



The Reluctant Returner

Country report: United Kingdom

An evolving workforce: What impact are 'Reluctant Returners' having on workplaces in the United Kingdom?

Introduction

Employers and employees have been waiting to get back to the workplace for so long, and they've had the time to rethink what it means to them.

The UK has faced repeated lockdowns throughout the pandemic and while 2022 kicked off with calls to work from home where possible, the country is largely back to a level of 'business as usual'. Following its 'Freedom Day' in July 2021, the vast majority of offices began to re-open and encourage staff back to the workplace in some capacity. And while the surge of the Omicron variant led to calls for more remote working once again, for many businesses a hybrid model appears to have been adopted to allow employees back into the office in a safe manner.

The general consensus across the UK is that office workers don't expect to return to the office full time, with a [BBC survey](#) revealing that the majority of employees believe they will have a hybrid approach. In fact, in a survey at the end of 2021 by [Microsoft](#) revealed that 51% of UK employees who currently have the option to work both from home and in the office would quit if the hybrid approach was removed.

As a participant in our study, Lloyd Lasade, Head of Workplace at the London-based global leader in account-to-account payment, GoCardless, explained, some employers are still taking a slow and steady approach to the best working model:

"It is slightly difficult to judge as it's still early days for everyone. We've taken an 'adaptive working' approach where staff can work with their manager to agree what's right for them and their role. At the moment we see this continuing, but we're really taking it one step at a time to see how many people are returning, how frequently, and what they're using the space for."

The above-mentioned BBC survey did, however, show that managers are concerned that creativity will be impacted if staff permanently work from home.

This is reflected in our survey of UK employers, with a staggering 80% of respondents suggesting that working from home will limit the career prospects of staff in some way, with 62% indicating that promotion opportunities will be negatively impacted and 52% saying bonuses will be hit.

This suggests that while UK employees may feel they can work effectively remotely, on a longer-term basis, people will be needed back in the workplace for their own development as much as the company's prospects. This issue of remote working impacting career progression has been echoed by some business leaders, including James Timpson who claimed in a [Times article](#) that staff who want a promotion need to get back in the office.

So how can UK employers encourage people back into the workplace in this environment? Here's an insight into the key learnings from UK respondents in our study of 3,000 office workers and 2,750 employers across Europe.

About Unispace

In 2010, Unispace revolutionised the workplace creation model with an industry-leading, end-to-end approach to strategy, change management, design, delivery and construction. Today, we continue to meet the pace of change delivering a breadth of workspace projects from the modern to historic, offices, laboratories, campuses, headquarters, hospitality venues and retail spaces. With 5,500 workplace projects completed across virtually every sector, a presence across 26 countries, and 600+ employees worldwide, Unispace creates workplaces powered by collaborative client partnerships, delivered seamlessly across borders, and enabled by industry-leading intelligence and technology.



CAFFEINE BAR

Executive summary

65%

of employees surveyed showed some reticence about returning to the physical workplace.

A majority of Reluctant Returners

There's a general air of reluctance from UK based office workers.

Overall, 65% of those surveyed showed some reticence about returning to the physical workplace. In comparison, employers expressed greater reluctance, with 72% indicating some concerns about heading back into the workplace.

Top drivers of reluctance

Of those employees who indicated concerns about going back into the office, the main drivers of reluctance were:

41% The commute and enjoying spending this time more efficiently

32% Not seeing the need to go back

31% Unwillingness to spend money

Encouraging colleagues back

When we look at how to entice people back, respondents had a clear desire for more incentives, the majority of which centred on commuting times, travel costs and in-office perks such as free food. However, one particularly alarming statistic that came out of our survey is the potential impact of remote working on salaries.

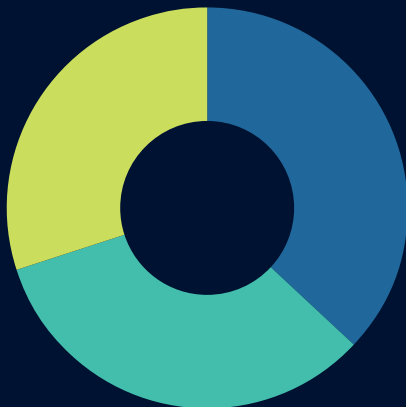
Over half (62%) of employers stated remote workers would have limited promotion opportunities and 55% indicated those not in the office would be less likely to get bonuses. This suggests that office workers could have their pay and career prospects impacted if they fail to return to the office.

