain”. When asked to specify what is truly at stake during a full return to the office, employees point to factors that money can’t easily buy back:

- **Work / life balance and flexibility (34%):** This remains the “gold standard” for modern financial professionals. Removing it is viewed as a significant benefit cut.
- **Trust (7%):** Perhaps the most stinging statistic: For these employees, a mandated return to HQ may feel like a lack of confidence in their ability to perform autonomously.

The Message for Leadership:

If a firm mandates a full return while its competitors offer hybrid flexibility, the talent pipeline won’t just narrow, it will divert elsewhere. Retention in 2026 may no longer be just about the year-end bonus, great candidates and high performers may instead focus on workweek autonomy.

Insight #4: Stricter Mandates Will Negatively Impact Women



Figure 4.1: Caregiving Responsibilities Comparison

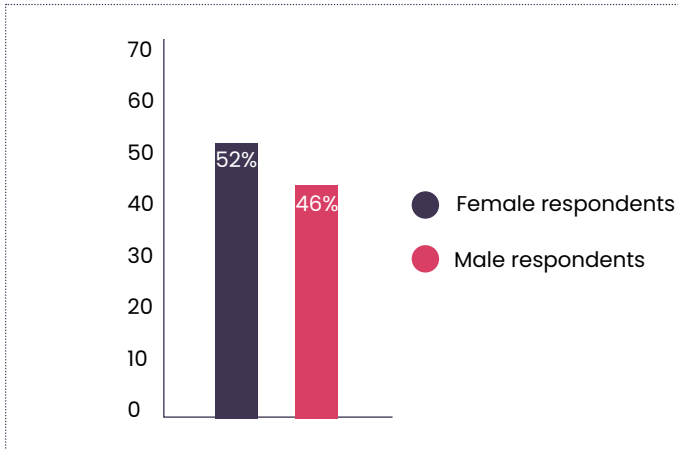


Figure 4.2: Satisfaction With Current Policy Comparison

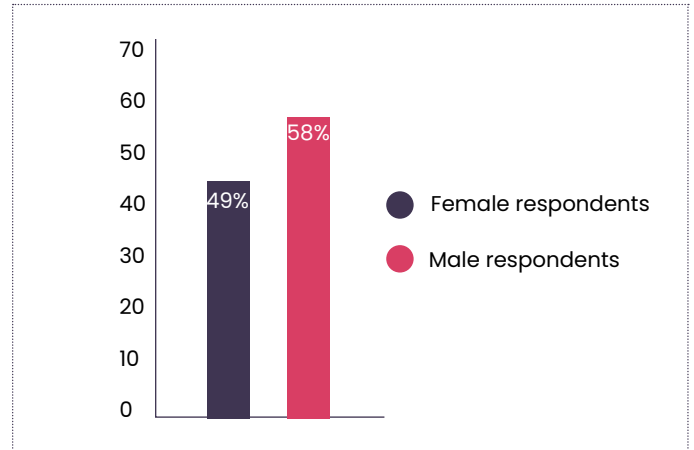
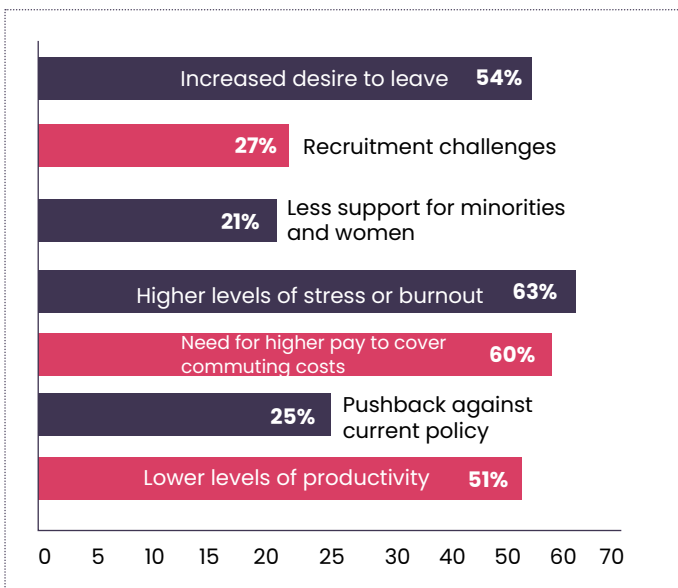
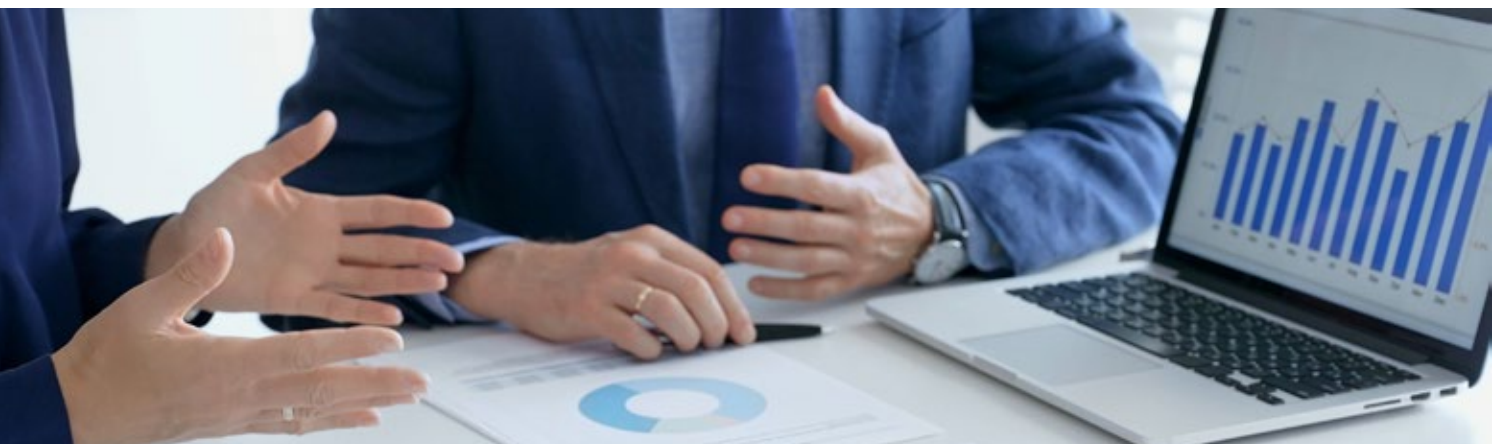
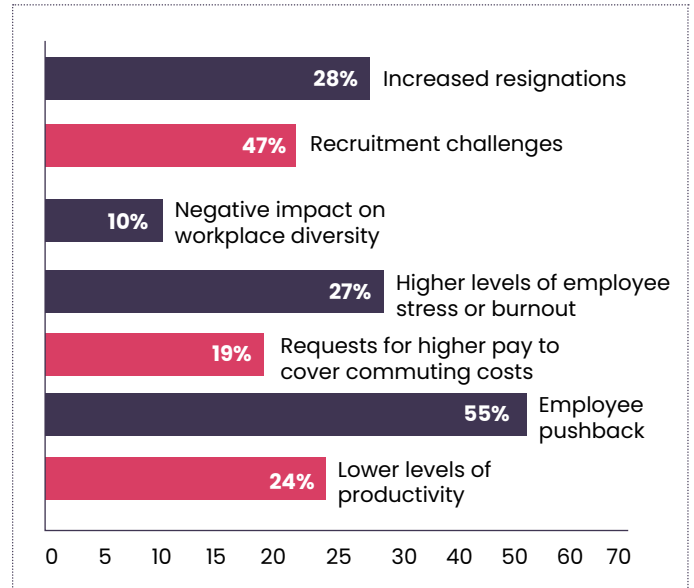


