

The New Geography of Work: Culture, Trust, and Connection in Every Kind of Workplace

Themes, Patterns, and Recommendations on
Work Environments, Trust, and Relationship
Building from Leaders Across All Sectors

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Table of Contents

Introduction and Overview	01
Section 1: The Landscape	02
1.1 Smaller Organizations are not Following the RTO Script	02
1.2 The Pandemics as a Dividing Line	02
1.3 A Spectrum, Not a Binary	03
Section 2: Work Environments In-Depth	05
2.1 Fully In-Person	05
2.2 Hybrid	07
2.3 Flexible	09
2.4 Fully Remote	11
Section 3: Trust and Relationship Building Across Work Environments	13
3.1 Trust is the Foundation, Not the Goal	13
3.2 Building Trust Across Distance	14
3.3 The Role of Technology	15
Section 4: Common Threads Across Conversations.....	17
4.1 Generational Dynamics are Real and Complex	17
4.2 The Outsized Impact on Women and Caregivers	19
4.3 Equity and Inclusion Go Both Ways	19
4.4 Mental Health and Boundaries	20
4.5 Culture is Not a Location	20
Section 5: A Culture-First Framework for Thinking About Work Environments	21
Section 6: Recommendations	22
6.1 For All Organizations Regardless of Work Environment	22
6.2 For Organizations Considering or Implementing RTO	23
6.3 For Leaders Managing Remote or Hybrid Teams	24
6.4 For Leaders, HR Professionals and Organizational Designers	25
Section 7: Conclusions	26
7.1 The RTO Debate is a Distraction for Small and Medium Sized Organizations	26
7.2 Trust is an Operating System	26
7.3 Intentionality is Not Optional.....	27
7.4 It's a Human Conversation, Not a Logistics Problem	27
Questions to Guide Workplace Option Choices	28
How We Help and Contact Us	29

Introduction & Overview

When conversations about Return to Office (RTO) mandates began dominating professional networks and news feeds in 2024 and 2025, most of the announcements were coming from large corporations and governments. What was less visible — and arguably more instructive — was how leaders in small and medium-sized organizations (under 1,000 employees) were navigating the same terrain, often with fewer resources, more flexibility, and a deeper personal stake in getting it right.

This report draws on conversations with dozens of leaders, managers, consultants, and HR professionals working across a wide range of sectors: long-term care, technology, tourism, pharmacy, not-for-profit, government, creative services, legal, and more. Their organizations range from fewer than a dozen employees to several hundred, and their work environments span the full spectrum: fully in-person, hybrid, flexible, and fully remote. Several participants also brought the perspective of consultants who work with many organizations simultaneously, offering a valuable cross-sectional view.

What began as an inquiry into RTO mandates and whether smaller organizations were following the lead of large employers quickly expanded into a much richer conversation. Topics ranged from how trust is built (and broken) in-person and across distance, to the particular challenges of onboarding in remote settings, to the outsized impact of required attendance policies on women, caregivers, and people with disabilities. The pandemic — its disruptions, its surprising innovations, and its lasting effects — served as a recurring point of reference throughout.

The voices in this report are not claiming to represent all organizations. They are sharing lived experience, hard-won insight, and sometimes raw frustration. Together, they paint a nuanced picture that resists easy conclusions. There is no single right answer to how and where people should work. But there are clear principles, thoughtful practices, and common pitfalls — all of which this report references.



Section 1: The Landscape

1.1 Smaller Organizations Are Not Following the RTO Script

1.2 The Pandemic as a Dividing Line

1.3 A Spectrum, Not a Binary

1.1 Smaller Organizations Are Not Following the RTO Script

One of the clearest findings from these conversations is that the RTO debate, as it plays out in the media and in large organizations, largely does not apply to smaller ones. Multiple participants observed that, post the pandemic, small to medium sized businesses returned to something resembling normal far more quickly and organically than their larger counterparts, and with less drama.

A manager with two decades of experience working in diverse settings noted plainly that RTO appears to be primarily a large employer issue, and that small to medium sized businesses generally adapt faster and with less friction. This was echoed by others across sectors. In smaller organizations, the relationship between leaders and employees is more direct, decisions are made with less bureaucracy, and the "why" behind any policy can be communicated person to person rather than through cascading memos.

Several not-for-profit and association leaders noted that the ability to offer hybrid or remote arrangements has become a meaningful competitive advantage in talent recruitment. One HR executive noted that her organization could attract professionals willing to accept lower salaries in exchange for flexibility — an edge that larger, more rigid organizations simply cannot match. As she put it, just promoting only two days in the office as an option was enough to attract strong candidates.

1.2 The Pandemic as a Dividing Line

The pandemic came up in nearly every conversation — sometimes briefly, sometimes centrally. It served as a shared reference point for before, during, and after, and the reflections were remarkably consistent in one respect: COVID-19 proved that things which had seemed impossible to change could change almost overnight.

