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As employers push for a return to the office, are pandemic-era wellness habits under threat?

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More and more major employers are asking their workers to spend four or even five days a week in the office.

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For many Canadians, the pandemic and the hybrid-work years that emerged from it revolutionized personal fitness and well-being. Without commutes or rigid office hours, people rediscovered movement, whether through morning runs, lunchtime yoga or midday walks. The concept of the home gym also blossomed, with sales of exercise equipment in Canada increasing 42.5 per cent in 2020. Wellness was no longer separate from work life – it had merged with it.

But now, the balance many Canadians worked so hard to achieve may be at risk.

This year marks a pivotal moment in the country's return-to-office (RTO) journey. Many organizations that once embraced distributed teams are now reversing course, returning to a more traditional work model. From Toronto-Dominion Bank to Rogers Communications, Starbucks Canada and the public sector, leaders are mandating staff return to the office four or five days a week, arguing that in-person work supports collaboration, mentorship and corporate culture. Yet for many employees, the RTO push feels less like a positive shift, with three in five Canadians preferring to spend most of their time working from home, and 79 per cent saying they want at least some remote work flexibility. Moreover, 51 per cent of employees say they would be “very upset” if forced to return to the office more often. This tension is playing out across HR departments, boardrooms and recruiting offices nationwide.

Unions hit out at Doug Ford's 'ridiculous' back-to-work order as Ontario civil servants return to office

The paradox of the modern workplace is that flexibility, not rigidity, has proven to be the real driver of productivity.

“This is a very nuanced issue,” says Dr. Kathleen Martin Ginis, a professor in the department of medicine at the University of British Columbia and the founding

director of the Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Management on UBC's Okanagan campus. "For some people, working from home created opportunities to establish healthier habits, like going to the gym or walking the dog. For others, losing their commute meant losing a key source of daily physical activity." She cites a 2022 Statistics Canada study that found that those working from home reported slightly more recreational activity than commuters, but the difference was only about four minutes a day.

"Ultimately, much of this variability comes down to job control and how much autonomy individuals have over their schedules," she says. Research shows that greater control reduces stress and can help people maintain healthier routines. "For those returning to full-time, in-person work, being able to choose when to take breaks or having the flexibility to adjust commute times could help preserve some balance."



The COVID-19 pandemic saw many workers take advantage of the newfound flexibility from working at home.

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Finding flexibility at the office

Erin Clifford, a Chicago-based wellness expert and corporate coach, says that wellness became a bigger part of workplace culture during the pandemic.

“Working from home made it easy to step out for a midday workout or walk without worrying about a commute or logistics. Back in the office, that might not fit into a typical hour-long lunch break.”

Ms. Clifford emphasizes that wellness habits aren’t necessarily at risk owing to RTO mandates, but they do need to be reimagined. “Wellness isn’t about perfection. It’s about consistency and intention.” Ms. Clifford encourages her clients to find “pockets of self care” in their busy day. It doesn’t have to be an hour-long workout to be worthwhile. “Your wellness can evolve with you,” she says. “Find 15 to 20 minutes to move, eat mindfully, meditate or pause. These consistent moments add up.”

For me, returning to the office is not just a policy – it’s an opportunity

Companies are also realizing that simply requiring presence isn’t enough – employees want to feel supported while they’re there. Ms. Clifford notices an uptick in organizations investing in comprehensive wellness programs, from gym memberships to wellness apps. “Employees want to know they still have access to wellness,” she says.

An often overlooked resource? Benefits. “Most people don’t realize their health plans often include acupuncture, physical therapy and mental-health support,” she says. Many companies are also becoming more mindful of time off, encouraging employees to use their vacation days and even setting more precise boundaries like noting work hours in e-mail signatures. “These are the policies that build a strong workplace culture,” she says.



Working from home makes it easier to squeeze in a yoga session or midday walk.

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Stress and the hidden challenges of office returns

Nicole Porter is a stress coach and founder of Nicole Porter Wellness, recognized as one of Canada's Top 10 Corporate Wellness Service Companies. Through her keynote talks and workshops, she helps professionals see how everyday, often invisible, habits – such as excessive screen time, poor sleep, limited movement or social interaction – can accumulate into chronic stress. Her signature framework, *The Hidden Stress Method*, identifies 10 lifestyle patterns that quietly undermine physical and mental health.

“Step counts drop, people snack more and sleep declines with longer days and higher stress.” Returning to the office isn’t just a location change; it can reactivate these “hidden stress” patterns. “Time and logistics are major barriers,” Ms. Porter explains. “If you’re commuting two to four hours a day, you’re not just losing time – you’re sitting still, which impacts everything from immunity to mood.”

Ms. Porter's road map helps reduce invisible strain and create a more sustainable, balanced and healthy work life.

"We often overlook simple habits like hydration, good nutrition and mindful breathing," she says. "You don't need hours in the gym to feel healthy. Wellness can fit into your day in smaller, realistic ways."

Ms. Porter emphasizes that creating a culture of wellness is a mutual responsibility: Employees must prioritize healthy habits, while employers must foster environments where well-being is part of everyday work life. This could mean walking meetings, built-in breaks, movement-friendly spaces and realistic expectations around hours. Employers, Ms. Porter notes, should ask what "productivity" really means and how wellness contributes to it.

"The data is clear: organizations that prioritize wellness see lower absenteeism and better performance. You can't retain top talent if you don't care about their well-being."

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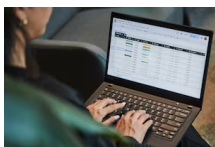
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