The need to update the physical workspace

What is certainly apparent from our study, though, is the desire for change to UK offices. While 42% felt they were more productive in the workplace than at home, just 17% said they were happy with the office the way it is set up, with 75% indicating that they would improve it in some way.

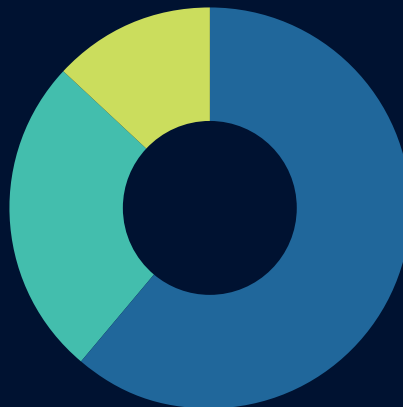
Research & Surveying

AGES



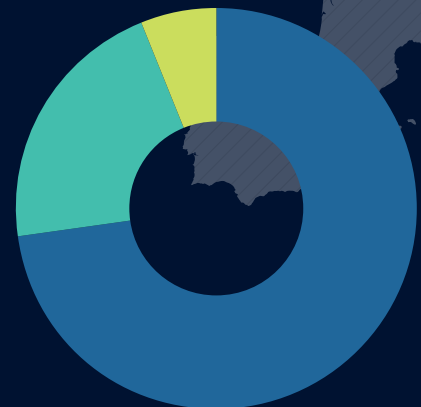
37% (aged 18 – 34)
33% (aged 35 – 44)
30% (aged 45+)

LIVING AREA



62% Urban Dwellers
26% Suburbanites
13% Rural Living

WORKING AREA



73% City Centre
21% Suburban Town
6% Rural Area

Research was conducted alongside Opinium. Research between 16.09.21 – 01.10.21.

Who was surveyed?

3,000 employees who have worked from home during the pandemic, working in companies with 50+ employees and 2,750 employers (Director-level or above) in companies with 50+ employees in the UK, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, to meet statistically robust numbers within each market.

Diving deeper

We also conducted 10+ deep dive interviews with senior Real Estate, People and Operations decision makers from major employers.

GENDER SPLIT

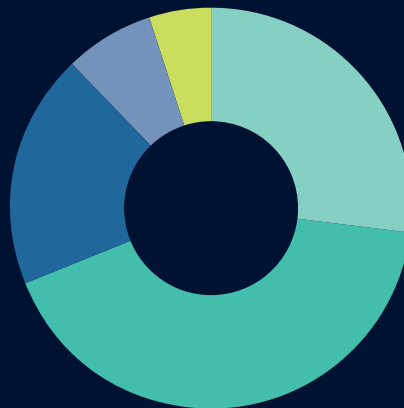
52%

Female

48%

Male

PERSONAL INCOME (GBP / ANNUM)



- 27% – Up to £30,000 a year
- 42% – £30,001 to £60,000 a year
- 19% – £60,001 to £100,000 a year
- 7% – Over £100,000
- 5% – Prefer not to say



Landsec, Dashwood House, London, United Kingdom

The Reluctant Returner

noun

The Re·luc·tant Re·turn·er:

An office worker who has indicated negative sentiments about returning to the workplace post-Covid including anxiety, unhappiness, annoyance, demotivation, uneasiness, dread or worry.

The UK's Reluctant Workforce

72%

of employers indicated they have concerns about heading back into the workplace.

Returning to the workplace: are office workers reluctant?

Our study shows a clear reluctance from office workers to get back into the workplace, with two thirds (65%) of employees indicating reluctant. However, it is the UK's employers who appear to have a greater level of reticence, with 72% indicating that they have some concerns about heading back into the workplace. This increased reluctance from employers is perhaps the main driver behind the discrepancy between how reluctant businesses perceive their workforce to be, with 76% of these respondents stating they believe their staff were concerned about making a return to work.

