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MANDATES: DO THEY WORK?

CANADIAN EDITION

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The Mandate Effect: Culture, Compliance, and Consequences

Across Canada, a clear trend is emerging: companies are mandating **in-office presence** four days per week. This shift spans industries – from **financial** services and **technology** to **government** and **professional** services – as leaders seek to reinforce culture, drive collaboration, and regain the sense of connection that was diminished from years of remote work. While the return-to-office push is gaining traction, it also raises important questions about **how space is used, how presence is measured, and how employees experience the workplace.**

Mandates alone won't deliver impact; they must be paired with intentional workplace strategies, like activity-based work that make coming into the office not just required, but worthwhile. To succeed, organizations must reimagine the office as a **dynamic ecosystem** that **supports diverse workstyles, fosters belonging, and aligns with business outcomes.**



Mandates Have Gained Momentum

2025 marked a significant shift from flexible experimentation to structured enforcement. Many branches of the federal government have asked for 3+ days per week in office.



Mandates Alone Do Not Guarantee Attendance

Despite stricter policies, actual office attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels in many markets. Hybrid work is still widespread, with enforcement varying by company and geography.



Employee Sentiment Is Mixed

Surveys show that while some employees are adapting to mandates, others remain resistant—especially those with long commutes or caregiving responsibilities.



Office Quality and Purpose Matter

Companies that invested in high-quality, amenitized office spaces saw better compliance and satisfaction. The office is increasingly viewed as a place for collaboration, culture-building, and learning, rather than just task execution.

Key Strategies

The workplace is a **strategic asset** that can help a company transform and enable their overall business strategy.



Define a Destination

What defines your organization and how do you visually represent it to employees, partners, and clients?



Align to Purpose

Emphasize your values in your place. Help employees understand what is important to the organization.



Reinforce Experience

People still have choice. Create a place where people want to be. 'If you can work anywhere, why work there?'



Empower Choice (with Guardrails)

Choice raises engagement scores. Even if days are mandated, offering a degree of choice is important.



Champion Equity

Ensure mandates reflect different work styles, generational preferences, neurodiversity, accessibility.



Communicate Impact

Mandates are more successful when employees see a clear value exchange: presence results in progress.



Embrace Cultural Shift

Seize the opportunity to evolve—design for efficiency, effectiveness, and engagement.



Support the Workforce

Curate an environment that reinforces culture, meets real needs, and supports flexible, high-performing teams.

How Can C&W Total Workplace Help?

WORKPLACE ISSUES & CLIENT QUESTIONS	WE CAN HELP
LOCATION & ALIGNMENT	
Are you certain you are in the right location?	Location strategy, labour market analytics, & portfolio optimization services
UTILIZATION & ATTENDANCE	
Are you having trouble getting people to the office ?	Occupancy analytics Experience per SF survey WP strategies tailored to your culture
Are you embarking on a mandate and worry about engagement?	Change management Communication planning Workplace experience design to ease transitions
WORKPLACE & BRAND	
Do you need to align people, place & technology?	Integrated workplace strategy; Experience per SF survey
Does your workplace (physical or virtual) reflect your brand?	Workplace branding Design strategy Virtual collaboration assessments to ensure alignment
Do you have outdated facilities?	Portfolio Strategy Workplace transformation Capital planning for design advisory to modernize
PERFORMANCE & PRODUCTIVITY	
Is productivity dropping?	Team workflow mapping Space utilization Technology integration to optimize performance
Are your employees complacent?	Use engagement diagnostics Workplace experience programmes to re-energize teams & foster innovation
WELL-BEING & ENGAGEMENT	
Is well-being suffering? Mental and physical?	Wellness-focused workplace design Flexible work policies studies Access to health-supportive amenities.
Are your employee engagement scores low?	Engagement benchmarking Pulse surveys Targeted interventions to improve morale
TALENT ATTRACTION & RETENTION	
Are you losing employees to competitors?	Workplace strategy benchmarking against industry peers to recommend improvements
Do you want to attract the best and brightest?	WP Standards for high-performance, flexible, and inclusive workplaces that appeal to top talent
BENCHMARKING	
Do you wonder what your competitors are doing?	Industry benchmarks, peer insights, & best practices from C&W's global client base
How do you measure up?	Workplace diagnostics; Performance benchmarking
Do you need a defensible workplace strategy and business case?	Data-driven business cases with ROI modeling, scenario planning, and executive-ready presentations

Mid 2025, Strict RTO Policies Are Being Mandated

In the news . . .

As of mid-2025, the workplace landscape continues to evolve rapidly, with a marked acceleration in return-to-office mandates across both the private and public sectors. The year began with a **wave of high-profile RTO announcements**, signaling a shift from flexible experimentation to more structured, in-person expectations.

