

Make the Office a
Magnet, Not a Mandate:

What RTO Means for Space Planning in 2025

With insights drawn directly from WorkX:



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Introduction

After a three-year grand experiment with remote work, 2025 is shaping up as a pivotal year in which many companies are doubling down on return-to-office (RTO) mandates. In boardrooms and city halls alike, the message is growing louder: it's time to come back to the workplace. Major employers from tech behemoths to banks are rolling out policies requiring more face time in the office, aiming to recapture the collaboration and culture they believe was diluted in the work-from-home era. Yet this push is meeting a mixed reception. Employees have grown accustomed to flexibility, and attendance patterns suggest the office of 2025 will look very different than 2019's. This article examines the latest RTO mandates and workplace trends, blending forward-looking analysis with practical insights for Corporate Real Estate and Workplace professionals.

A New Wave of Return-to-Office Mandates

The Corporate Push: By early 2025, 32% of U.S. firms required a full-time in-office schedule. The share of companies mandating at least three days per week jumped to 28%, up from 19% two quarters earlier. According to ResumeBuilder, 87% of companies had implemented some form of RTO mandate by the end of 2024. High-profile mandates from Amazon, AT&T, Dell, and others have only amplified this trend.

“ Why Now?

Many executives cite in-person collaboration, mentorship, and company culture as drivers. A Resume Template survey shows 68% of companies prioritize collaboration, 64% productivity, and 61% communication as key reasons for RTO. At the WorkX conference (February 24 – 26, 2025), Kenneth Carney, Executive Director of Real Estate & Office Operations at Dotdash Meredith, shared, "2025 is about establishing new norms for being back in person."



-- Kenneth Carney, Executive Director, Global Real Estate & Office Operations Dotdash Meredith, WorkX February 2025 Speaker

Employee Sentiment: Flexibility or Flight?

Despite the corporate push, many employees remain wary. Surveys show that 70% of remote-capable workers would look for a new job if forced back full-time. Hybrid models remain dominant, with only 12% of firms planning full mandates in 2025.

Clarity and Fairness: One learning from the past two years is that how an RTO policy is implemented matters as much as the policy itself. Sudden, opaque, or uneven mandates breed resentment, whereas clear and consistent guidelines can actually improve culture. "Clear RTO policies improve workplace culture, reduce friction, and boost engagement," writes workplace expert Dr. Tracy Brower from [forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com).

Employees, even those willing to come back, want to know why leadership is calling them in and what's expected. Are bosses leading by example or quietly exempting themselves? Will there be flexibility for appointments, child care, or the occasional remote day when it makes sense? The companies finding a smoother path are communicating the rationale behind RTO (e.g. **"We believe in-person collaboration will drive innovation and we don't want you to miss out"**), setting reasonable requirements (many stop short of five days, opting for 2-4 days in-office), and, importantly, providing support. For instance, some firms are **offsetting the burden** with perks like subsidized commuting costs or free lunch on office days. Others are ensuring that if they expect people in, the experience won't be a hollow one – more on that in a moment.



Source: World Architecture | Jump Studios creates a social hub with informal layout for Saatchi & Saatchi's HQ in London

On the flip side, there are examples of the "stick" approach. At Tesla, Elon Musk famously told employees that **if they don't show up 40 hours a week, "we'll assume you have resigned"**. Google, while not demanding full-time attendance, warned it would factor office presence into performance reviews [axios.com](https://www.axios.com). These hardline tactics send a clear message, but they can also erode trust. It's a fine line: **Corporate real estate and HR leaders must balance enforcing attendance with maintaining morale.** The takeaway is that listening to employee concerns and being transparent can make a world of difference. In practice, many organizations are now involving employees in shaping hybrid schedules or at least gathering feedback on RTO plans before finalizing them.

Dr. Tracy Brower writes, "Clear RTO policies improve workplace culture, reduce friction, and boost engagement." At WorkX, Alexandra Selezneva, Senior Director of NA Workplace Business Strategy, Corporate Real Estate at Coca-Cola Company emphasized the need for balance: *"We found that giving employees two mandated team days and flexibility on others was a sweet spot."*

When (and Where) the Office is Filling Up

Midweek is the New Peak: Badge data shows office occupancy peaking on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Mondays and Fridays remain the least popular.

