

How L&D Can Lead a Smooth Return to Office Transition



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As L&D professionals, we know that change can be a tough pill to swallow, especially when it's a shift as significant as returning to the office. For many employees, the idea of leaving the comfort of their home office and re-entering the traditional workplace feels more like a setback than a fresh start.

And if we're being completely transparent, we wouldn't be thrilled about it either. Home is where our dog lives after all. After years of working from home, the idea of packing up and heading back to a cubicle feels a little out of touch with the reality most people are living.

As much as we might dread it, RTO is happening. So, how do we help employees transition without turning the whole thing into a massive headache? It's not about pretending this is everyone's dream come true. It's about acknowledging that change is hard, and giving employees the support and flexibility they need to make it a little less painful.

If we're going to make RTO "work," we need to approach it with empathy, flexibility, and humanity.

Acknowledge Reality

The first step in making RTO smoother is recognizing that the transition is going to be tough. We can't just brush this under the rug and pretend that everyone is thrilled about the idea of coming back to the office.

Some employees may feel disconnected, overwhelmed, or even resentful. Instead of dismissing these feelings, L&D can openly acknowledge them, showing empathy from the start.

To do this, start by creating an open space where employees can express their concerns. Send out surveys or hold focus groups where people feel safe sharing their true feelings. Ask specific questions like, "What are your biggest concerns about returning to the office?" or "What would make this transition easier for you?" This feedback doesn't just give employees a voice; it also provides valuable insights that can shape your RTO strategy moving forward.

L&D can set the tone by admitting that moving from remote work back to the office isn't exactly a walk in the park. Use internal communications to show some empathy. Try sharing personal stories from leadership about how they're also dealing with this transition. This helps employees see that RTO isn't just something being imposed from above. It's a collective challenge. The message should be clear: this isn't about snapping back to "business as usual," but about finding a way to adjust together and make this as painless as possible for everyone.

Finally, remember that acknowledging reality doesn't mean throwing a pity party. It's about validating how employees feel without sugarcoating things. Make sure they know the company gets that this shift is tough and is genuinely committed to working with them to find solutions. It's all about making employees feel seen and heard while keeping the focus on moving forward *together*.

Quick Tips - What L&D Can Do Right Now:

- **Send out an anonymous survey** to gather employee concerns about RTO. Keep it short and focused on their emotional and logistical concerns.
- **Host listening sessions (virtual or in-person)** where employees can talk openly about their feelings without fear of judgment.
- **Encourage leadership to share personal experiences** of returning to the office to normalize the struggle and show empathy.
- **Use internal comms** to directly address the challenges of RTO, letting employees know they're not alone in this transition.
- **Create an open-door policy** for employees to share concerns during the RTO period, reinforcing a culture of transparency.

Communicate the "Why"

When it comes to RTO, the "why" is everything. Employees are more likely to get on board if they understand the reasoning behind the shift, and it's important that L&D helps communicate this clearly and consistently. Simply saying, "We're going back to the office because we have to," won't cut it. Instead, explain why RTO is important, not just for the company, but for the employees as well. Help them see the bigger picture.

Communicate *why* the office matters. Is it about better collaboration? Strengthening team bonds? Sparking creativity through those random "hey, what if we tried this?" hallway conversations? Be specific. If the goal is to build stronger cross-department relationships, let employees know how that benefits them, professionally and personally. If it's about improving mental health through social interaction, show how the company is committed to making that happen.

But don't just tell them—get them involved. Poll employees to see what they need to make the transition easier. Ask for input on how the company can support them.

If RTO is happening for financial or logistical reasons, don't spin it—just be honest. Employees appreciate candor, even when the truth isn't ideal. Let them know their feedback matters and that this isn't a one-and-done decision. Keeping the conversation open builds trust and makes the transition feel like a process rather than a done deal.

Quick Tips - What L&D Can Do Right Now:

- **Host a company-wide meeting (virtual or in-person)** where leadership explains the rationale behind RTO, addressing both the business and employee benefits.
- **Share a clear, written statement** about why RTO is necessary, tying it to both company goals and employee growth or well-being.
- **Ask for feedback** through surveys or polls on how employees feel about RTO and what support they need during the transition.
- **Make the conversation two-way** by holding listening sessions or Q&A forums where employees can ask questions and share their concerns.
- **Be transparent** about any challenges or limitations behind the decision to return to the office, and let employees know how their input will shape future decisions.

Offer Flexible Training Opportunities

RTO isn't just about getting people back in their office chairs. It's about helping them adjust to a new rhythm of work. Hybrid dynamics, shifting collaboration styles, and figuring out how to exist in an office again (without instinctively looking for the unmute button before speaking) all come into play. L&D has a huge opportunity here to make that transition smoother by offering training that actually meets employees where they are.