Leaders described watching years of organizational inertia dissolve in weeks. Technology adoption accelerated. Hierarchies flattened. Compassion for employees' home lives became unavoidable. One person noted that what once seemed to take forever to accomplish now got done in a few weeks. The pandemic demonstrated, in real time, that knowledge workers could be productive outside the traditional office setting and that other workers could adapt with speed and ingenuity.



This is why many people we spoke with expressed surprise and even frustration at the subsequent push to return to pre-pandemic norms. The expectation, for some, was that organizations would build on the creativity and resilience shown during COVID, not retreat from it.



An HR specialist described this reversal as confusing and, in her view, counterproductive. Although, as another person mentioned, if, pre-COVID, an organization had no plan or intention for either hybrid or remote work, they were most likely to default to pre-pandemic office norms.

At the same time, participants who work in fully in-person environments offered an important counterpoint. A CEO of a long-term care facility described her team working through COVID in masks and protective gear, finding creative workarounds (including hosting employees' children when schools closed), and emerging with their culture intact. For her, the office — or rather, the work environment — was never optional, and flexibility meant something different: adapting how work happened, not where.

1.3 A Spectrum, Not a Binary

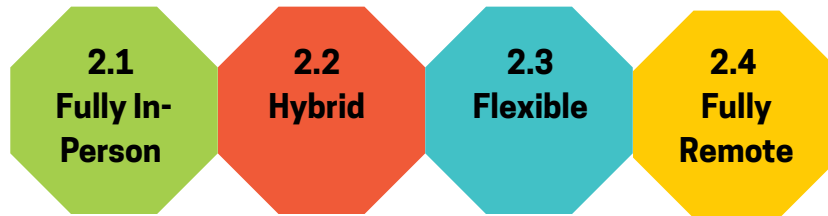
Participants consistently described the framing of "office versus remote" as a false binary. The reality, as lived in these organizations, is far more nuanced. Work environments exist on a spectrum, and even within a single organization, different roles, teams, and individuals may require different arrangements.

A tech executive noted that RTO is very much role-specific, not across the board — pointing out that sales staff, for instance, were never primarily office-based anyway — they were out visiting with clients. A financial and administrative officer at a not-for-profit described a model where staff come in one to three days per week, with senior team members tending toward more office presence, newer staff having more flexibility, and remote staff receiving a small stipend to travel to headquarters periodically.

The most effective organizations, based on these conversations, are those that have thought carefully about what work genuinely benefits from co-location (collaborative problem-solving, mentorship, culture-building, creative reviews) versus what is equally or more productively done remotely (focused individual work, writing, data analysis, calls with distributed clients).



Section 2: Work Environments In-Depth



2.1 Fully In-Person

Who Is Working This Way?

Participants in fully in-person environments work primarily in roles where physical presence is not a policy choice but an operational requirement: long-term care, pharmacy, construction, manufacturing, legal services with court responsibilities, transit drivers, fisher people, farmers, hands-on personal services and so many more sectors. These are environments where the work cannot be done remotely, and the question of RTO is largely moot.

Similarly, there are situations that are considered remote, but require staff to be on-site, like parks, rural clinics or maintenance shops.

Additionally, there are some organizations that have made a clear decision to be in-person environments - even without the necessity of being co-located, providing incentives to do so. These incentives include on-site professional development, immediate access to decision-makers and intentional relationship building activities.



Potential Challenges for Fully In-Person

- If there is flexibility in in-person, it must be expressed differently — not through location, but through scheduling, task flexibility, and empathy for personal circumstances.
- Frontline workers can feel like second-class citizens when they observe office colleagues gaining remote options. One DEI and recruitment professional described the importance of preventing an “upstairs/downstairs” dynamic when some roles are eligible for remote work and others are not.
- In some organizations with RTO mandates, particularly governments, the physical space to accommodate everyone is not available, leading to the feeling that organizational leaders do not actually care about the wellbeing or sense of belonging of the people who work there.
- Burnout and caregiver conflicts are ongoing pressures, particularly for staff in care-giving roles.
- People who are required in the office and do back-to-back virtual meetings that could have been done from a home office can lead to resentment.
- Similarly, if one of the justifications for RTO mandates is to revitalize the downtown core, as is often the case for government mandates, this also leads to resentment.



Skilled leaders in these environments tend to develop a particular strength: deep relational knowledge of their people. The CEO of a long-term care organization described knowing her staff’s “superpowers,” the supports they need, and the life circumstances that sometimes spill into work.

Her response to school closures — setting up a supervised space for children in the facility so their parents could complete full workdays — exemplified the kind of creative flexibility available even in a non-negotiable in-person environment.

Relationship-building in-person is almost organic: proximity creates daily touch points, casual conversations happen naturally, and culture is reinforced through shared routines. The challenge is not taking it for granted and maintaining this warmth and connection as teams grow or shift with intentionality.

Key Insights - In-Person Environments

- Flexibility in in-person environments isn’t about location; it’s about empathy, scheduling creativity, and acknowledging that life happens at work.
- Leaders who know their people well — their strengths, pressures, and needs — build resilient teams even without the option of remote work.