Royal Bank of Canada (RBC): Launching a requirement for employees—not in fully remote roles—to work from the office **four days per week beginning September 2025**, emphasizing the importance of in-person collaboration as a core part of its culture. https://www.reuters.com/business/world-at-work/canadas-rbc-asks-staff-return-office-four-days-week-2025-05-29/?utm_

Scotiabank: Starting September as real estate permits, certain business units are shifting to a **4-day in-office model**, aiming to extend across more teams over time as capacity increases. https://www.mpamag.com/ca/mortgage-industry/industry-trends/scotiabank-bringing-some-employees-back-to-office-four-days-a-week/538542?utm_

Bank of Montreal (BMO): Effective **September 15, 2025**, the bank will require most employees to be in the office **four days per week**, citing benefits like collaboration, mentorship, and innovation. https://www.reuters.com/business/world-at-work/canadas-bmo-will-require-employees-return-office-four-days-week-2025-06-26/?utm_

TD Bank: https://www.reuters.com/business/world-at-work/td-bank-calls-staff-back-office-four-days-week-starting-this-fall-memo-says-2025-07-23/?utm_

Executives: Required to begin working four days per week **in-office starting October 6, 2025**. **Non-executive staff:** Follow by **November 3, 2025** (with phased rollout and space permitting). Benefits cited include stronger decision-making, culture alignment, and learning through proximity.

Rogers Communications: Corporate employees required **four days per week in office starting October 2025**, with plans to move to **five days per week by February 2026** https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/article/rogers-asks-employees-to-work-in-the-office-full-time/?utm_

Mid 2025, Strict RTO Policies Are Being Mandated

continued...

According to reporting, Canaccord is transitioning to a full five-day in-office model, aligning with major financial institutions' stricter return-to-office policies.

<https://wcbc.ca/remote-work/?utm>

Employment professionals and human resources leaders (e.g., Engage HR, CPHR Canada) confirm that stricter RTO measures are most common in enterprise-scale firms, while mid-sized companies often maintain more flexible, hybrid arrangements to retain talent.

In Canada, the federal government has implemented a structured return-to-office (RTO) policy requiring most core public service employees—such as those at the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA)—to work on-site at least three days per week, with executives expected four days, effective September 9, 2024. This mandate, issued by the Treasury Board Secretariat, marked a shift from pandemic-era flexibility toward more standardized in-office expectations. However, the policy has faced sustained opposition from major public sector unions, including the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC).

These unions have criticized the one-size-fits-all approach, arguing that it ignores operational realities, equity concerns, and prior commitments to flexibility and inclusion. The April 2025 revision of the federal Telework Directive further fueled discontent by removing references to work-life balance, environmental sustainability, and inclusion—while retaining the mandatory in-person requirements.

<https://psacunion.ca/changes-telework-directive-what-you-need-know?utm>

Despite these changes, compliance remains inconsistent across departments, and legal challenges are ongoing, highlighting the growing tension between centralized mandates and the evolving expectations of Canada's public workforce.

CEO Q&A – You Asked, We Answered

Q: Does a 4 day a week mandate mean we need to provide everyone with an assigned seat?

A: No. Depending upon your organization, it may mean that you can take advantage of activity-based work, especially because we know that even with a 5-day mandate on average seats are typically only occupied 60% of the time (vacation, off-site meetings).

Q: How do we prevent friction when people return and can't find a seat?

A: The key is visibility and planning. User-friendly digital booking systems and team neighborhoods can create structure within flexibility.

Q: Won't giving up assigned desks make people feel displaced or less valued?

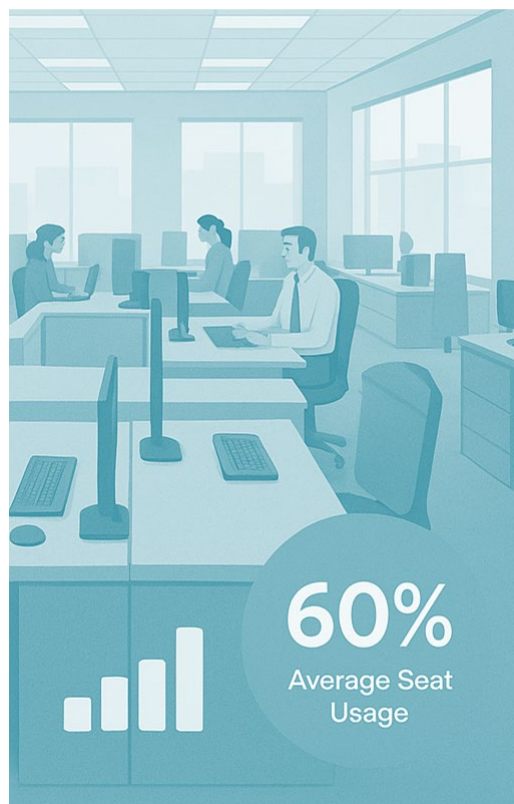
A: Only if the shift is poorly communicated – and the 'give-back' to employees is overlooked. Providing ways to personalize spaces and team zones help retain a sense of identity.