Figure 4.3: Negatives Related to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Experienced With In-Office Working

Employees:



Employers:



As some Financial Services firms transition from hybrid models back to a headquarters-first approach, they must be mindful of the impact on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). For women and caregivers, flexibility is a baseline requirement for career longevity.

Data shows a significant financial disparity: **29%** of female respondents earn between **US\$35,000 - US\$58,000**, compared to just **16%** of men. Conversely, men are nearly three times as likely to earn **US\$175,000+ (8% vs. 3%)**, making the cost of returning to the office a heavier relative burden for women.

Women are also more likely to carry caregiving responsibilities (**52%**) than men (**46%**). Consequently, satisfaction with office mandates is lower among women (**49%**) than men (**58%**).

While employers acknowledge pushback, they often miss the risk of burnout. While **55%** of men report increased stress due to office expectations, that number climbs to **71%** for women. This strain translates into a retention risk, with **59%** of women reporting an increased desire to leave, vs. **54%** for men.

Importantly, a perception gap exists regarding workplace culture. Only **12%** of men feel there is less support for women and minorities under these mandates, whereas **31%** of women report a decline in support. Women also see fewer benefits in-office: only **14%** report increased productivity (vs. **24%** of men) and only **33%** experience culture-building (vs. **43%** of men).

The Message for Leadership:

Financial institutions must weigh the perceived benefits of in-office presence against the quantifiable risk of losing a generation of diverse leaders. With **70%** of women needing higher pay to cover commuting costs and over half reporting lower productivity in-office, strict mandates may dismantle DEI progress by prioritising presence over performance.



Insight #5: Employees Report Lower Productivity in the Office

Figure 5.1: Benefits Experienced With In-Office Working Related to Productivity, as Reported by Employees

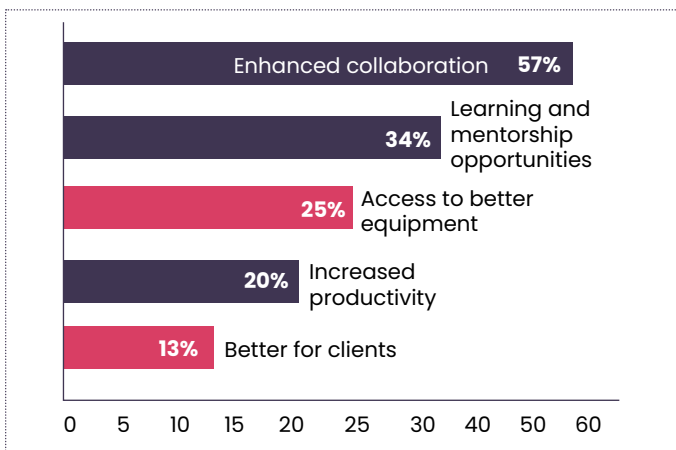


Figure 5.2: What Would be Gained From a Full RTO From a Productivity Perspective, According to Employees*