2.2 Hybrid

Who Is Working This Way

Hybrid arrangements are the most common model among participants in these conversations and the most varied in how they are implemented. Organizations include a mid-sized not-for-profit that unified seven regional entities, a Canadian tourism HR council, a tech software company, a government-funded not-for-profit association, a large government department and a creative agency in the process of merging.



The number of in-office days ranges from one to four per week, with some organizations specifying which days and others leaving it to teams or individuals.

Potential Challenges for Hybrid



- Consistency: when employees have different schedules, there is a risk of coming into an empty office or missing out on informal interactions that happen organically when multiple people are present simultaneously.
- Real estate and infrastructure: some organizations discovered their office space cannot physically accommodate all staff at once, leading to informal rotations that can complicate any formal attendance expectations.
- "Hot desking" without hospitality: several participants noted that organizations mandating office attendance without providing dedicated space, comfortable amenities, or a genuine welcoming environment actually undermine the purpose of bringing people together.
- Inequity between roles: staff whose work requires physical presence every day can develop resentment toward colleagues with more flexible schedules.
- Culture fragmentation: one director with responsibility for change management in her organization described the challenge of merging seven distinct organizational cultures into a cohesive whole when in-person time is limited. Culture building in hybrid settings requires intentional design, not passive proximity.



The most effective hybrid models in these conversations share several characteristics. First, they were designed with purpose: leaders identified why in-person time matters for their specific work and used that rationale to shape schedules. One leader noted that her organization designates specific in-office days so that different teams intersect with each other, rather than everyone staggering in at different times.

Second, effective hybrid organizations invest in the in-person experience. One not-for-profit recently moved to a smaller, purpose-designed space with dedicated quiet areas, open collaboration pods, and genuine amenities — and measured staff sentiment using a real-time mood meter. Addressing practical concerns (like parking – which was creating an undue amount of stress amongst staff) had a measurable positive impact on how staff felt about coming in to the office.

Third, the best hybrid leaders are intentional about what happens when people are not physically together. Regular team meetings, virtual coffee chats, cross-team connections, and social channels on messaging platforms ensure that relationships do not atrophy between in-person days.



Key Insights - Hybrid Environments

- Hybrid works best when it is purposefully designed, not just a default to “some days here, some days there”.
- The in-office experience must justify the commute: amenities, connection, and purpose matter.
- Communication from leadership is regular and transparent.
- Staff have the opportunity to offer input into practices and procedures.
- Rotating schedules that ensure team overlap are more effective than leaving attendance entirely to individual discretion.
- Culture-building requires explicit effort in hybrid settings — it will not happen by accident — but then, intentional culture never does.



2.3 Flexible

Who Is Working This Way

Flexible environments, as described by participants, are distinct from structured hybrid models in that they are driven more by individual and team needs than by organizational policy. Organizations in this group include associations, sales, real estate, writers, health service or care organizations, and consulting practices. The common thread is a focus on outcomes over attendance, with leaders trusting their people to manage their own time effectively.



Potential Challenges for Flexible Environments

- Maintaining visibility and connection: when everyone sets their own schedule, there is no guaranteed touchpoint and informal relationship-building can suffer.
- Perceived inequity: employees who need to work predictable hours can feel disadvantaged compared to colleagues with more fluid arrangements.
- Manager discomfort: not all managers are equally comfortable with outcomes-based accountability. Some default to presence-based time management even in nominally flexible environments, creating inconsistency.
- Subcultures: one HR executive noted that with significant flexibility, distinct subcultures can emerge within a single organization, requiring deliberate effort to maintain shared identity.





What's Working Well?



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- A close-up, warm-toned photograph showing two individuals in business attire shaking hands over a dark table. On the table are several documents, including one with a bar chart, and a dark leather folder or laptop. The background is softly blurred, showing an office environment with other people and furniture.

2.4 Fully Remote

Who Is Working This Way

Fully remote organizations in this group include a sustainability-focused institute, an organization dedicated to the success of women business owners and entrepreneurs, and a software company whose North American offices closed during the pandemic and never fully reopened. Several independent consultants also operate in effectively remote modes, managing clients and collaborators across geographies. For all of these organizations, "remote" is not a pandemic remnant — it is the deliberate operating model.



Potential Challenges for Fully Remote

- Onboarding: multiple participants highlighted this as the most significant challenge in fully remote environments. Without natural opportunities for organic connection, new employees can struggle to integrate, understand culture, or develop the informal relationships that support their work — and this is particularly true for younger workers.
- Isolation: younger employees in particular were identified as more likely to struggle with the absence of in-person social interaction. One tech leader observed that entry-level workers who had never experienced office culture often seek it out, and turnover among this group was higher in fully remote settings.
- Trust at a distance: building trust without face-to-face interaction requires deliberate effort and different skills from both managers and team members.
- Creativity and spontaneity: a creative services leader noted that some virtual interactions have become more transactional, with fewer of the dynamic, spontaneous exchanges that fueled creative collaboration in person.