Interestingly, there is a clear split in reluctance between genders, with 75% of women in the UK indicating they are concerned about a return to the office, while 58% of men felt the same. Those aged 35-44 were also more reluctant than any other age group, with 74% of this group reticent about going back to the workplace, compared to 65% of those aged 18-34 and 62% of the over 45's.

THE GENDER GAP

75%

Women concerned about the return to the office

58%

Men concerned about the return to the office

A RELUCTANCE TO RETURN BY AGE GROUP

74%

Aged 35 – 44

65%

Aged 18 – 34

62%

Aged 45 and over

The UK's Reluctant Workforce

Working from home has re-shaped what employees want from the office.

A preference for hybrid

When we look into more detail at how employees would prefer to operate, hybrid certainly appears to be popular, with 55% of staff desiring this return-to-work option. Interestingly, when we break down where hybrid-advocates would predominantly like to work, 29% would want to be mostly in the office, while 26% indicated they'd rather be mostly home-based.

There are also clear preferential differences across demographics. While just 24% of women want 100% of their time to be office based, this jumps to 45% for men. Those looking to further their careers also indicated more of a preference to be office based than workers who are more established in their jobs. While just 20% of those aged over 45 wanted to go back to full-time office-based work, 39% of 18-34 year olds and 40% of 35-44

year olds in the UK reported a desire to be back in the office with no work from home option.

Location also has an impact on preferences around the 'in the office, hybrid or remote' debate.

Staff in the North East and London showed a greater desire to be fully in the workplace (63% and 50% respectively) while those in the Yorkshire and Humberside region favoured a hybrid setup that was mostly remote (57%).



63%

North East region
Greater desire to be fully
in the workplace

57%

York

57%

Humberside region

50%

London

The impact on office space

With employers seemingly more reluctant to return to the office than their staff, there is the concern that the commitment to make the workplace more desirable could be missing. But with a third of the workforce happy to return and the majority of businesses viewing remote working as career limiting for staff, a balance is clearly needed.

Why are people reluctant to return?

It can be all too easy to assume what is causing the reluctance to return for some of the UK's office workers, but as we've already noted, assumptions aren't always accurate.

With discrepancies between how reluctant employees are to go back into the office and how reticent employers believe their workforces to be, a more accurate picture is clearly needed.

So, what's stopping UK workers from getting back into the office?

When we drill down into why people are reluctant, the top three reasons from employees are:

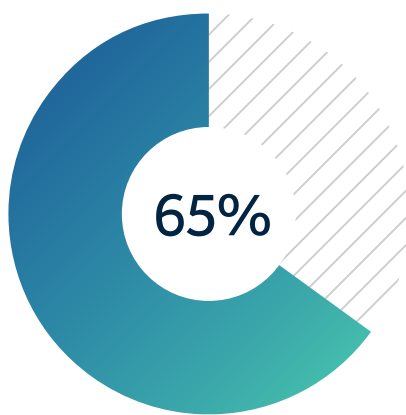
41% The commute and enjoying spending this time more efficiently

32% Note seeing the need to go back

31% Unwillingness to spend money

Barrier #1: The Commute

RELUCTANT TO RETURN



of UK office workers feel that the commute takes up a significant part of their day.

With the time taken to commute ranked as the biggest barrier for Reluctant Returners, it's perhaps no surprise that 65% of UK office workers feel that the commute takes up a significant part of their day. **Travel also appears to take a toll on the majority of office workers, with 58% finding it physically tiring.**

While there is almost an equal split between genders when it comes to the commute being tiring (cited by 57% of UK males and 58% of females), there is an interesting split across the age groups. The majority of those aged 18-34 (64%) and 35-44 (63%) found the journey had a physical impact on them. This drops to 57% for those over 45.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those working in an urban area were more likely to state that the commute was tiring than those whose office is located in a

rural area (64% versus 28%).

