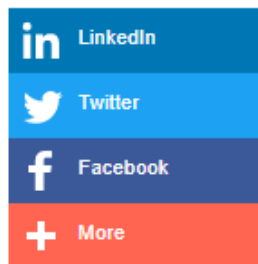# How to deal with return-to-work pushback

Apple's recent remote-work flap serves as a warning to other companies eager to get employees back into the office. The author explains how to navigate this difficult limbo period with empathy, flexibility and clarity.

By Dr. Paul White

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Recently, Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, announced to 137,000 Apple employees that they would be expected to return to work onsite beginning in early September – not necessarily full-time but potentially up to three days a week.

Almost immediately, there was pushback from some employees who wrote an open letter, stating: "We feel like the current policy is not sufficient in addressing many of our needs."

The issue is one that many companies are facing – divergent views and conflicting desires regarding employees returning to work in the office, at least on a semi-regular basis. More and more surveys and polls are finding that a large segment of employees want to continue to work remotely — from 39% who say they would rather quit than give up working remotely to 64% who said they would prefer to permanently work from home rather than get a substantial raise.

Cook's email has created an avalanche of responses from the traditional business leadership community, from the hardline "work from home forever" groups to the "return to the office full-time" crowd and every position in between. Their arguments span a wide range of topics from the economic feasibility of a hybrid model to the need to listen to the desires of one's employees.

I believe Tim Cook is an incredibly bright individual who has demonstrated amazing skill and leadership ability. And I do not disagree with his decision. But here is where I believe he missed the mark.

Tim Cook's error

In the closing remarks of his email, Cook stated, "For now, let me simply say that I look forward to seeing your faces. I know I'm not alone in missing the hum of activity, the energy, creativity and collaboration of our in-person meetings and the sense of community we've all built." This is a nice, warm personal statement, and it's probably true for many.

This proposition may surprise you coming from a long-term proponent of the benefits of building positive, supportive (in-person) workplace cultures, but "missing the hum of activity" and "the sense of community we've all built" isn't the right reason to bring people back to onsite work. Cook's thinking leans *toward* the actual reason for the increased call for employees to return to the office. But he doesn't state it overtly, which has led to confusion and left him open to a wide range of criticisms.

Getting back to the basics

To get to the underlying "why" employers are asking their workers to return to the office, we need to review some foundational principles about work.

- **From an economic perspective, work is the process of: (a) providing goods and/or services that (b) people need or want, and (c) are willing to pay for.** There are obviously other purposes for work, at a deeper philosophical level – the good of the community, providing meaning and purpose for the individual worker, etc. But the ultimate starting point is the economic exchange of goods and services for something of value to the worker.
- **The ultimate judge of "what is needed" in the workplace lies with the customer and client.** Employers are only the intermediary – they essentially serve as the broker between the work provider and the customer. The business owner has identified a need or desire customers have and has assembled a process and resources (materials, information, skilled laborers) to meet the need. In many ways, the issue is not what the employer wants or desires if the action taken doesn't serve the client well.
- **The owner and leadership of a company has the authority to make the decisions they believe are in the best interest of their clientele and for the long-term benefit of the company.** A company that does not make enough money to meet its expenses will

eventually cease to exist. As a result, employees are no longer needed. Leaders often have access to information across a variety of arenas that affect decisions in specific areas of the company. Conversely, frequently managers and employees do <u>not</u> have all of the relevant information related to decisions made.

- **The long-term health of an organization is dependent on taking care of and considering the needs of its employees.** We don't pursue positive workplace cultures just for the sake of general harmony. Positive, supportive workplaces create better products and services for their clientele and they do so more efficiently and profitably than organizations that ignore the humanity of their employees.

The real reason employees must work onsite

The genuine reason many employees will need to go back to onsite work (at least partially) is because doing so is what is best for the customers they serve and the long-term health of the organization.

If better quality products and services can be produced more effectively and profitably when employees return to the workplace, then that has to be part of the company's post-pandemic plan. This was recently affirmed by the Securities and Exchange Commission, which is now [requiring publicly held corporations to document their strategy, plan and investment in developing their "human capital"](#) (their employees), because companies that invest in their employees and the workplace culture outperform those companies who don't. Thus, it is in the interests of stockholders, investors, and owners to consider the ways they invest in their workers.

What Tim Cook did wasn't wrong, just incomplete. It was fine that he communicated his own sense of loss and desire to have team members around, but he needed to connect his decision with the deeper purpose – to better serve their customers and to maintain the ongoing health of the company. While employees might not like the personal implications of the decision, giving them these foundational reasons would provide him firmer ground on which to stand.

There is no one-size-fits-all answer for navigating the new terrain of the evolving post-pandemic workplace. Each company will have to develop their own guiding principles through investigation, reflection, and communication with team members. Which types of team members need to return to in-person work, how often they need to be there, and whether there are benefits for some of them to continue working remotely (experiencing the benefits of less commute time, working in a quiet environment without interruptions, etc.) will all have to be considered and balanced to attain the best results for both employees and employer. Doing so will yield the best results for both your customers *and* for your team members.

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