The most effective remote organizations described in these conversations are characterized by one word above all others: intentionality. Nothing that can happen organically in an office — casual conversation, spontaneous problem-solving, cultural transmission, mentorship — happens automatically at a distance. Everything must be designed.



One CEO of a fully remote sustainability organization shared a detailed set of practices that illustrate this well. Every meeting — internal and client-facing — starts with unstructured chat. The team gathers every other week for a one-hour call that begins with twenty minutes of conversation before touching the agenda. Slack channels are used for both work and social interaction. As the CEO, she models the behaviours she wants to see across the board. And once a year, the entire team meets in person for two to four days of strategic work, relationship renewal, and informal time together.

The annual in-person gathering is a theme that appears across many remote organizations. It is not a luxury — it is a strategic investment in the relational foundation that makes remote work sustainable over time.

Key Insights - Fully Remote Environments



- Remote work by design is fundamentally different from remote work by default. The former requires deliberate structures; the latter creates risk.
- The annual in-person gathering is not optional — it is the relational anchor for geographically distributed teams.
- Starting every meeting with informal chat is not a waste of time, it is one of the simplest and most effective practices for building connection at a distance.
- Onboarding must be far more deliberate in remote settings: buddy systems, frequent check-ins, and explicit culture orientation are essential.

Section 3: Trust and Relationship Building Across Work Environments

3.1 Trust is the Foundation, Not the Goal

3.2 Building Trust Across Distance

3.3 The Role of Technology

If there is a single thread running through every conversation in this research, it is trust. Not as an abstract value, but as a practical operational question: How do you build it, maintain it, repair it, and extend it to people you may rarely or ever see in person?

3.1 Trust is the Foundation, Not the Goal

Trust is not the destination of good workplace culture — it is the foundation on which everything else is built. And it is fragile. One person referenced the art of trust-building in the workplace, noting that when trust is broken, a repair process must be deliberate and visible. If no such process exists, other things fill the vacuum — usually rumour, resentment, and disengagement.



Several participants described trust as directional: leaders must demonstrate it first. Mandating office attendance without explaining the rationale is not just a policy failure — it is a trust signal. Employees read the gap between stated values and actual behaviour immediately. As one person noted, employees' radar is always looking for inconsistencies.

A managing director in the financial services sector offered a striking reframe: what leaders interpret as resistance or disengagement in their teams is often a trust signal. Employees who push back on return-to-office policies are not necessarily lazy or difficult — they may be expressing a legitimate concern that the change is being imposed rather than explained or warranted, and that their previous experience of being trusted to work effectively from home is being revoked without reason.

3.2 Building Trust Across Distance

Across work environments, participants identified several consistent trust-building strategies.



Transparency and consistency. Leaders who communicate the reasoning behind decisions — even difficult ones — and who follow through on what they say, earn trust over time. Inconsistency, even in small things, erodes it.

Presence before task. Multiple participants noted that effective meetings and interactions begin with human connection, not agenda items. Whether in-person or virtual, taking time to check in personally before moving to work creates a relational tone that sustains people through challenging periods.

Visibility of leadership. Several participants, particularly those in hybrid and remote settings, noted that senior leaders who are present and accessible — whether physically or virtually — signal investment in their people. Leaders who disappear into private offices or are absent from team gatherings create distance that is noticed.

Giving people a voice. A DEI and recruitment officer who contributed detailed written insights was clear on this point, reflecting the comments of others — return-to-office policies that are purely top-down, without genuine employee input, are far less likely to succeed. Involving employees in the process is not just good practice; it is the difference between compliance and commitment.

Focusing on outcomes. Trust, in a practical sense, is demonstrated by letting people manage their own work. Multiple participants described the shift from presence-based time management to outcomes-based accountability as essential to a healthy modern workplace. Managing by results communicates that you trust your people; managing by hours clocked-in signals that you don't.



3.3 The Role of Technology

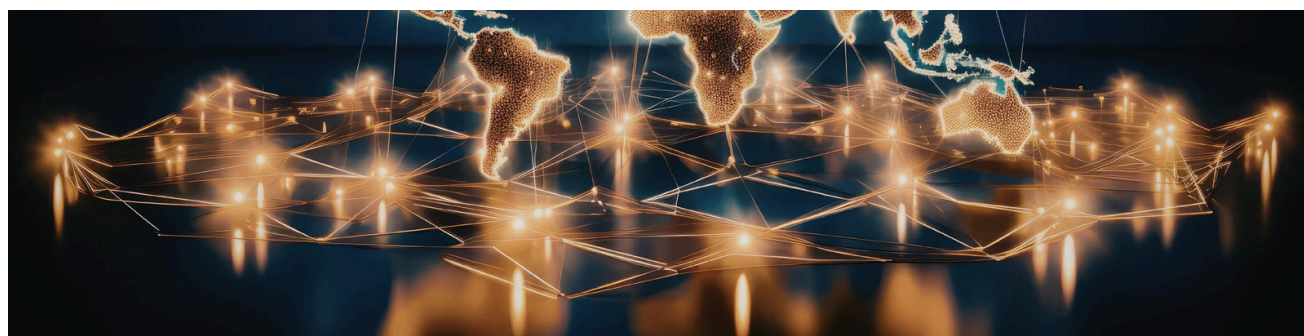
Technology enables remote and hybrid work, but it is not neutral in its effects on relationship and trust. Participants offered a nuanced view: digital tools are excellent for maintaining connections that already exist, but they can be less effective at creating new ones.