Concerns around the time spent commuting are more predominant in Scotland and North-West England, with 58% and 56% of respondents respectively stating that they enjoy the time they have regained from no longer commuting.

There are, however, positive sentiments around the commute as well, with 48% of office workers indicating that it gave them invaluable 'me-time'. A further 22% indicated that they missed the boundary that the commute created between work and home-life.

Barrier #2: A reason to return

FOCUS TIME



of office workers indicated that they find it easier to focus when working in the office

Across the UK, 42% of office workers indicated that they find it easier to focus when working in the office, compared to 39% who concentrate better at home. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the majority of survey respondents stated that the office helps eliminate some of the distractions they face at home.

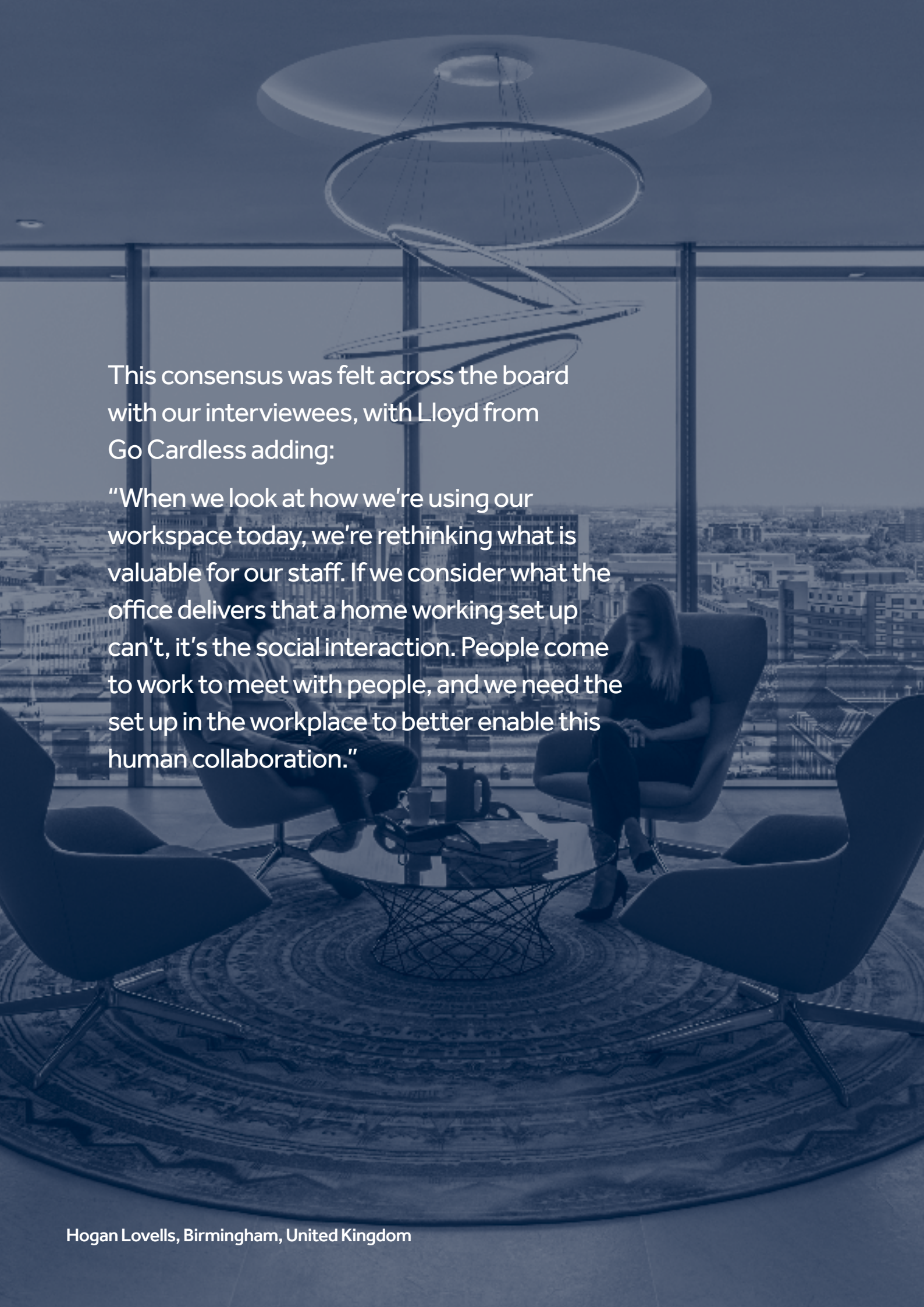
When asked if they felt that working in the office encouraged them to take time away from their screens and digital distractions, 74% of UK workers indicated that it did.