Q: Is activity-based work just hot-desking?

A: No. Hot-desking is unstructured seat sharing. Activity-based work is a thoughtful and curated set of spaces that empowers employees to choose where they work best. It supports focus, collaboration, and wellbeing in a way that hot-desking never did.

Q: How do we balance mandated presence with employee flexibility expectations?

A: Mandates should focus on purpose-driven presence and reinforce the values and culture that an organization desires. You often hear our workplace specialists ask, 'what is your cultural end state?' or simply put, what do you want to be when you grow up?



CEO Q&A – You Asked, We Answered



Q: Can we still reduce our footprint if we are mandating?

A: This depends on your current use of space. You may not be drastically able to reduce, but you can improve experience, rethink the types of space, and strive toward employee engagement.



Q: How do you know if it's working?

A: Measure both utilization and employee sentiment. Workplace strategies succeed when people come in for the right reasons and find the space that supports them. Use check-in data, sensors and surveys to adjust in real time.



Q: How do we encourage people to come in if they're used to working from home?

A: Focus on what the office offers that home doesn't—connection, mentorship, collaboration, and a sense of shared purpose. Designing spaces and programmes that support these experiences makes the commute feel worthwhile.



Q: What metrics matter most when evaluating the success of a mandate?

A: It's not just about badge swipes. Look at engagement, team performance, space utilization, and sentiment data. A successful mandate should enhance culture and productivity—not just occupancy.



Q: This all sounds so complicated, can't we just go back to the way things were?

A: There has been a fundamental shift in culture within the last 5 years. This was already underway pre-pandemic. The flight to quality and need for flexibility has been underway for years and the pandemic was simply a lightning bolt that drove trends faster. If you are struggling to make sense of it all, please reach out. Our experts at C&W are happy to help.

Carrots vs. Sticks

While incentives help, recent reporting shows that only a minority of Fortune 200 employers rely primarily on perks. Most mandates still come with relatively few “carrots” compared to the “sticks.” However, where incentives are offered, they generally focus on supporting employee well-being, reducing friction, and demonstrating corporate investment in office-based community. In Canada, many organizations, including major banks, insurers, and tech firms, have focused more on wellness and flexibility than strict mandates, offering perks like mental health days, flex Fridays, and transit subsidies to encourage purposeful presence.

Commuter Benefits: Companies are reimbursing fuel costs or providing employer-sponsored transportation such as contracted buses or commuter rail tickets, easing the financial and time burden of commuting.

Free or Subsidized Food: Catered lunches, coffee bars, healthy snacks, and regular food offerings have been widely adopted as in-office draws; these are cited among the top perks employees appreciate.

Wellness and Fitness Perks: Subsidized or on-site gym memberships, yoga classes, meditation sessions, and well-being stipends are increasingly popular. Leading firms have found these perks support both physical and mental health, helping employees adjust positively to office routines.

Flexible Paid Time Off: Some companies use enhanced PTO schemes, including unlimited vacation days, to compensate for lost flexibility and entice employees back without feeling penalized.



Over 50% of Employees Cite Commute Reimbursement as a Preferred Perk.



Over 50% of Employees Cite Paid Vacation as a Preferred Perk. (CPHR 2025).

Carrots vs. Sticks

Child and Pet Care Support: On-site childcare, after-school programmes, and pet care stipends have emerged as creative options to reduce employees' logistical stress and help people focus at work.

Home Services and Lifestyle Spending Accounts:

To compensate employees for lost time due to commuting, companies have started offering home services stipends (for chores like laundry or repairs) and flexible lifestyle accounts usable for health, wellness, or professional development.

Career Growth and Visibility: Some large organizations now explicitly tie promotions, plum assignments, and salary increases to in-person attendance, rewarding those who commit to office work.

Professional Development & Mentorship:

Companies foster mentorship programmes and in-person career development sessions to highlight the collaboration and learning benefits of office life—especially for junior employees or those starting in their careers.

Financial and Consulting Firms: Many are offering travel reimbursements, premium lunches, and expanded health programmes for in-person teams.



44%
of employees
say they would be
incentivized to
commute with free
food and beverages



23%
of Employees
Cite Paid
Wellness and a Gym
as a Preferred Perk
(CPHR 2025).

[10 Incentives to Make a Return to Office Exciting](#)

[23 Best Employee Perks Your Staff Will Love](#)

[80% of CEOs say they'd rather promote an in-person employee | Fortune](#)



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