One person who works extensively on organizational culture put it directly: technology is not great for initially connecting people, but it is good at maintaining connections. This distinction has important implications. In particular, you cannot rely primarily on digital tools to integrate new employees into a team — they need face-to-face investment early in their tenure to form the relational bonds that later sustain them in remote or hybrid settings.



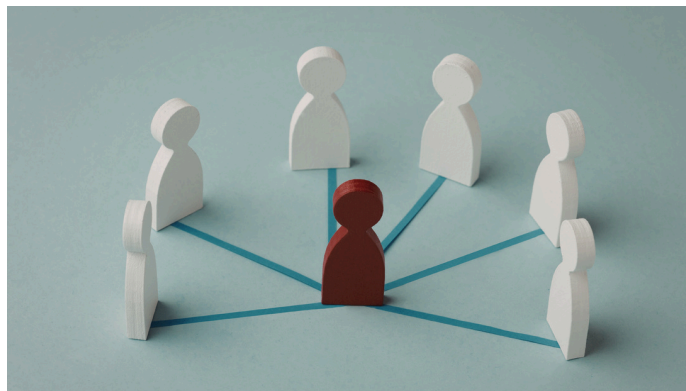
A creative services leader noted a specific consequence of this: creative reviews that once happened in person — with body language, energy, and dynamic exchange — now happen virtually ninety percent of the time, with a corresponding loss of spontaneity and depth. Interactions have become more transactional. This is not unique to creative work; it reflects a broader shift in how people experience collaboration across distance.

Several participants also noted a generational dimension to technology use. Younger employees tend to be more fluent in digital tools, but may lack the relational context that makes those tools meaningful. Older employees may need support in adapting to new platforms but bring relational depth developed over years of in-person work.