Interestingly, those in London were far more likely to be able to focus more in the office, with 75% of those based in the capital indicating the workplace is better for concentration. In comparison, just 26% of those in the South West could focus better in the office.

However, despite a significant number of employees indicating

that they find it easier to focus in the office, 75% did state that they would make a change to their current workplace. The most popular amendments included creating more private spaces (cited by 24% of those surveyed), improving the lay-out (22%) and adding more amenities (21%).

Andrew Alderson, Global Facilities Director of global law firm, Kennedys Law, highlighted as part of this study why he believed that the traditional pre-Covid workplace simply doesn't work for many: "The challenge that we now have is that the office space isn't set up as we'd like. The reason for the office now being the destination of choice has changed from people being desk bound to people wanting to use spaces for collaboration, socialising and meeting in more appropriately equipped spaces which now tailors for a virtual meeting model."



This consensus was felt across the board with our interviewees, with Lloyd from Go Cardless adding:

“When we look at how we’re using our workspace today, we’re rethinking what is valuable for our staff. If we consider what the office delivers that a home working set up can’t, it’s the social interaction. People come to work to meet with people, and we need the set up in the workplace to better enable this human collaboration.”

Barrier #3: Money concerns

TRAVEL COSTS



the average decrease in travel costs for UK commuters pre v post pandemic.

While the actual commute itself and its impact on people physically and in terms of time is an issue, the pandemic has clearly given UK workers a chance to review just how much travelling into the office is costing them financially. According to Andrew from Kennedys Law, the cost of travel to work was as much of a concern as the actual travelling itself: **"We found that the commute was a real issue for a lot of colleagues, both in terms of the financial benefit realised from the protracted period of working from home."**

This resonates with the employee survey respondents who ranked the financial impact of travelling to the office third in the list of reasons they are reluctant to return.

However, it's important to add that when we asked office workers in the UK how much their journey into work cost them before the

pandemic and what this will be per week going forward, the average amount dropped 14%.

There is also a noticeable difference between how employees feel about the expense of commuting and the perception from employers about this impact on Reluctant Returners. When asked how they believed their staff viewed their journey into work, just 29% of business respondents thought it was viewed as an unnecessary expense.

With the commute, concerns around travel costs and a need to see the benefit of a return to the office, how can UK employers change the minds of their Reluctant Returners?



Confidential Client, London, United Kingdom

Getting people back: *what's needed?*

When we asked UK office workers what would encourage them back into the office, there was a clear trend in addressing the main issues of reluctance cited above:

AN OFFICE WITHIN 5-10 MINUTES FROM HOME

78%

Does the satellite office have a purpose?

FREE LUNCH, SNACKS, COFFEE AND DRINKS PROVIDED

73%

This paves the way for a shift in how workplaces are organised, including more dedicated hospitality and social spaces

THE BUSINESS SUBSIDISING TRAVEL

72%

Though not financially feasible for all employers, the conversation must be had rather than ignored. Flexible starting times and cycle to work schemes may prove a viable option

FLEXIBLE START TIMES

72%

Encouraging employees to work the hours which best suit their needs to maximise work-life balance, productivity and happiness

“Having meaningful conversations with our people is also helping drive decisions [...]”

Lloyd Lasade

Head of Workplace, Go Cardless

Given the concerns around the cost, time and physical impact of the commute, the financial travel incentives and flexible start times are perhaps unsurprising motivators to return to work, with the free lunch options a clear way to differentiate what added value the office can provide to staff from the home office.