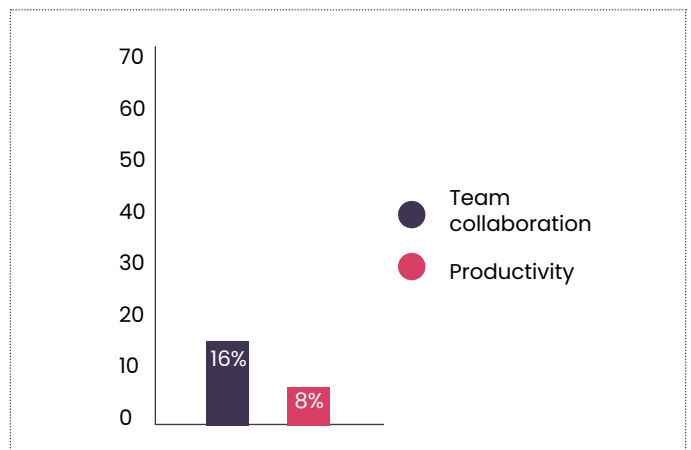
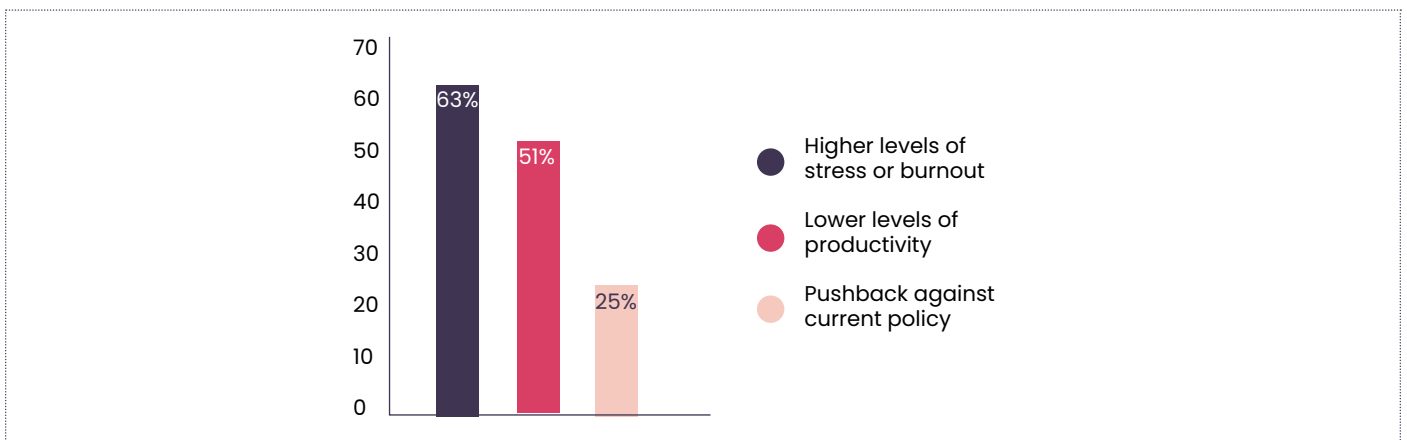


Figure 5.3: Drawbacks Experienced From In-Office Working Related to Recruitment, as Reported by Employees



***Note:** As this particular question was set up as an open question, there is less alignment on specific answers.

While many leadership teams correlate physical presence with output, the workforce is signaling a productivity paradox. In the office, the social “glue” is strong, but the actual “grind” is getting interrupted. While over half of employees see the value in face-to-face collaboration, a meager **20%** believe their actual productivity increases when they are in the office. And in fact, **51%** report lower levels of productivity while working in the office.

When asked what would be gained by moving from a hybrid model to a full RTO, the numbers

drop even further. In an open-ended survey (where employees were free to name any benefit), only **8%** cited “Productivity” as a gain.

The data suggests that firms are at risk of conflating activity (meetings, chats, presence) with productivity (output, analysis, deep work). The **57%** score for collaboration proves that the office is still the primary engine for brainstorming and culture.

However, the fact that only **8%** see productivity gains in a full RTO indicates that “deep work” is being crowded out. If firms opt for a full, five-day office presence, they may see an increase in meeting hours but a decline in the quality and speed of individual deliverables.

The Message for Leadership:

There may be a collaborative tax being paid. While **57%** of employees experience a boost in collaboration from increased in-office time, the friction of commuting and distractions means that **80%** of employees do not experience an in-office boost in productivity.