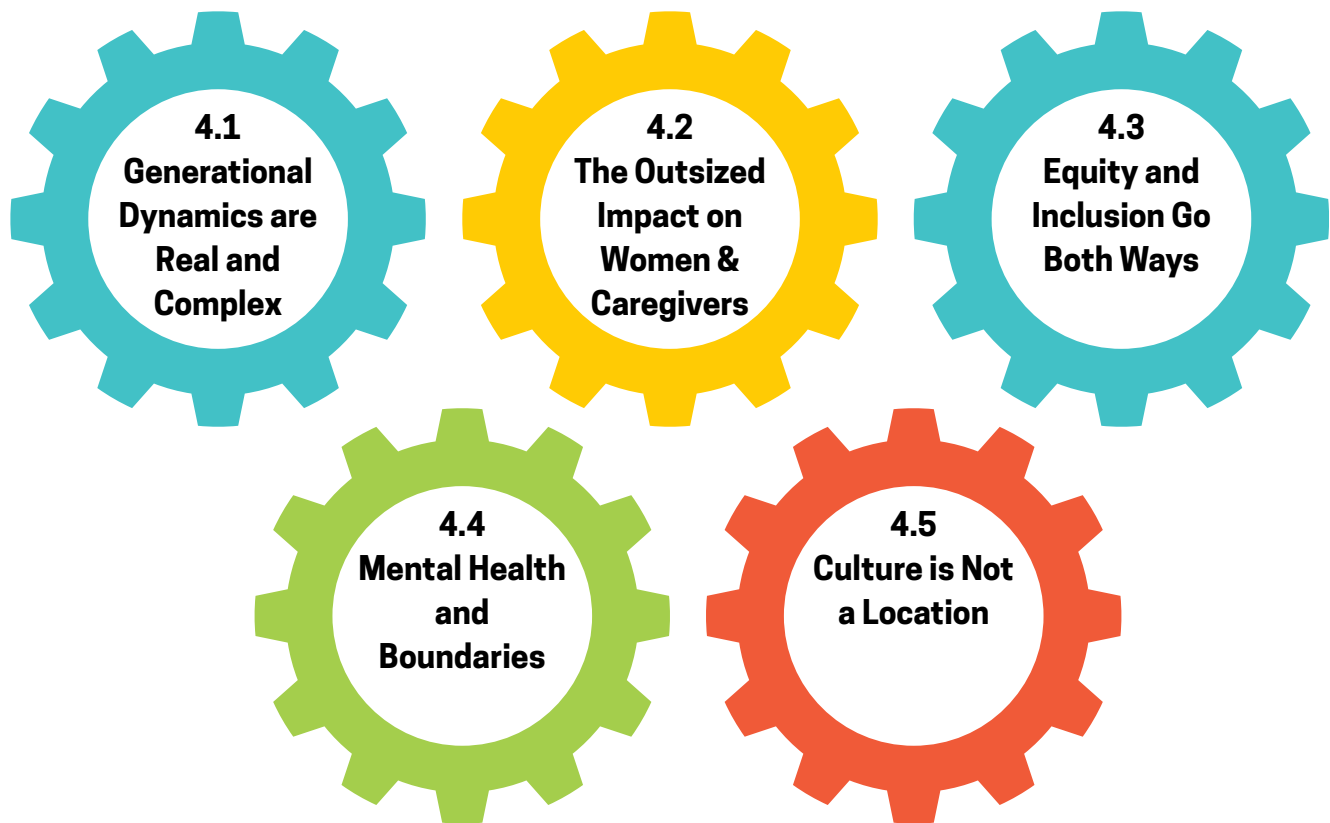


Trust-Building Practices That Work Across All types of Work Environments

- Begin every meeting with informal connection, not the agenda.
- Communicate the 'why' behind decisions — especially ones that affect how people work.
- Invest in onboarding: new employees need human connection early; digital tools alone are insufficient.
- Ensure leadership is visible: be present, accessible, and consistent.
- Measure and reward outcomes, not hours or physical presence.
- Hold regular one-on-ones with structure and genuine interest in the individual.
- Create informal channels — virtual social channels, coffee chats, walking meetings — that replicate the serendipity of hallway conversations.
- Gather in person at least once a year, even in fully remote organizations.



Section 4: Common Threads Across Conversations



4.1 Generational Dynamics are Real and Complex

Nearly every participant touched on generational differences in how people relate to work location. The picture that emerged is more nuanced than the typical caricature of young people wanting remote work and older generations wanting offices.



Several participants observed that younger employees — particularly those early in their careers — often prefer in-person environments because they crave the social interaction, mentorship, and visibility that offices provide. One tech leader noted that entry-level workers in his fully remote North American operation actively sought out in-person settings, and turnover in that group was higher. A senior advisor noted that newer hires and senior executives share a preference for office time, albeit for completely different reasons: executives for leadership visibility and informal influence, newer employees for career development and professional socialization.

Meanwhile, mid-career professionals with established networks, family responsibilities, and long commutes are often the group most committed to remote or hybrid arrangements — and most likely to leave organizations that remove that flexibility without justification.

4.2 The Outsized Impact on Women and Caregivers



A CEO of a small not-for-profit organization focused on accessibility expressed concern about the reverse: that women who work remotely may miss out on the informal promotability that comes from physical presence and visibility. The tension here is real — both presence and absence can disadvantage women, depending on the culture and environment.

One of the most pointed themes in these conversations concerns the disproportionate impact of rigid RTO policies on women. A managing director in financial services described watching female colleagues leave organizations or decline advancement opportunities when inflexible in-person requirements conflicted with caregiving responsibilities. She framed it directly: rigid return-to-office policies can function as a mechanism for removing women from leadership pipelines, even when that is not the intent.



Caregivers broadly — not only parents of young children, but those caring for aging relatives or family members with health needs — were described as particularly vulnerable to the inflexibility of mandatory attendance policies. The inability to adapt one's schedule to a child's illness, a school event, or a medical appointment can make otherwise attractive roles untenable.

4.3 Equity and Inclusion Go Both Ways

While flexibility is generally associated with accessibility and inclusion, several participants noted important counterpoints. Remote or hybrid work is not universally beneficial for employees with disabilities or accommodation needs: some individuals thrive with the customized environment of a home office; others rely on the structure, social contact, and formal accommodations available in a physical workplace. A blanket remote policy can inadvertently disadvantage the latter group.



The DEI perspective offered by a recruitment officer in government was particularly instructive. She identified the risk of creating two-tier workplaces where employees in roles ineligible for remote work feel undervalued compared to office-based colleagues who can work from home. She recommended that organizations think carefully about how to address this disparity with equitable benefits, incentives, or recognition.

4.4 Mental Health and Boundaries

The mental health dimensions of remote and hybrid work surfaced repeatedly. Participants noted that remote workers often work longer hours than their office-based counterparts (contrary to the popular perception of throwing in a load of laundry, making lunch or taking a walk on “company time”), because the physical boundary between work and home disappears. One Colorado-based HR professional who works with state agencies described studying the mental health impact of remote work as an important and underexplored area, noting that some employees struggle with the absence of structure and boundary that an office provides.

A mindfulness practitioner contributed an important perspective: employees need different skills for hybrid work — particularly around managing energy, setting boundaries, and being intentional about when they are ‘on’ and when they are not. These are not skills most organizations have invested in developing, and their absence can lead to chronic stress or burnout, particularly for employees who are conscientious and tend to over-function.



