

The Future of Work Is Not About Attendance. It Is About Purpose.

For the past few years, one main question has taken center stage: How often should people be in the office? Three days a week? Four days? Full-time? However, more organizations are discovering that strict attendance rules do not automatically boost engagement. More importantly, these rules do not necessarily enhance collaboration, culture, or performance. The real challenge goes beyond just getting people to show up. It's about giving them a good reason to be there.

THERE IS NO UNIVERSAL MODEL

Two companies may work in the same industry and compete for similar talent, yet they may need different workplace models. One may depend on spontaneous collaboration, mentoring, and informal knowledge-sharing. In this case, regular in-office time can help achieve important business goals. Another company may focus on accessing the best talent, regardless of location, and function well with a virtual-first approach. Both strategies can succeed. What matters is that the workplace strategy, company culture, leadership behavior, and business priorities are in sync. Problems arise when organizations create policies based on trends rather than responding to their actual circumstances.

LEADERSHIP PRESENCE MATTERS MORE THAN POLICY

A significant challenge in workplaces today has less to do with employees than leaders might think. It concerns whether leadership is present in a way that makes the office worthwhile. In one organization, junior and mid-level employees mostly met attendance expectations. However, leadership was often absent from the office. Employees were told that in-person work mattered, yet the people they wanted to learn from and collaborate with were frequently missing. The outcome was not surprising. Employees began to wonder why they were even coming in. When workplace policies result in low engagement, it's essential to consider whether leadership behavior matches the expectations set. Before enforcing rules, organizations should assess whether the office experience is living up to what was promised to employees.

THE ATTENDANCE PARADOX

Many organizations hesitate to make long-term real estate decisions because they are unsure what future attendance will really look like. At the same time, they face pressure to create workplaces that encourage more in-person connection. This situation creates a genuine planning challenge. Few leaders want to commit to a space strategy based on attendance goals that may never happen. However, waiting for complete clarity often delays crucial decisions about workplace strategy, real estate, and employee experience.

Organizations that manage this challenge well do not focus solely on occupancy rates. They pay attention to outcomes. They start with a different set of questions:

- What do we want people to achieve when they gather?
- Which activities truly benefit from face-to-face interaction?
- What role should the workplace have in our culture, operations, and long-term business strategy?

For many organizations, the answers depend closely on their business, culture, and workforce.



A USEFUL LESSON FROM HOSPITALITY AND RETAIL

A relevant lesson for workplace leaders comes from industries that have addressed a similar challenge for decades. Restaurants, hotels, museums, and retailers have never been able to mandate attendance. They have always needed to create environments that people want to visit. Workplaces may need to adopt the same mindset. Instead of asking how to enforce attendance, organizations should ask how to create an experience that people find valuable. Over the long term, purpose will always be more compelling than policy.

THE OFFICE EXPERIENCE STILL MATTERS

People are far more inclined to make the commute if the office helps them do their jobs better. That may seem obvious, but it often gets overlooked. If someone leaves a productive home office only to spend all day searching for meeting rooms, struggling with technology, dealing with distractions, or joining virtual calls from a desk, the value quickly disappears. The workplace experience must support the work people are there to do. This involves focusing on acoustics, meeting technology, collaboration spaces, quiet areas, and the overall flow of the employee experience. The office should make things easier, not harder.

FLEXIBILITY IS NOT JUST ABOUT SCHEDULES

It's also about space. More organizations seek ways to create workplaces that can change over time. Multi-purpose spaces, flexible furniture, and access to shared building amenities help them respond to shifting attendance patterns while avoiding unnecessary long-term costs. A large boardroom that remains empty most of the year may not be the best use of space. Shared amenities, adaptable collaboration areas, and smarter planning can often lead to better results while lowering long-term risk. The most resilient workplaces are designed for change, not certainty.

WHAT THE DATA IS TELLING US

Historical occupancy data alone is no longer enough to guide future decisions. Leading organizations combine attendance data with insights on demographics, commuting patterns, workforce distribution, and growth forecasts to gain a clearer understanding of how people are likely to use space in the coming years. When these factors are considered together, more useful patterns emerge. The goal is not to predict the future perfectly. It is to make better decisions with greater confidence.