

## Back to the office - why would employees choose to make a comeback?



Many companies have already begun summoning their employees back to the office after allowing them to spend most of the last two years working remotely or in a hybrid environment. Understandably, there is some reluctance to make this shift, as working remotely has changed many people's lives, giving them more flexibility to spend time with family while saving money on fuel or day care costs. So *why should* employees come back to the office? Because there really is no substitute for face-to-face personal interactions in business, particularly in Africa. As people return to the office environment, it will become increasingly important to reintegrate them through training and upskilling to equip them to make the most of the transition into a post-Covid business world.

### **Benefits for whom, exactly?**

Employees are resistant to return, and according to a study by McKinsey, 29% of people say they are likely to look for a new job if their employer required them to work exclusively on-site moving forward. Many think that their employers want them back in the office purely to micromanage their productivity, but this is not necessarily the case.

### **Benefits for business *and* people**

Coming back to the office is not just for the benefit of employers - there are benefits for employees too. Returning to the office and reconnecting with team members fulfils one of the most important basic human needs - the need for socialisation. In the office, people feel more connected to each other and the company culture. Although not impossible, it is challenging to facilitate collaboration and boost employee

satisfaction when some people are in the office, while others are still working from home.

### **Fulfilling the human need for connection**

Being physically in the office environment provides a critical opportunity for networking, forming connections and engaging with others in the company. It's tough for entry-level employees to feel welcomed into the office culture if remote work continues. Even with the adoption of video meetings and other online collaboration tools, socialisation still suffers. Furthermore, having people physically present in the office gives them the opportunity to be exposed to informal learning opportunities, which helps to facilitate individual skills transfer and growth.

### **In-person facilitates personal growth**

As humans, we learn better when we are working and interacting with others. It's easier to master best practices and to reach out for help when necessary. Along with fulfilling the need for human interaction, workers also have the opportunity to be more visible to leadership, something that is much harder to achieve working remotely. All of this contributes to an individual's ability to advance their career prospects. Working from home might be more attractive in the short-term, but how will this contribute to an individual's five- or ten-year career plan?

### **In-person is better for many reasons**

Physically working together also helps people to feel more in tune with what's happening in the business, while giving them access to a better workspace set-up. Whether it's better connectivity or physical resources in the workplace, a return to the office can also facilitate a better balance between work and personal life. It improves general well-being, as getting dressed and having in-person conversations can help support mental and physical welfare.

### **Fairness through leadership**

So how can businesses facilitate the return to the office? It all boils down to fairness. Whether a company chooses a continued hybrid model or facilitates a full-time return, it is essential that employees consider it to be fair. This means that it must be negotiated with employees, and they must be given the chance to have their say on the working model. The right kind of leadership is also essential. Leadership is the glue that holds everything together, and with the right training and skills development, leaders can get their people re-energised and feeling positive about returning to the office.

### **Leadership training is key**

Specific training to equip leaders with the right skills to facilitate the return to the office is essential. Navigating issues of fairness and helping people to deal with the challenges of daily work life will not be easy. There is no one-size-fits-all approach that will ensure that the chosen working model is successful. This makes it critical to ensure that leaders have the necessary tools to treat their people with the empathy and grace required to ensure that productivity can be achieved, along with sufficient levels of employee engagement and satisfaction.