The societal stress context matters too. One leader noted that employees in all environments are arriving at work more traumatised and stressed than before the pandemic, due to a combination of ongoing societal uncertainty, economic pressure, and the lingering effects of a collective trauma experience. This heightened emotional baseline affects everything: interpersonal dynamics, tolerance for change, capacity for conflict, and ability to connect.

4.5 Culture is Not a Location

Perhaps the most consistent theme across all environments is this: culture is not a function of physical space. It is built through relationships, values, communication, and leadership behaviour — all of which can be cultivated with intention in any work environment.

A people and culture director made this point directly: if a workplace culture is truly strong and connected, the return to office is desired, not fought. When employees want to come in, it is not because they are mandated to — it is because the culture is compelling, the relationships are meaningful, and the work is energizing. Mandatory attendance is, in some ways, an admission that the culture cannot sustain itself through genuine attraction.

This reframing — from attendance as policy to attendance as cultural expression — represents a significant shift in how organizations might think about the entire work environment question.



Section 5: A Culture-First Framework for Thinking About Work Environments

Across all the conversations in this research, a consistent pattern emerged. Organizations that navigate work environments successfully are not those that got the policy right on the first attempt — they are those that approached the question with the right sequence of thinking: a Culture-First Framework.

The New Geography of Work A Culture-First Framework



- 1 Culture First** Define what your culture is and what you want it to be. What do you value? How do you work best together? What does connection look like in your organization? These answers must come before any policy decisions about where people work.
- 2 Strategy** Determine how your work environment strategy serves your culture and your operational reality. What does your organization's work actually require? Which roles need collaboration, and which need deep focus? Who are your people and what do they need to thrive?
- 3 Involve People** Co-create the approach with employees rather than delivering it from above. People are more likely to commit to arrangements they helped shape, and they often have practical insights that leadership lacks. Involving people is not a soft nicety — it is a strategic necessity.
- 4 Design with Intention** Whatever model you choose — in-person, hybrid, flexible, or fully remote — design it deliberately. Define the purpose of in-person time. Build structures for connection in virtual settings. Address onboarding explicitly. Make the physical environment welcoming if people are expected to use it.
- 5 Build Trust Continuously** Trust is not a milestone — it is a practice. Communicate with transparency, manage by outcomes, invest in relationships, model the behaviours you want to see, and create pathways to repair trust when it is damaged.
- 6 Evaluate and Adapt** Work environments are not static. Revisit your arrangements regularly, gather feedback, measure outcomes, and be willing to adjust. The goal is not to find the perfect model once; it is to keep calibrating as your organization, your people, and the world around you evolve.



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Section 6: Recommendations

6.1 For All Organizations, Regardless of Work Environment

Lead with culture. Before making any decisions about office attendance, understand and articulate what your workplace culture is and what work environment would best express and reinforce it. Culture drives strategy; strategy drives tactics. Do not start with the policy.

Communicate the ‘why’. Whatever your model, explain the reasoning behind it clearly and honestly. Employees who understand the rationale are far more likely to engage genuinely than those who receive unexplained mandates.

Focus on outcomes, not hours at work. Develop clear metrics for what good work looks like in your organization, and use those metrics — not hours logged or desks occupied — as your primary measure of performance.

Invest in onboarding, wherever people work. New employees need more support, not less, in hybrid and remote settings. Assign a buddy from another part of the organization, hold frequent check-ins, and be explicit about culture norms that experienced employees have internalized.

Ensure leaders are visible and accessible. Whether in-person or virtual, senior leaders who are present and engaged signal commitment to their people. Invisible leaders create distance that compounds all other challenges.

Create intentional informal connection. Hallway conversations, coffee breaks, and serendipitous encounters do not happen by accident in hybrid or remote settings. Design them deliberately: morning coffee channels, virtual social events, walking meetings, structured informal check-ins.



6.2 For Organizations Considering or Implementing RTO Policies



Build a genuine business case. “Because leadership says so” is not a rationale that will sustain a policy through employee resistance. Articulate clearly what in-person work accomplishes that remote work does not, and be honest if the answer is primarily about real estate, visibility, or culture concerns.

Anticipate and accept resistance. Some employees will not want to return to the office. That is not a problem to be solved by better messaging; it is a reality to be managed through honest conversation, clear expectations, and — where appropriate — acknowledgment that some roles or individuals may not be the right fit for the new model.

Frame change as retaining flexibility, not removing it. Behavioural research, as noted during one conversation, shows that people weigh what they stand to lose twice as heavily as what they might gain. Framing a hybrid policy as preserving some flexibility (rather than eliminating full flexibility) can significantly affect how it is received.

Address practical barriers. If you want people in the office, make the experience worth the commute. Adequate space, reliable technology, amenities, dedicated desks or easy booking systems, and welcoming physical environments are not luxuries — they are the baseline.

Do not follow government or large organizations by default. RTO mandates from large public sector employers are driven by political, economic, and reputational factors that do not apply to most small and medium-sized organizations. Follow the logic that is right for your own culture, your people, and your work.