City-by-City Variations: New York and Miami lead with attendance nearing 90% of 2019 levels. San Francisco lags behind at just over 50%.

"Coffee Badging": Employees increasingly show up briefly just to "check in." Nearly 50% of U.S. managers admit to it. This trend underscores the need for office spaces to provide real value.

“ Why Now?

Forward-thinking companies are transforming offices into destinations with social hubs, fitness centers, and wellness spaces. "When you create a special environment and experience in the office, you can bring people. You can hire talent much easier compared to locations where you don't have those facilities."



-- Alexandra Selezneva, Senior Director of NA Workplace Strategy at Coca-Cola,
WorkX February 2025 Speaker

In 2025, offices are being reinvented as destination spaces. Environments designed to offer what employees can't get at home. These elevated experiences help drive in-person engagement and make the commute worthwhile. Key trends include:

- **Entertainment & Social Hubs:** Game rooms, bowling alleys, pickleball courts, golf simulators, and speakeasy-style lounges are creating spaces for networking and casual connection.



Source: WorkX February 2025 Site Tour at JP Morgan Dallas-Fort Worth

- **Upscale Dining & Coffee Bars:** From barista stations and healthy eateries to after-hours beer taps and locally catered team lunches, food is becoming a major workplace draw.



Source: WorkX February 2025 Site Tour at Third Bridge Group Limited in Dallas, TX

Office as a Destination: Amenities and Design Upgrades

Forward-thinking companies are transforming offices into destinations with social hubs, fitness centers, and wellness spaces. According to WorkX speaker **Alexandra Selezneva**, Senior Director of NA Workplace Strategy at Coca-Cola: *"When you create a special environment and experience in the office, you can bring people. You can hire talent much easier compared to locations where you don't have those facilities."*

She emphasized that "Nothing screams home like food... People love coming [to our office] because they want to eat healthy, they want to have fun." Her comments echo a growing trend: spaces must engage employees emotionally and physically.

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- **Wellness & Fitness Amenities:** Offices now include meditation rooms, nap pods, fitness centers, and yoga spaces, supporting physical and mental health throughout the day.



Source: Wellness Design Consultants | The mental empowerment office gym - Wellness Design Consultants

- **On-Site Childcare:** Family-friendly features like daycare facilities not only help working parents return to the office, but also promote inclusivity and retention.



Source: MIT News | MIT opens childcare center in Graduate Tower at Site 4

These perks are more than just nice-to-haves, they're fast becoming table stakes for organizations competing for talent and culture in the new world of work.

Real Estate Optimization: Flexible Models for a Fluid Future

Data-Driven Strategy: According to **Kenneth Carney**, Executive Director of Real Estate & Office Operations at Dotdash Meredith, *"We utilize the occupancy data of our offices to determine how we're going to either expand or shrink footprints, change the way we operate offices in certain markets."* His approach includes shifting from leased space to coworking where populations are small, and scaling back into leased or owned spaces where growth is anticipated.

“ Why Now?

You have to be very aligned with leadership strategy... It's a constant game of chasing what the company is doing, but being out ahead of it — because real estate is such a costly endeavor."

— *Kenneth Carney, Executive Director, Global Real Estate & Office Operations, Dotdash Meredith, WorkX February 2025 Speaker*



Technology and AI Transforming the Workplace

Smarter Spaces: Companies are upgrading meeting rooms with advanced conferencing tools, sensors, and AI-driven platforms like Microsoft Places and Cisco Spaces. As Selezneva noted, "When people started coming back, the first thing we did was ask: How do we upgrade our conference rooms? How do we make sure no one feels isolated if they're working remotely?"

AR/VR & Analytics: Virtual collaboration, immersive design tools, and real-time occupancy data are shaping how workspaces evolve. AI is also being used to detect employee sentiment during meetings and suggest hybrid optimization strategies.