Insights From Employers

Insight #6: The Office Is a Culture & Collaboration Centre



Figure 6.1: Benefits Experienced With In-Office Working, as Reported by Employers

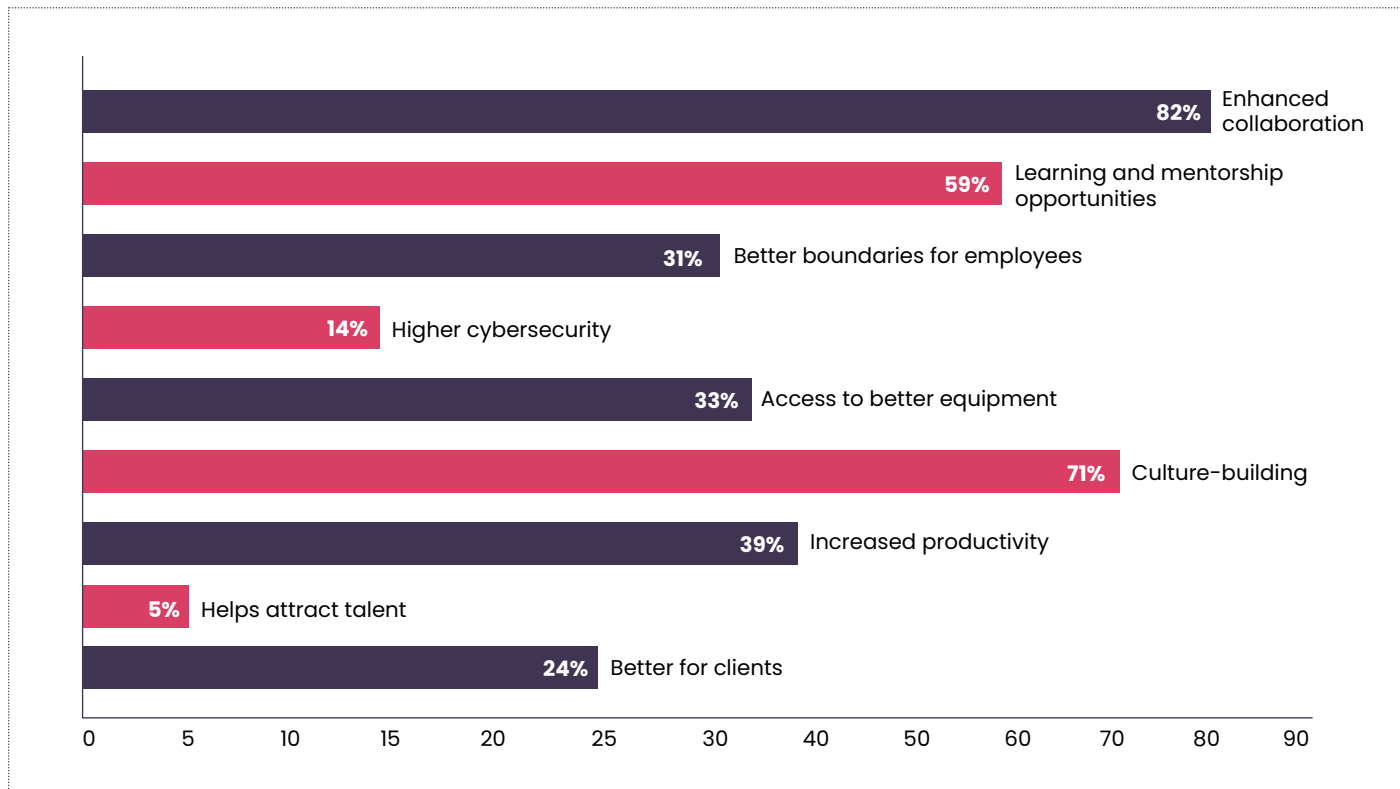
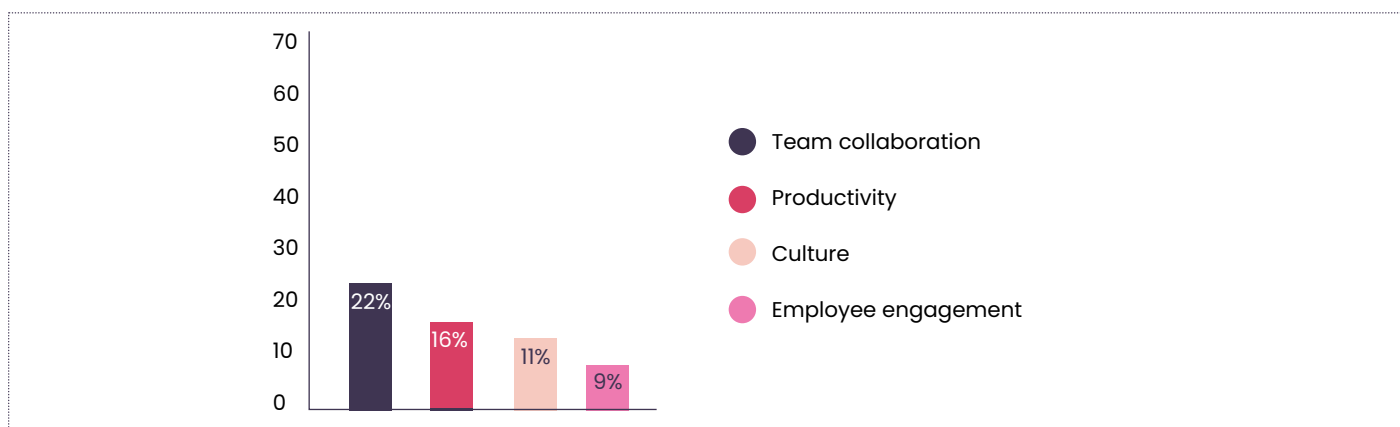


Figure 6.2: What Would be Gained From a Full RTO, as Reported by Employers*



***Note:** As this particular question was set up as an open question, there is less alignment on specific answers.

Both employers and employees identify “Enhanced collaboration” as the leading benefit of in-office work. However, there is a significant “enthusiasm gap” between the two groups. While **82%** of employers see the office as a hub for teamwork, only **57%** (Figure 5.1) of employees feel the same.

