

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How Can Firms Enhance Perceptions of Return-to-Office When Restricting Autonomy Over Where Work Occurs?

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ABSTRACT

As return-to-office (RTO) policies grow in popularity, firms are struggling to quell resistance from employees—especially since RTO policies inherently restrict autonomy over where work occurs. Integrating HRM system strength and signaling theory with our critique that firms are often depicted as far more passive in the work-life flexibility literature than they are in practice, we theorize a process of RTO conversion as to how firms address the recoil effect they create (i.e., employee resistance) when introducing RTO. We conceptualize employees' perceptions of RTO as a continuum ranging from “employer-friendly” (low) to “employee-friendly” (high) based on the extent to which firms consider and rectify how on-site requirements misalign with employees' preferences for autonomy over where work occurs. Our work underscores the complexity of how RTO unfolds in practice, involving ongoing, dynamic efforts across multiple business functions to convert and sustain perceptions of RTO as employee-friendly. A core theme throughout is that an emphasis on quality of work life—specifically, enhancing the physical and psychosocial features of the workplace to improve employees' extrinsic and intrinsic on-site experiences—functions as a potentially viable *substitute* for autonomy over where work occurs. We also discuss implications for CEOs, HR leaders, strategy, policies, and practices.

1 | Introduction

In 2023, a KPMG survey of more than 1300 CEOs reported, “global CEOs are steadfast in signaling their support of pre-pandemic ways of working, with a majority (64 percent) anticipating a full return to office is only three years away.” These anticipations appear prescient as firms increasingly impose return-to-office (RTO) requirements for employees whose jobs can be conducted remotely. Yet because RTO restricts employees' autonomy over where work occurs, employees' refusal to embrace RTO is unsurprising; estimates suggest as many as

94% of employees need to be “convinced” to come back (Owl Labs 2023; see also Bloom 2022).

Based on evidence from the work-life flexibility literature that employees prefer and seek autonomy over where work occurs (Kossek et al. 2023), we assert that most employees initially perceive that firms largely neglect this preference when introducing RTO. Yet, we further assert that firms can enhance employees' perceptions of RTO when they communicate and enact RTO in ways that emphasize quality of work life (defined below as the ways in which firms enhance the physical and

psychosocial features of the workplace), which we argue functions as a potential substitute for autonomy over where work occurs. Accordingly, we unpack this process to understand how firms can generate more positive attitudes and enthusiasm for RTO.

We develop a theoretical framework based on HRM system strength (Bowen and Ostroff 2004) and signaling theory (Spence 1973). HRM system strength addresses how employees make sense of *why* a policy change occurs relative to the existence of the firm's other HR policies and practices (Hewett et al. 2018; Sanders and Yang 2016). This allows us to address whether the changes associated with RTO policies create “strong” signals that are clear and consistent (Bednall et al. 2022; Meier-Barthold et al. 2023; Xiao and Cooke 2022) versus “weak” or “mixed” signals that are unclear and inconsistent (Ehrnrooth and Björkman 2012; Townsend et al. 2012). Signaling theory allows us to consider the complexity of RTO signals, including the content of RTO-related messaging, how RTO is enacted, and how firms utilize RTO feedback.

Our work contributes to theory on work-life flexibility in three ways. First, we explain how firms can position and enact RTO in ways that enhance employees' RTO-related perceptions, even though RTO policies restrict autonomy over where work occurs. This is an important complement to the paradigmatic view that enhancing (restricting) autonomy over where work occurs is associated with positive (negative) work attitudes (Butts et al. 2013). Second, we offer insight into how firms actively shape employees' perceptions of RTO, complementing views in the work-life flexibility literature that position firms as passive (e.g., those that “follow the leader” in RTO adoption; Kossek, Hill, et al. 2025). Third, we unpack how firms implement RTO, augmenting the paradigmatic view that “implementation” heavily relies on supervisors (Crain and Stevens 2018); instead, we theorize how RTO “enactment” involves multiple business functions critical to shaping employees' daily on-site experiences.

