

Career & Workplace

How often should employees be in the office? Best practices for answering the big question

By [Ty West](#) – Senior Editor, The Business Journals,
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It's the million-dollar question facing companies [navigating the hybrid workplace model for the first time](#): How often should employees be required to come to the office?

With [workers demanding flexibility](#), morale hanging in the balance and a [turnover tsunami looming in a competitive labor market](#), high stakes are riding on companies' decisions.

Experts are quick to note there's no one-size-fits-all answer. In fact, the answer may vary from role to role within companies. But they do have some suggestions for companies that are attempting to determine the optimal frequency for their employees to be in the office.

1. Don't make decisions in a vacuum

Cali Williams Yost, founder and CEO of the Flex+Strategy Group, has been helping global organizations reimagine their workplaces for more than two decades. As more companies have embraced the hybrid model this year, she's witnessed a mix of good and bad approaches.

She said one of the most important steps a company should take is gauging employee feelings and expectations on the matter.

That could include a mix of surveys and one-on-one discussions, but the goal is ensuring workers feel heard. It also can help identify [disconnects that often occur on the issue](#).

"You don't have to give them exactly what they say they want, but you do have to know what they are saying and what they think," Yost said.

[Ilona Davis](#), a principal at accounting and advisory firm Baker Newman Noyes, said companies need to approach their hybrid plans the way they would any other strategic business decision.

Davis said that means involving the right people in the discussion, asking the right questions, weighing risks and rewards, and making sure the company has the proper communication and governance in place to make its model effective.

Specifically, Davis said determining the frequency of working at the office is not a decision that should be left solely to the top of the organization.

"It really needs to be the top layer working with the management teams to whom those people report to," Davis said.

Davis said failing to empower front-line managers in a hybrid model is a potential pitfall for employers as they embrace workplace flexibility. That needs to start in the initial decision-making process.

2. Think back to pre-pandemic times

[Mike Lantz](#), chief people officer at New York City-based digital bank Quontic, said companies should also take into account what their workplace model was before Covid-19 when determining their plans for a hybrid model.

The policy for a company with employees who were in the office five days a week in 2019 may look vastly different than a policy for a company that was already offering flexibility before the pandemic.

Lantz said those factors need to be taken into account. Failing to do so, or setting a policy that employees view as a step back, could strike a blow to morale.

Similarly, Lantz said companies need to consider how their workforces have changed during the pandemic.

Quontic, for example, used the shift to remote work to hire workers in places where it didn't previously have a physical presence.

As the bank thinks about its hybrid model, Quontic is considering those new wrinkles. Prior to Covid-19, most of Quontic's employees were located in or around New York City. During Covid-19, the company expanded its talent pool by hiring remote workers in other areas.

"Let's say we've got a mortgage underwriter that lives in Queens and a mortgage underwriter that lives in Los Angeles. We wouldn't want to always require the person in Queens to come into one of our offices when we're not requiring the one in L.A. to because we don't even have an office there," Lantz said.

3. Avoid a rigid approach

Experts understand why it's tempting to set an easy-to-understand, across-the-board policy for how often to be in the office — such as saying all employees must be in the office two days a week.

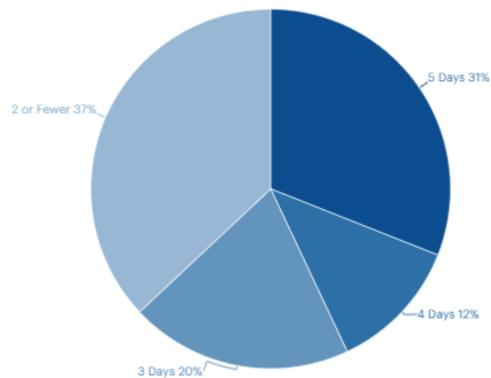
But, practically speaking, Yost said those types of rigid guidelines create obstacles.

"[Two days a week] is not necessarily going to apply to everybody," she said.

<https://infogram.com/wfh-1ho16vojoy0gx84n>

Don't call it a comeback

Number of days U.S. employees would like to work from home, according to a recent survey by management consulting firm McKinsey & Co.



Source: McKinsey & Co. survey

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Instead, Yost said companies should set broad guardrails that extend organization-wide for remote and onsite work.

“Then, what you want to do is allow managers further down in the organization to define what that optimal mix is for their business,” she said.

To find that mix, Yost said it’s pivotal to think about all of the tasks that go into different roles and determining where that work can be done well. Yost said managers need to draw on their experiences over the past year, such as which tasks worked well remotely and which didn’t.

“[It’s a mistake] to go right to where people are working and not thoughtfully step back and think about what they learned over the pandemic and experiment with new ways of operating,” she said.

That exercise could mean there are some roles with more remote-work freedom than others. Yost said that’s OK. It depends on the job and the people involved.

“The fairness is in the process of figuring that out. It’s not necessarily in the fact that everybody would have the same thing,” she said.

As companies have those conversations, Lantz said it’s important to have good reasons why certain roles may need to spend more time in the office.

Employers are likely to face pushback from workers who've been working from home for 15 months, so experts say companies need to have solid reasoning and open communication as they have those discussions.

"It's about sitting down with those employees and having that conversation. Sometimes, you can broker some sort of compromise," Lantz said. "Each particular case has to be well thought out and have some sound justification."

4. Hybrid itself isn't a policy

Yost said it's best to think of the hybrid workplace as a way of operating rather than a policy.

She cautioned it's not going to be a scenario where a company can simply issue a memo about how often employees need to come in and think the hybrid discussion is over.

Experts say companies that refuse to adapt their hybrid approaches [are setting themselves up for failure](#).

"Companies need to see this as the start of an ongoing experiment and evolution," Yost said. "You're never, ever done."

Yost said companies are going to learn things as they go with hybrid models, and they are going to adapt their workplace models just like they would adapt the way they run their businesses.

To accomplish that goal, experts said employers will need to train and empower managers to work with their direct reports on finding the optimal mix of flexibility and productivity.

Managers [need to be able to ensure their teams have the tools and the skills](#) to evolve with the model and succeed in the hybrid environment. That includes [onboarding programs tailored to the new environment](#).