This suggests that while the office may be seen as particularly effective for brainstorming and high-stakes projects, employees may still feel that routine collaboration can be handled effectively from home.

The following data highlights the divergence in how leadership and staff value the physical workspace:

Benefit	Employers (Fig 6.1)	Employees (Fig 1.1)	Variance
Enhanced collaboration	82%	57%	-25%
Culture-building	71%	35%	-36%
Learning and mentorship	59%	34%	-25%
Access to better equipment	33%	25%	-8%
Increased productivity	39%	20%	-19%

Key takeaway: The largest discrepancy lies in culture-building. Employers are twice as likely as employees to see the office as the vital ingredient for company culture. For leadership, the office is where “the brand” lives. For many employees however, company culture is increasingly found in flexibility and trust.

When Financial Services employers were asked what would be gained specifically by a full RTO (as opposed to hybrid models), the focus shifted toward the intangible elements of professional life:

- Team collaboration: **22%**
- Productivity: **16%**
- Culture: **11%**
- Employee engagement: **9%**

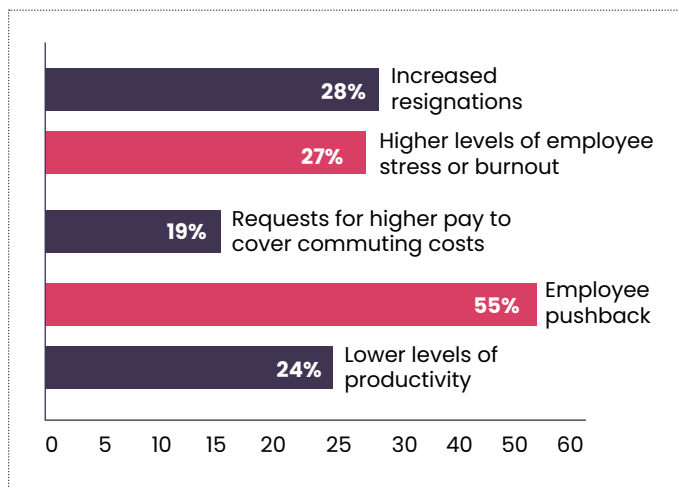
The Message for Leadership:

For financial firms, the challenge is not just mandating attendance, but proving the “value of the commute”. This involves ensuring that when employees do come in, they find the collaboration, culture and mentorship that they don’t get at home.



Insight #7: Retention Is a Worry With Increased In-Office Days

Figure 7.1: General Drawbacks Experienced From In-Office Working, as Reported by Employers

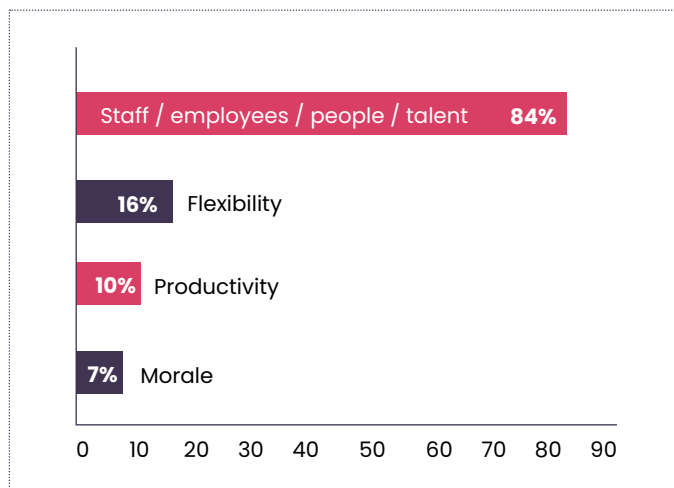


***Note:** As this particular question was set up as an open question, there is less alignment on specific answers.

The most striking revelation from the data is the degree to which employers are aware of the risks of a potential talent drain by introducing in-office mandates. When asked what would be lost if a full RTO were mandated, the response from leadership was nearly unanimous:

According to thematic analysis of open answers, some **84%** of employers believe they would lose staff, employees, and top talent.

Figure 7.2: What Would be Lost From a Full RTO, as Reported by Employers*



Comparatively, only **16%** cited a loss of flexibility and a mere **7%** cited a loss of morale.

This indicates that while firms are pushing for more in-office days, they are doing so with the realisation that they may be testing the limits of employee loyalty. There is a clear disconnect between how employers report drawbacks and how employees experience them, particularly regarding the impact of commuting, as we can see in the comparative table below:

Negative Impact	Employers (Fig 7.1)	Employees (Fig 2.1)	Variance
Higher stress and burnout	27%	63%	+36%
Requests and need for higher pay	19%	60%	+41%



The data suggests a burnout blindspot. While only **27%** of employers acknowledge higher stress as a drawback of in-office work, **63%** of employees identify it as a primary negative of the commute. Furthermore, **60%** of employees feel they need higher pay to cover commuting costs, a sentiment only **19%** of employers have formally registered as a “drawback” so far.

