



Rethinking work, five
years on:

*are smarter metrics the real
Return-to-Office debate?*

Five years after the pandemic upended how and where we work, lead, and measure performance, the tide is turning. Remote work once promised a productivity revolution—but now, “Return to Office” (RTO) is one of the latest corporate buzzwords. The BBC’s Panorama documentary, Should We Still Be Working from Home?, reignited this debate, questioning whether WFH has outlived its usefulness. What was once hailed as the productivity revolution is now being scrutinised as leaders push for a reversal – whether employees want it or not. But are we really learning from the recent past, or are we just chasing a nostalgic idea of work that no longer fits the modern world?

The case for RTO: Structure, collaboration and performance

Supporters of Return to Office (RTO) argue that in-person work is essential for building and maintaining company culture. They believe that being physically together strengthens communication, reinforces shared values, and fosters a sense of belonging in ways that remote work and scheduled calls struggle to replicate.

But here’s the uncomfortable truth: if your culture relies on a watercooler to survive, was it ever that strong to begin with?



Culture trumps location

Culture isn't about coffee machines or watercooler moments – it's your firm's identity. It's what clients buy into, what keeps people connected, and what underpins trust – the profession's most valuable asset. Let's be clear: if a Firm's culture only works when people are physically together, it was never that strong to begin with. Strong culture lives in action, not geography. When firms clearly define and live by their values, those values travel. They show up in every client meeting, team check-in, and year-end audit – regardless of location. The best Firms know this, and they're proving that values well lived matter far more than where people sit.

In fact, remote and hybrid environments can sharpen cultural focus. They force Firms to be intentional: about how they communicate, how they lead, and how they define success.

For professional services' Firms, where service, quality, and trust define reputation, the real question is this: Are your values strong enough to work from anywhere?



The case against RTO: What the *data* really says

There is a growing belief among some leaders that remote work has led to a decline in productivity, responsiveness, creativity, and mentorship. At best, they argue that conventional performance metrics have suffered outside the traditional office environment. At worst, some believe that remote work isn't "real" work at all. What does the evidence show? For many, returning to the office feels like the logical fix. But if in-person work is so essential to performance, where's the proof? Some of today's most productive, engaged, and innovative teams aren't sitting in the same building. Recent research suggests the problem isn't remote work—it's whether your workplace strategy is fit for purpose.

Firms that prioritise results and outcomes over office attendance continue to see strong performance, higher engagement, and better employee well-being. Why are we still focusing on where people work instead of how well they work?

If office attendance is truly critical, shouldn't the burden of proof should be on Firms to demonstrate that being physically present leads to better performance.

Shouldn't Firms be asking themselves:

- Are our teams thriving and engaged?
- Are we reducing burnout and increasing job satisfaction?
- Are we attracting and keeping top talent?
- Are we measuring success in meaningful ways?

Workplace Theatre: “*Performance productivity*” vs outcomes

The pre-Covid concept of “workplace theatre” seems to be returning – a performance where employees feel compelled to act busy and appear productive, often prioritising visibility over actual value. This phenomenon, aptly termed “productivity theatre,” involves engaging in tasks that are more about showcasing activity than achieving meaningful outcomes.

This performative culture is compounded when organisations use office attendance as a performance metric, equating physical presence with productivity. As the Financial Times recently highlighted in its article [Office attendance is becoming a performance metric](#), some companies are now tracking in-office days as a key measure of employee performance. But is merely showing up at a desk truly an indicator of success?

The reality is that when organisations prioritise optics over output, employees inevitably shift their focus toward looking productive rather than delivering meaningful results. When workplace theatrics are valued over meaningful work, it’s no surprise that genuine productivity takes a back seat. Surely, the true measure of performance lies not in the act, but in the outcomes. By shifting the focus from mere attendance and performative tasks to genuine results and employee wellbeing, organisations can write a new narrative – one where authenticity, trust, and meaningful contributions take the lead.

Are firms measuring what *matters*— or defaulting to presenteeism because it's easier to track?

Closely linked to workplace theatre is presenteeism – the outdated belief that time spent in the office equates to performance. But being present isn't the same as being productive. Presenteeism rewards visibility over value – favouring those who look busy, rather than those delivering real impact. It's not a measure of engagement, contribution, or alignment with Firm values.

As Firms grapple with Return-to-Office mandates, many risk confusing attendance with accountability. The danger? Teams start optimising for being seen, not for outcomes. In accounting firms especially – where billable hours and client responsiveness is under the microscope—it's easy to conflate presence with performance. But does more time at the desk really drive better results for clients? Or is it just a default that's easier to measure?

The most forward-thinking Firms are moving beyond the illusion that showing up equals success. They're managing for results, not rituals. The real question becomes: are we managing for output, or just managing what's easy to see?



The future: *Smarter* work, *smarter* metrics

Productivity is about results, not location. High-performing teams succeed when measured by outcomes. When you provide the best tech, resources and support, employees can deliver – whether from home, at a client site, or in the office. The future of work isn't about where employees sit – it's about how well they perform, how engaged they feel, and how sustainable the work environment is. The best Firms are already embracing:

- Outcome-driven leadership
- Flexible policies that empower employees
- Wellbeing-focused work environments

So, is your Firm measuring success the smart way—or are they still stuck in the past, mistaking presence for performance?



Find truth.

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