What is interesting, is that across our UK and Irish employer interviews, all indicated they are already adjusting or looking at evolving office environments for the new way of working.

According to Lloyd, at Go Cardless, “We have already started looking at what incentives we can use to entice people into the office, including small gestures like ‘biscuit club’ where people take a break to grab a biscuit and chat to colleagues, and offering breakfast.

Having meaningful conversations with our people is also helping drive decisions. We don’t want to have an artificial approach where we dictate what people do, but at the same time we recognise the concerns from people that they don’t want to travel into work and be there on their own.”

This was replicated across our business survey respondents as well, with 44% highlighting that they had either created separate spaces for collaborate and quiet work during the pandemic, or were planning to do so. A further 39% of employers indicated that they created a space for hospitality such as a bar in the office during the pandemic or plan to do so in the future.

Mental health in the workplace

48%

of UK employees indicated that working from home had had a positive impact on their mental health.

Just under half (48%) of UK employee indicated that working from home had had a positive impact on their mental health. However, that doesn't mean that mental wellbeing took a significant hit for employees working remotely. In fact, just 20% of respondents indicated their mental health had been negatively impacted – the second lowest figure recorded across Europe.

When asked to score how anxious they felt, the average response was just above the middle of the scoring system at 5.8, which suggests that there's still a level of anxiety impacting workers in the UK. These levels of anxiousness were highest in London, while those in the East of England reported the lowest anxiety levels regionally. When asked how happy they felt with their lives at the moment, office workers indicated a more positive atmosphere, with the average on the scoring system noted at 6.6.

It is important to draw attention to the fact that 70% of employees highlighted that their office is set up to make them feel comfortable, while 49% stated that work from home restrictions made them value the office more, suggesting that the office continues to have a positive impact on the general wellbeing of office workers.



Stepstone, London, United Kingdom

Reluctant Returners: *the impact on salary*

With the cost of the commute ranked in the top three drivers of Reluctant Returners, it's perhaps no surprise to note that 52% of UK office workers would be happy to take a pay cut in order to continue working from home on a full-time basis.

However, while this will have an immediate impact on expenditure for employees, respondents did indicate that remote working is likely to have a longer-term effect on income. According to the office workers we surveyed, 32% felt that colleagues working from home would have limited promotion

opportunities, while 29% believed pay rises would be thin on the ground and 28% felt that bonuses would be impacted.

This correlates with the views of employers across the UK with 62% stating that remote working would limit promotion opportunities. A further 55% stated that employees who aren't in the office are less likely to be given bonuses.

Women are 14% more likely to believe home working will not impact their career

EMPLOYEES

32%

Promotions

28%

Bonus

29%

Payrise

47%

N/A

EMPLOYERS

62%

Promotions

55%

Bonus

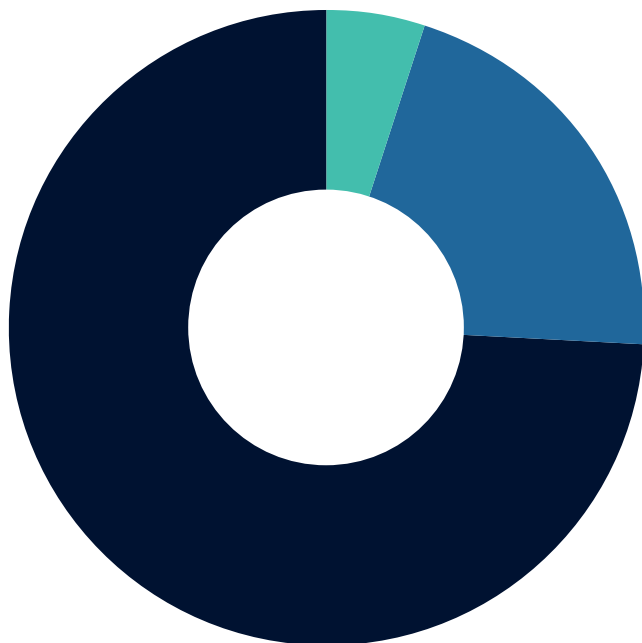
20%

Payrise

20%

N/A

CAREER PROSPECTS



- 74% of employers claim to have formally communicated how working from home will impact career prospects
- 21% of employers believe this is something that is known, or felt rather than communicated
- 5% are unsure

10 tips to encourage Reluctant Returners back to the office

This research has identified a significant degree of reluctance to return from employees and employers alike across Europe. While the challenges facing each business will vary, the trends outlined here do provide solid foundations to start reframing how people are encouraged back to work.