The transition back to the office is not being met with passive compliance. Some **55%** of employers

report experiencing direct employee pushback regarding in-office requirements. This friction is compounded by other operational concerns:

- **24%** of employers report lower levels of productivity as a drawback of being in-office.
- Employees cited “Commuting/travel” (**17%**) and “Stress” (**8%**; Figure 2.2) as the top negative experiences resulting from increased office days.

The Message for Leadership:

Firms are currently walking a retention tightrope. With **84%** of firms fearing talent loss in a full RTO scenario, the challenge for 2026 and beyond isn't just getting people back to their desks, it's ensuring the mandate doesn't trigger a mass exodus to more flexible competitors.



Insight #8: Three Days Seems To Be the Happy Medium

Figure 8.1: In-Office Days Currently Required by Company Each Week, as Reported by Employees

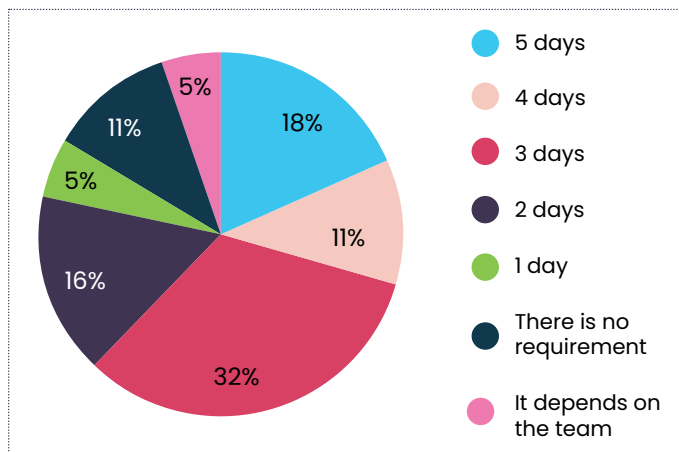


Figure 8.2: In-Office Days Currently Required by Company Each Week, as Reported by Employers

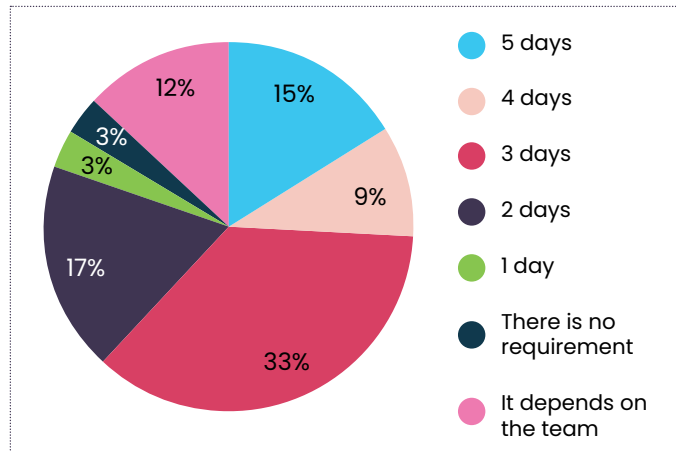
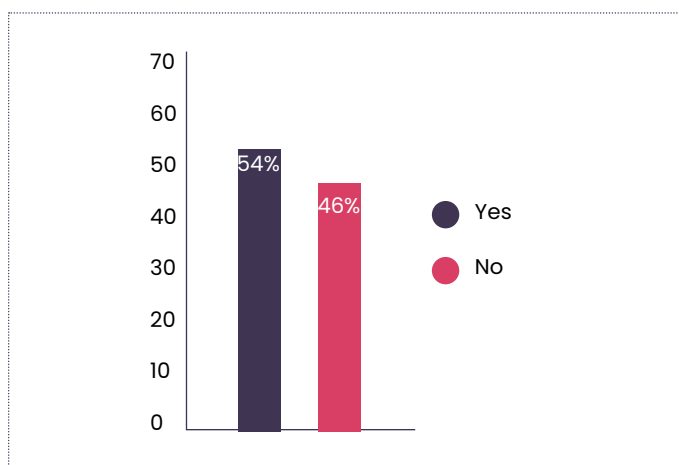


Figure 8.3: Satisfaction With Current In-Office Requirement Policy, as Reported by Employees



Data suggests that the three-day in-office week has emerged as the most common policy in place. However it's worth noting that employees are not necessarily aligned on this scenario being their ideal model, with only a little over half (**54%**) claiming satisfaction with their current working model.

