

Will staff simply quit if they are forced back into the office?

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After more than a year of working from home (WFH), many companies are mulling the end of remote working and a return to the office at least for a few days each week.



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Some companies have stated that they are comfortable with working from home for the long term; others expect employees to work to adopt a hybrid working model.

Still others want people back in the office full time.

It may not be that simple: it turns out, the new office could have a lot of empty desks if employers force employees back to work after the great work-from-home experiment gets closer to the end.

Forcing people back to work five days a week may well threaten talent retention strategies and cause people to simply quit their jobs. This, in particular, is a consideration in a country like South Africa, where the war for talent is fierce.

In a recent EY Global survey of 16,000 respondents, nine out of 10 employees sought flexibility around where and when they work, with about half of those indicating that this will be a large determinant for retention and this has to be considered, particularly in a scarce skills market.

So while the hybrid model must support your commercial, financial and other organisational goals, this has to be balanced with what people want.

The EY survey is further substantiated by a recent survey of 3,050 people by Blind, an anonymous network for professionals in the US, which sought to understand how the switch back to the in-person office could impact employee turnover if the great remote work experiment were to conclude.

Overall, more than one-third (35%) of respondents said they would quit if WFH ended and 54% said they would not.

Interestingly, 349 respondents (11%) said they had "already negotiated WFH forever."

The respondents included large sample pools for employees at some leading tech companies including Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Apple and more.

Among respondents at Amazon, 43% said they would quit if WFH ended, 51% would not and 5% said they had negotiated remote work indefinitely.

Among the 177 Microsoft respondents, 27% said they would quit if WFH ended, 62% would not. About one-third (31%) of the 154 Google respondents said they would quit if WFH ends, 64% said they would not. More than one-quarter (28%) of the 96 respondents employed at Apple said they would quit if WFH ended, 67% would not.

The results of global human resources consulting firm Robert Half's survey showed similar findings. They found that one-third of professionals currently working from home would look for a new job if required to return to the office.

Based on internal data as well as proxy market insights, we think South Africans will be more inclined to adopt a hybrid work approach going forward while prioritising the requirements of the job.

In particular, skilled people may prefer the lifestyle of opting to work for a company that allows working from home.

So how should companies respond in order to reconcile the needs of people who need to be in an office to learn, develop and collaborate with those who are more experienced and refuse to return?

EY's advice

Ultimately, companies should focus on designing a workforce model that supports your employees' adapted need for flexibility due to Covid-19 and 18 months of remote working; one that continues to positively impact their ability to do their jobs efficiently and importantly, to continue to optimally serve your customer base.

Businesses will have to strike the right balance that supports both clients and people. We advise testing and iterations to find that sweet spot.

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