What's needed to encourage employees back?

1

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Having a clear understanding of the wants and needs of employees by detailed demographic will allow employers to make impactful, data-led decisions, best future-proofing any strategies implemented.

2

CONSIDER HOW YOUR WORKFORCE IS EVOLVING

Understanding your future workforce as it relates to talent acquisition will better inform long-term decision-making, from real estate footprint to key benefits offered.

3

OFFER TRUE FLEXIBILITY – NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Whether this is focused on hours, start times or a combination of remote and in-office working patterns, flexibility is clearly needed. But in order to truly offer this to Reluctant Returners, the workplace itself will need to be reconfigured, particularly for those businesses that had a complete in-office setup pre-pandemic.

4

CREATE A WORKSPACE THAT CATERS FOR ALL TYPES OF WORK

The remote working movement in the last 20 months has created a greater appreciation of being able to focus in one place without distraction. Having separate focus areas in the office as opposed to open plan spaces, for example, will help entice Reluctant Returners back.

5

USE TECHNOLOGY TO ENABLE COLLABORATIVE SPACES

In a similar vein, having separate collaborative areas to work is needed. The office provides the opportunity to bring people together to be creative and ensuring there is the space to do this in groups of mixed sizes is vital. It's also important to use technology to your advantage to ensure colleagues feel connected whether at home or when at work meeting other employees face-to-face.

6

THERE IS SUCH A THING AS A FREE LUNCH

Having access to free lunch is high on the list for Reluctant Returners. Aside from simply providing this, it's important that employers consider how they can bring the likes of canteens into the workplace to give staff that extra reason to return, socialise and collaborate, mimicking the 'water cooler' effect.

7

INCREASED PHYSICAL SPACES

Having spent so long at home, many employees are used to being able to get up and roam around at will. But one thing that most homes don't have is the larger areas that offices do. While actual investment in bigger spaces is not an option for all, how the workplace is laid out will impact the perception of space and should be a consideration.

8

FEEDING THE MASSES

Staff have been able to access snacks as and when they want from home, without travelling too far from their desk. The likes of coffee and snack areas in the office will aid employers in replicating some of the elements of remote working that people have enjoyed.

9

FRESH AIR

For some businesses, the use of outdoor space had not played into office design pre-pandemic, after all, you want people working at their desks. But with the need for more collaboration areas, the value of outdoor space also increases. And with many staff members having spent 20 months with access to outdoor areas – even if it's just a stroll out their front door – having this option at work will be desirable.

10

FUTURE TRAVEL BENEFITS

While it's not feasible for all, having travel costs covered by their employer is prioritised by employees and organisations will need to consider how they address this. Whether that's through meeting employees in the middle with a hybrid approach so they do not have to pay as much for travel, subsidising these costs for staff or clearly communicating why it is not feasible, the topic will need to be directly addressed in order to avoid attrition.



Conclusion

For the first time, employees are firmly in control of the future design — and purpose — of the physical workplace.

While there is clearly a level of reluctance in the UK workforce to return to the office, our survey does highlight that employers can entice them back with the right incentives and the right office space. While the way of work as we knew it has changed – for good, from what it seems – the office itself is by no means redundant. But employees need to be shown what they're missing once again: that is a workspace with a purpose, that provides more than their home ever could.

For employers, this is a window of opportunity. The organisations that proactively look to create the most bespoke, purpose-driven and compelling working environments today, will be the most competitive at not only attracting top talent, but also maintaining a motivated workforce.

The cost of inaction for those who do not move to meet the moment? A missed opportunity to leverage their space to drive success with their most important asset: their employees.

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