It's clear that an increase in flexibility can be found across the industry. Once the industry gold standard, the 5-day office week now represents less than **20%** of the sector. Interestingly, **12%** of employers are moving away from firm-wide mandates, instead allowing individual teams to determine the cadence that best suits their specific functions, as seen in the table below:

Current In-Office Requirements (Comparative View)

Days Required	Employers (Fig 8.2)	Employees (Fig 8.1)
5 Days	18%	15%
4 Days	11%	9%
3 Days	32%	33%
2 Days	16%	17%
1 Day	5%	3%
No Requirement	11%	3%
Team Dependent	5%	12%

While a majority (**54%**) of employees are satisfied with their current policy, **46%** remain dissatisfied. The dissatisfaction likely may stem from a lack of flexibility within those three days or a perceived lack of purpose for being in the office (i.e. “commuting to sit on video calls”).

The Message for Leadership:

This data suggests that three days is the benchmark. However, with nearly half the workforce feeling frustrated with their current setup, the focus must shift from how many days employees are in the office to what they are doing while they are there. Gathering real insights here from your workforce on the ‘whys’ behind this dissatisfaction will be key in setting the right strategy.



Insight #9: Offering Less Flexibility Is Narrowing Talent Pools



Figure 9.1: Drawbacks Experienced From In-Office Working Related to Recruitment, as Reported by Employers

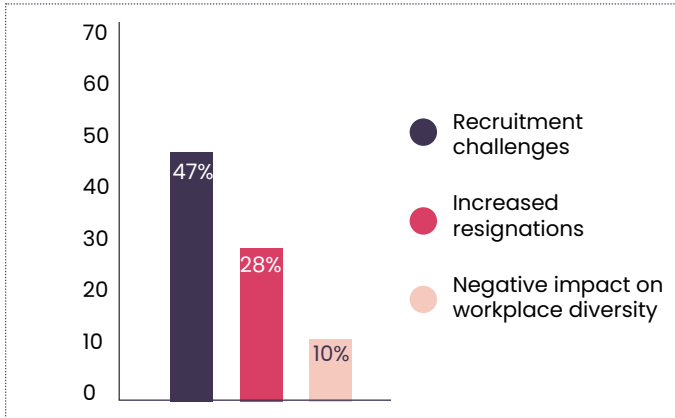
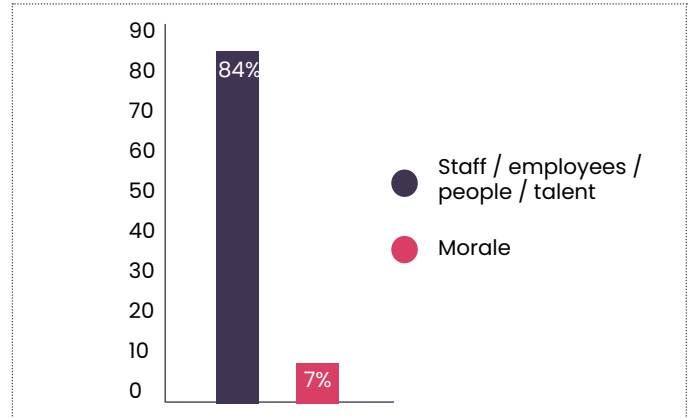


Figure 9.2: What Would be Lost From a Full RTO Related to Recruitment, as Reported by Employers*



***Note:** As this particular question was set up as an open question, there is less alignment on specific answers.

The data is clear: flexibility is no longer a perk. It is a primary currency in the talent market. As Financial Services firms push for more time in the office, they may be actively narrowing their access to top-tier, diverse talent.

Employers are keenly aware that a full RTO may damage their headcount. When asked what would be lost if they mandated a full, five-day office return, the overwhelming majority pointed to their people.

- **84%** of employers believe a full RTO would result in the loss of staff and talent.
- **47%** of employers are already reporting significant recruitment challenges due to current in-office requirements.
- **28%** of employers have already linked increased resignations directly to their in-office requirements.

A critical driver behind the demand for flexibility is the reality of modern life: nearly half of the industry (both at the staff and leadership level) has caregiving responsibilities. However, there may be a disconnect between how employees and employers perceive the resulting stress.



Responsibilities and the Impact of Increased In-Office Time	Employees	Employers
Caregiving responsibilities	48%	47%
Higher levels of stress or burnout	63%	27%
Demand for higher pay (to cover commute)	60%	19%

While **63%** of employees report that in-office mandates lead to higher stress and burnout, only **27%** of employers recognise this as a negative impact. This 36-point gap suggests leadership may be drastically underestimating the mental health toll of higher levels of commuting.

Strict office policies are also disproportionately affecting minority groups and women, threatening to reverse progress in diversity, equity and inclusion

(DEI), with **(21%: Figure 4.2)** of employees feeling there is less support for minorities and women when working predominantly in-office.

If the goal is a diverse and inclusive workplace, a “one-size-fits-all” office mandate may be a counter-productive strategy. The data suggests that for over half of the workforce, a lack of flexibility can be a deal-breaker.

The Message for Leadership:

The “war for talent” in Financial Services is being fought on the grounds of autonomy. Firms that insist on high-frequency in-office attendance may be filtering out candidates with caregiving needs, those with high commuting costs, and those who want to prioritise their mental wellbeing.



Recommendation for Employers



Based on the findings from this report, the Financial Services sector is at a crossroads. While leadership views the office as a cultural engine, many employees see it through the lens of a commuter tax and a barrier to their own productivity.