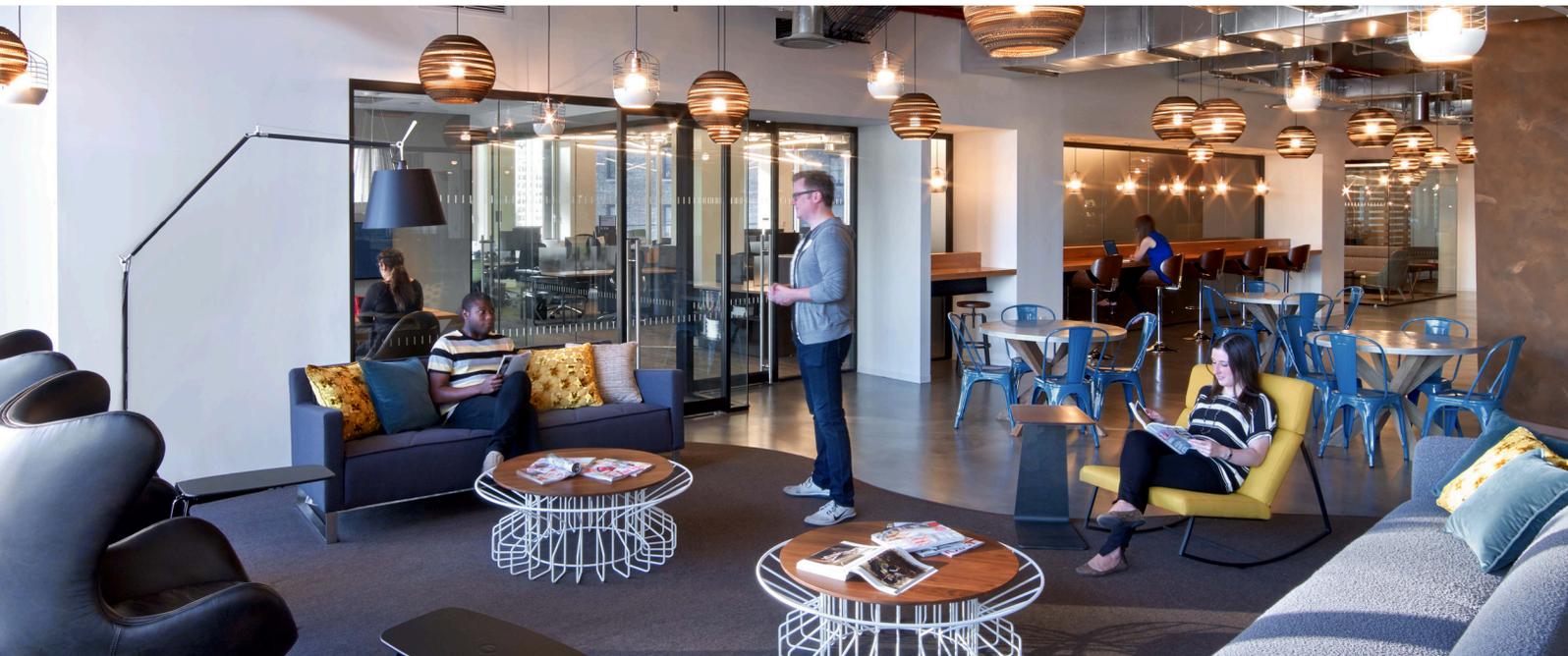
Key Takeaways for CRE and Workplace Leaders

1. **Design for flexibility.** Use analytics to right-size and reimagine space based on actual usage.
2. **Prioritize tech upgrades.** Equip spaces for seamless hybrid collaboration.
3. **Create meaningful in-office experiences.** Invest in amenities and events that make commutes worthwhile.
4. **Listen actively.** As Selezneva advised: "The future is about technologies, it's about feeling. How do you listen to your employees?"
5. **Stay agile.** As Carney noted, real estate must mirror business direction in real time.

Outlook: Finding the New Balance in 2025 & Beyond

As we move through 2025, the workplace is undeniably in flux. **RTO mandates are on the rise**, but so is the understanding that how we return matters profoundly. Companies are seeking a new equilibrium — one where the office reclaims its place at the heart of working life, but under radically different terms than before. The most successful organizations will likely be those that **marry the best of both worlds**: the engagement and innovation sparked by in-person interaction, with the autonomy and focus that remote work affords.

