More workers are being forced back to the office – yet a new study shows flexibility is the best way to keep employees

Source: theconversation | **Author:** John L. Hopkins (Swinburne University of Technology) | **Published:** October 08, 2024 | **PMS Relevance:** PMS RELATED | **Type:** News/Analysis | **Geography:** Asia-Pacific

Source URL: https://theconversation.com/more-workers-are-being-forced-back-to-the-office-yet

Executive Summary

This article addresses the tension between large employer-driven return-to-office (RTO) mandates and emerging research on the value of flexible work arrangements. The author's central argument is that flexibility — when well-managed — delivers measurable benefits for both employees and employers, and that RTO mandates run counter to current evidence. The primary evidence cited is Mercer's 2024 Employee Benefits Review, a survey of 502 Australian organisations, which found that 89% still offer remote work options, one-third of employees would forgo a 10% pay rise for flexible arrangements, and 77% of firms allow adjustable start and finish times. Additional supporting references include 2021 research linking flexibility to engagement and productivity, and Workplace Gender Equality Agency findings framing flexibility as central to gender equality. The article concludes that businesses broadening the definition of flexibility — beyond location to encompass leave, career development, and financial wellbeing — are better positioned to attract and retain talent in a low-wage-growth environment.

Key Insights

1. 89% of Australian organisations still offer remote work options as of 2024, with mandated office attendance stable at approximately three days per week.

2. One-third of Australian employees are willing to forgo a 10% pay rise in exchange for flexible, reduced, or compressed working arrangements.

3. The definition of workplace flexibility is expanding beyond location to include career development, parental leave, financial wellbeing programs, and compressed work schedules such as the 100:80:100 four-day week model.

Practical Takeaways

• Organisations offering non-monetary flexibility benefits — such as compressed schedules, adjusted hours, and wellbeing programs — may gain a competitive advantage in talent attraction during periods of limited wage growth.

• Flexible work arrangements are increasingly framed by Australian organisations as a diversity and inclusion lever, with implications for gender equity and employment access for people with disabilities.

Frameworks Mentioned

100:80:100 — A four-day workweek model in which employees work 80% of standard hours at 100% pay while maintaining 100% productivity output.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article draws on a large, multi-sector Australian survey (n=502) conducted by a recognised consultancy, providing reasonable empirical grounding for its claims. The inclusion of specific data points — percentages, model descriptions, and employer practices — adds credibility. Limitations: The article is structured as advocacy for flexibility rather than balanced analysis. Causal claims linking flexibility to productivity and performance are not rigorously established; the 2021 research cited is referenced without detail, making independent verification difficult. The RTO counterarguments (Amazon, Tabcorp) are presented dismissively, without engaging with their stated rationale. The Mercer report is produced by a consultancy with a commercial interest in HR advisory services, which introduces potential bias. The article does not account for sector-specific variation or roles where remote work is structurally impractical.

Organizational Practice

Australian organisations are described as maintaining hybrid work norms with an average of three mandated office days per week. Practices include flexible start and finish times (77% of firms), four-day workweeks at full pay (5%), compressed working years (4%), and expanded benefit offerings including health and wellbeing classes (65% of organisations) and financial wellness programs (29%). Individual firms are noted as experimenting with multi-year compressed salary arrangements.

Strategic Implications

The article's findings suggest a divergence between large multinational RTO mandates and the prevailing Australian employer practice of sustaining hybrid flexibility. If the correlation between flexibility and retention holds across sectors, organisations maintaining rigid attendance policies may face elevated attrition risk in talent markets where flexible alternatives are widely available. The broadening definition of flexibility — encompassing financial, developmental, and schedule dimensions — points toward a more holistic framing of employee value propositions in PMS design.

Validation Status: passed