To bridge this gap and maintain a competitive edge in 2026, employers should adopt the following strategies:

1. Optimise for the Social Dividend, Not Deep Work

Stop measuring attendance and start measuring actual productivity and results. With **51%** of employees reporting lower productivity in the office compared to at home, the office should no longer be the place for deep work.

Action: Reserve office days specifically for the “three Cs”: Collaboration, culture, and coaching.

For example, if an employee’s day consists of more than half solo tasks or video calls, that day should likely be remote. Use the office for brainstorming and collaboration, something that **57%** of employees will actually value.

2. Be Aware of the Toll of Commuting

There is a significant perception gap: **63%** of employees report “Stress / burnout” from in-office mandates, while only **27%** of employers recognise this negative impact.

Action: Acknowledge the “commuter tax” that is placed on employees when they are required to spend more of their working weeks in the office.

For example, if flexibility isn’t an option, consider financial offsets (subsidies or salary adjustments) to mitigate the fact that **60%** of employees see a need for higher pay as a result of an increase in their commuting costs.

3. Move Beyond “One-Size-Fits-All” Policies

Strict mandates may be a threat to diversity. Since roughly **48%** of the workforce has caregiving responsibilities, a strict RTO risks pushing out women and minority groups who may rely on flexibility for career longevity.

Action: Empower team-level autonomy for in-office expectations.



For example, follow the **12%** of employers who allow individual teams to set their own cadence. This ensures that those with caregiving needs aren't automatically penalised by a strict firm-wide policy.

4. Make In-Office Time More Valuable

If you are among the **15%** of firms mandating a 5-day work week, your value proposition needs to be market-leading. You no longer need to compete on benefits, you need to compete on career acceleration and learning.

Action: If flexibility is off the table, focus on mentorship, compensation and career progression.

For example, set up mentorship programmes, clear career pathways and in-person learning and development opportunities to reinforce how in-office person collaboration can lead to faster promotions and better earning potential.

5. Gather the Data on Policy Satisfaction

The data shows that three days is the benchmark. But with **46%** of employees dissatisfied with this split, three days isn't necessarily the ideal, it's just the most common. Your workforce may want more or less in-office days.

Action: Before automatically implementing or sticking with a 3-day model, focus on the whys. Conduct internal stay interviews to understand what would make those three days more beneficial.

The Bottom Line

With **84%** of employers admitting that a full RTO would result in a loss of top talent, flexibility is the ultimate recruitment currency. To win the "war for talent" in 2026, firms must shift from a culture of presence to a culture of purpose. And that means being intentional about the time we ask employees to work in the office, creating more value for them and ultimately, boosting retention.



The methodology for the “From Hybrid to HQ” analysis is based on a survey sent out to our global database of clients and candidates within the Accounting & Finance (A&F) and Banking & Financial Services (BFS) sectors.

The total number of respondents was 1,478. The following summary details the composition and demographics of both types of respondents in both regions:

Employee Respondent Profile

- **Sector Dominance:** A combined **76%** of respondents work in roles they defined as Accounting & Finance (**49%**) or Banking & Financial Services (**27%**). Other respondents did work in these two sectors but within other departments e.g. Legal, Risk & Compliance (**8%**).
- **Company Size:** The majority (**45%**) work in companies with 1,000+ employees, with the next most represented bracket being 50–249 employees (**21%**).
- **Location:** The majority of employees were based in Ireland (**30%**) and the UK (**30%**), followed by Japan (**15%**), Singapore (**9%**) and Hong Kong SAR (**5%**).

Demographics:

- **Age:** Primarily aged 25–54, with the **35–44** category (**34%**) being the most represented.
- **Gender:** **53%** of respondents identified as female, while **44%** identified as male.
- **Ethnicity:** Employee respondents primarily identified as white (**42%**) or Asian (**42%**), followed by Black (**5%**).
- **Compensation:** Most earn between **US\$35,000** and **US\$175,000**, with the **US\$58,000–\$87,250** bracket being the most represented (**23%**).
- **Caregiving:** There were slightly more people with no caregiving responsibilities (**52%**) than those who do (**48%**).



Employer Respondent Profile

- **Sector Dominance:** The majority of respondents work in roles they defined as Accounting & Finance (**41%**), HR (**23%**) within the sector and Banking & Financial Services (**15%**).
- **Company Size:** Company sizes were mixed, with the most common bracket being 50–249 employees (**31%**), followed by 1,000+ (**28%**).
- **Location:** The majority of employees were based in the UK (**47%**) and Ireland (**28%**), followed by Singapore (**9%**), Japan (**6%**), Hong Kong SAR (**3%**) and Australia (**3%**).

Demographics:

- **Age:** Primarily aged 35–64, with the **45–54** category (**37%**) being the most represented.
- **Gender:** **52%** of respondents identified as female, while **44%** identified as male.
- **Ethnicity:** Employee respondents primarily identified as white (**67%**) or Asian (**23%**), followed by Hispanic (**2%**).
- **Compensation:** Most earn between **US\$58,000** and **US\$175,000**, with the **US\$116,000** to **US\$175,000** bracket being the most common (**22%**).
- **Caregiving:** There were slightly more people with no caregiving responsibilities (**53%**) than those who do (**47%**).

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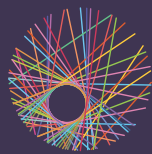
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