For Corporate Real Estate and Workplace professionals, this is a moment of opportunity. After years of reactive crisis management, **you now have a chance to proactively shape the future of work in your organizations.** That might mean redesigning space to be more inclusive and engaging, championing new technologies that bridge physical and virtual work, or advising the C-suite on policies that attract talent rather than repel it. It certainly means continuing to listen – to data, to employee voices, and to industry trends – and being willing to iterate. The office is not dead; it's evolving. And in that evolution lies the potential to create workplaces that are better than what we left behind in 2020 – more purposeful, more human-centric, and more resilient.

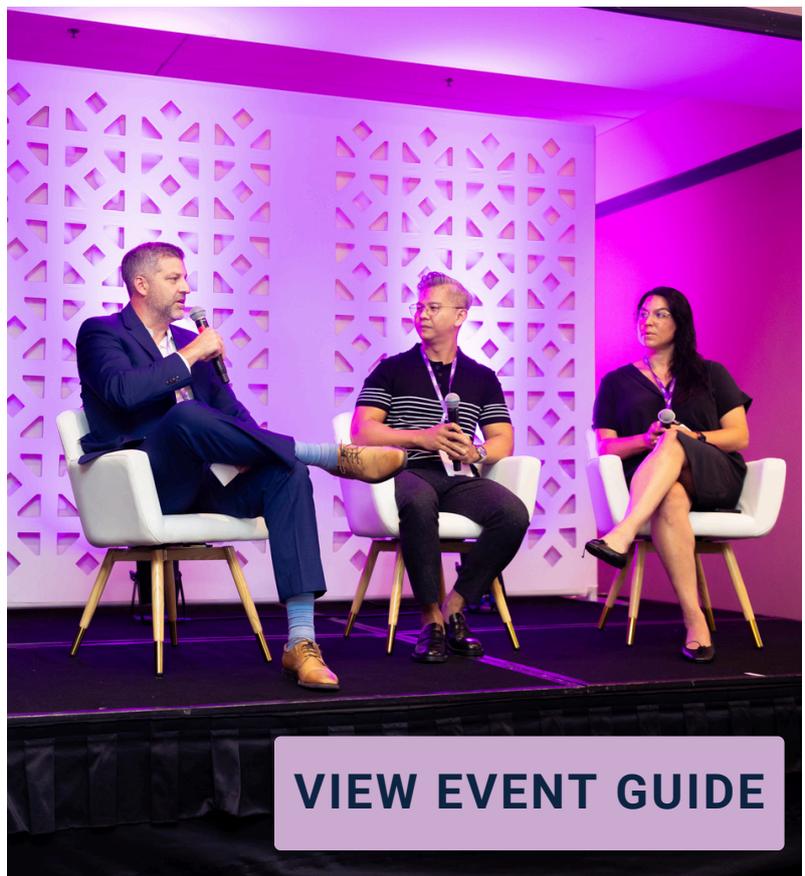


Source: Work Design Magazine | Condé Nast Entertainment's Rustic, Open NYC Office

Get Real Insights and Connections at the WorkX Experience

As **WorkX** continues to serve as a hub for workplace innovation, its community of professionals remains at the forefront of navigating change—from mandates to measurements, flexibility to future-proofing. The message is clear: the office of 2025 isn't just back—it's evolving.

Alexandra Selezneva and Kenneth Carney praised the WorkX conference. "It feels like a book club," said Selezneva. "Very warm, very real conversations." Carney agreed: "It's a very intimate conference... You have better conversations with similar leaders in the industry."



Featured Sessions....

- **Keynote Panel:** Building Future-Ready Workplaces in 2025 for the Modern Worker
- **Interactive Discussion Group:** Design Immersive Spaces that Fit the Culture of Your Business
- **Customizable Track:** Correcting for Surplus Space – Solutions for Repurposing
- **Panel Discussion:** Optimizing Space to Manage Investments and Better Serve the Business



Sources: This article draws from original interviews with WorkX speakers Alexandra Selezneva and Kenneth Carney, as well as expert commentary and industry research, including:

- Forbes articles by Dr. Tracy Brower on RTO trends (forbes.com, muckrack.com)
- NWN Carousel reports on office technology (nwncarousel.com)
- 2025 Workspace Forecasts and trend roundups (forbes.com, globest.com)
- Employee sentiment and workplace data from Stanford University, Owl Labs, Axios, FTI Consulting, ResumeBuilder, and TopResume (axios.com, linkedin.com)