6.3 For Leaders Managing Remote or Hybrid Teams

Start every meeting with connection, not content. Twenty minutes of conversation before the agenda in a one-hour meeting is not wasted time — it is the relational investment that makes the work itself more effective.

Hold structured one-on-ones. Brief, regular, structured check-ins between managers and direct reports — even as short as ten minutes monthly using a shared template — keep expectations clear and give employees a reliable channel for raising concerns.

Invest in at least one annual in-person gathering. For fully remote and geographically distributed teams, this is the single most important investment in team cohesion. It does not need to be elaborate; it needs to be intentional.

Be a bridge builder, not a bunker builder. An essential quality of effective leaders in fragmented environments is the ability to help people make connections across differences — of role, location, generation, and perspective. This is a skill that can be developed.

Address mental health and boundaries proactively. Remote workers often struggle to disconnect. Normalize conversations about managing energy, setting limits, and protecting non-work time as part of your leadership practice.



6.4 For Leaders, HR Professionals and Organizational Designers

Audit your policies for equity. Who benefits from your current work arrangement policies, and who is disadvantaged? Pay particular attention to caregivers, employees with disabilities, employees in roles ineligible for flexibility, and newer employees still building their networks.

Design infrastructure to support the model you choose. Hybrid and remote work requires reliable technology, secure remote access, effective collaboration tools, and physical spaces that are genuinely welcoming on in-office days. These are not afterthoughts.

Build in feedback mechanisms. Use pulse surveys, mood meters, team retrospectives, or informal check-ins to monitor how the work environment model is actually landing — not just in theory, but in practice.

Develop manager capability. The shift from hours worked to outcomes-based management is not automatic. Managers need training, support, and permission to manage differently. Without this investment, hybrid and remote policies are undermined by managers who default to what they know.



Section 7: Conclusions

The conversations that inform this report were not just about policy. They were about people — how they work, how they connect, how they trust one another, and how they thrive or struggle in the varied environments that modern organizations offer.

What emerged is not a single answer to the question of where work should happen. It is something more valuable: a set of principles, practices, and hard-won insights from leaders who are navigating these questions every day in organizations small enough to feel the impact of every decision directly.

A few conclusions stand out above all others.

7.1 The RTO Debate is a Distraction for Small and Medium Sized Organizations

The RTO debate, as framed in large organizations and governments, is largely a distraction for small and medium-sized organizations. The more useful questions are:

- What does our workplace culture require?
- What does our work actually need?
- How do we build and sustain the relationships and trust that allow people to do their best work, wherever that work happens?



7.2 Trust is an Operating Currency



Trust is the operating currency of every work environment, and it is more fragile across distance. Trust is built through transparency, consistency, genuine connection, and the daily practice of treating people as capable adults who can manage their own time and work. When it is broken — by unexplained mandates, inconsistent expectations, or the absence of any real rationale for change — it is difficult and slow to repair.

7.3 Intentionality is not Optional

Whether your organization is fully in-person, fully remote, or somewhere in between, the connections, culture, and trust that make work meaningful do not happen by accident. They are the result of deliberate choices, consistent practices, and leaders who model the behaviours they want to see.



7.4 It's a Human Conversation — Not a Logistics Problem

The work environment conversation is a human conversation — about wellbeing, fairness, belonging, and the kind of organizations people want to be part of. The leaders who are getting this right are those who approach it that way: not as a logistics problem to be solved, but as a human question to be engaged with care, humility, and ongoing curiosity.



“If a workplace culture is truly strong and connected, the return to office is desired, not fought.” ~ Director, People and Culture

Questions to Guide Workplace Option Choices

Workplace Option Considerations

These questions are worth asking before deciding the type of work environment that will work for your organization.

	CONSIDERATIONS	
Culture	Have we defined what our culture is and what work environment best expresses it?	
Culture	Do we know what our employees need to do their best work?	
Strategy	Is there a genuine business case for our chosen arrangement — beyond cost or convention?	
Strategy	Have we mapped which roles benefit from in-person collaboration vs. focused solo work?	
People	Have we involved employees in shaping this decision, or are we delivering it top-down?	
People	Have we considered the impact on caregivers, employees with disabilities, and those with long commutes?	
People	Are we risking an 'upstairs/downstairs' dynamic between roles with different flexibility levels?	
Design	If we're asking people to come in, is the space genuinely welcoming — desks, amenities, purpose?	
Design	Do we have the technology infrastructure to support remote or hybrid work effectively?	
Design	Have we designed our onboarding to work for people who may rarely or ever be in-person?	
Trust	Can we explain the 'why' behind our decisions clearly and honestly?	
Trust	Are we measuring performance by outcomes, or by hours in the office?	
Trust	Do we have a process for when things go wrong and trust needs to be repaired?	
Adapt	How will we know if this is working? What will we measure and when?	
Adapt	Are we willing to revisit this decision if the evidence suggests it isn't serving our people or our work?	

Ways We Support Building and Sustaining a Healthy Workplace Culture

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