Some employees might be all-in on in-person sessions, while others need a softer reentry, like hybrid or virtual options. Give them choices. Offer a mix of in-person, virtual, and hybrid training so employees can engage in a way that works for them. Some people do really well in live, interactive sessions, while others prefer self-paced modules they can complete when their schedule allows. Let them decide!

Different roles need different support. For example, managers may need training on leading hybrid teams, while individual contributors may need a refresh on face-to-face collaboration. Tailoring training to their actual needs makes it far more effective and way less likely to be ignored or groaned at.

Don't leave them hanging once training is over. Keep the support going with on-demand resources, quick-reference guides, or even peer mentorship programs. The goal isn't just to get employees back in the office, it's to help them feel comfortable, capable, and connected once they're there.

Quick Tips - What L&D Can Do Right Now:

- **Create a mix of training formats**—live sessions, on-demand videos, and interactive modules—that employees can access at their own pace.
- **Offer role-specific training** to help employees transition smoothly into their new hybrid roles, whether they're managers, team members, or support staff.
- **Provide ongoing support resources** like quick guides, FAQ pages, or peer mentoring to help employees continue learning at their own pace.
- **Survey employees** about training preferences to make sure the training options you offer align with their needs—ask them whether they prefer virtual, in-person, or hybrid sessions.
- **Consider hybrid learning** for managers to help them develop the skills they need to lead effectively in a hybrid environment—focus on communication, team-building, and conflict resolution.

Train Managers to Lead with Empathy

As employees transition back to the office, managers will play a huge role, especially when it comes to leading with empathy. RTO will be a giant emotional shift for a whole lot of people. Remember what we said earlier about missing our dog at home?!? That's not easy!

Managers need the right tools and mindset to support their teams through this change with sensitivity and understanding.

First, managers need practical training on emotional intelligence and active listening. These are not just nice-to-have skills, they are essential for understanding and addressing employees' concerns. Whether it's long commutes, adjusting to in-person collaboration, or juggling family responsibilities, employees want to feel heard. When managers actively listen and respond with empathy, they create a work environment where people feel valued.

But listening is not enough. Managers also need to recognize when employees are struggling, *even if they are not saying it outright*. Some people will not speak up when they are overwhelmed, so L&D can help managers spot stress signals and respond in meaningful ways. This might mean regular one-on-one check-ins, flexible work arrangements, or simply acknowledging that this shift is hard. A little understanding goes a long way in keeping employees engaged and supported.

Finally, L&D can help managers shift away from the old-school “command-and-control” approach and adopt something more trust-based and collaborative. In-office expectations need to be clear, but flexibility and autonomy matter just as much. When employees know their managers support them, they are more likely to embrace the transition instead of resisting it.

This is a moment for leadership to show up, not just as managers but as real people who understand what employees are going through. That kind of leadership makes all the difference.

Quick Tips - What L&D Can Do Right Now:

- **Offer emotional intelligence training** for managers, focusing on active listening, empathy, and recognizing non-verbal cues of stress or discomfort.
- **Host empathy-focused workshops** where managers can practice real-life scenarios with role-playing to develop their emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills.
- **Encourage regular one-on-one check-ins** with team members to assess how they’re adjusting to RTO and offer personalized support.
- **Provide managers with clear guidelines** on how to handle tough conversations about RTO concerns, like commuting challenges or personal preferences.
- **Help managers set realistic, flexible expectations** for in-office time, balancing the needs of the business with the well-being of employees.

Final Thoughts

The return to the office doesn’t have to be a jarring transition. With empathy, open communication, and support from L&D, the shift can be smooth and not-so-terrible for employees and managers. By acknowledging the challenges, clearly explaining the reasons behind the change, and offering flexible training options, companies can turn the RTO process into an opportunity for growth and adaptation. L&D can be the bridge, helping employees feel heard, empowering managers with emotional intelligence, and creating a supportive work environment—no matter where people are working from.

At IDLance, we’re uniquely positioned to help navigate this transition. As a community of freelancers who thrive in flexible, remote environments, we understand how to balance autonomy with collaboration. With our experience in remote and hybrid work dynamics, we help companies rethink how they work, communicate, and collaborate to make RTO a success.

Just recently, we helped one of the country’s largest telecom platforms develop training to ease the transition to RTO, balancing remote and in-office work while prioritizing employee well-being.

Let us help *you* create a strategy that works for everyone! [Click here to send us a message and get started.](#)