We also underscore the practical significance of our work. Core arguments in the work-life flexibility literature hold that enhancing autonomy over where work occurs creates mutual benefits for firms (operational/market performance, organizational reputation) and employees (job satisfaction, productivity, work-life balance) (M. M. Arthur 2003; De Menezes and Kelliher 2011). Yet the business case for RTO is limited, in that it seemingly fails to factor in employees' RTO resistance. In resolving how firms can address this disconnect, we assuage ongoing concerns that RTO is a primary example of “How to Lose Your Best Performers” (Elliott 2024).

2 | Return-To-Office Policies: Definitional Aspects and Linkages to HRM

RTO policies are not new, as several firms—including Yahoo!, Best Buy, Reddit, and Bank of America—all introduced RTO prior to the pandemic, scaling back remote work opportunities and requiring employees to work on-site (Noguchi 2017). Nonetheless, RTO policies are receiving increased attention and scrutiny: in scaling back work-from-home requirements prompted by the pandemic, many firms are implementing hybrid

arrangements that include an RTO component (e.g., three or four days per week required on site; Gratton 2021) while others are going so far as to mandate a full five days per week on-site. A hallmark feature of RTO policies is that they “enclose employees within the workplace,” thereby restricting employees' autonomy over where work occurs (Bourdeau et al. 2019, 173).

Rather than treat RTO as a static policy (c.f., Goodstein 1994), we consider the post-pandemic context and emphasize that *return* to office reflects active adaptation to dynamic environments (Hitt et al. 2020). Contemporary RTO policies begin with a firm introducing a *change* to its current working arrangements. Our focus on change allows us to assume that all RTO policies inherently restrict employees' autonomy over where work occurs relative to the pre-RTO period before the firm adopted or introduced the policy—regardless of how many days are required on site (a relevant consideration, but one we hold constant for our theorizing). We also focus on change because the shift to RTO reflects “the rescinding of [work-life flexibility] policies and shifts to practices restricting employee autonomy,” or a form of firm-initiated work-from-home “backlash” capturing how firms respond adversely to vestigial post-pandemic remote work arrangements (Perrigino et al. 2018, 615).

RTO changes prompt reactions from employees. Employees “respond attitudinally and behaviorally to HR policies based on the attributions they make about management's purpose in implementing HR policies” (Nishii et al. 2008, 505). Decades of research on job design and job characteristics theory (Hackman and Oldham 1975) highlight that employees seek and desire autonomy—including control over where work occurs and how they manage work-nonwork boundaries (Butts et al. 2013; Kossek et al. 2023). Thus, the action of introducing RTO and restricting autonomy over where work occurs prompts employees' negative reactions in the form of a “recoil” effect that firms must manage and address (Perrigino et al. 2018).

3 | RTO as Ranging From “Employer-Friendly” to “Employee-Friendly”

RTO policies vary in the degree to which they factor in employees' preferences, needs, interests, and well-being. Fleetwood's (2007) “employer-friendly” and “employee-friendly” terms speak to this distinction, although this is an imperfect dichotomization that we enhance by incorporating the HRM system strength literature. HRM systems refer to the collection of HR policies and practices within a firm, with a key tenet holding that policies should work together to set clear and consistent expectations for employees. One way that firms accomplish this is by aligning policies that reflect the view of employees as “commodity-like and more replaceable” (Lepak et al. 2006, 226). This aligns with principles of classical management where firms do not believe it is their responsibility to cater to employees' desires or well-being (J. B. Arthur 1994; Hauff et al. 2014; Monks et al. 2013; Osterman 1994; Zhou et al. 2013). An alternate way that firms accomplish this is by aligning policies to “help forge a stronger psychological connection between employees and organizations” (Lepak et al. 2006, 227). This is rooted in behavioral management where firms holistically value employees as long-term assets

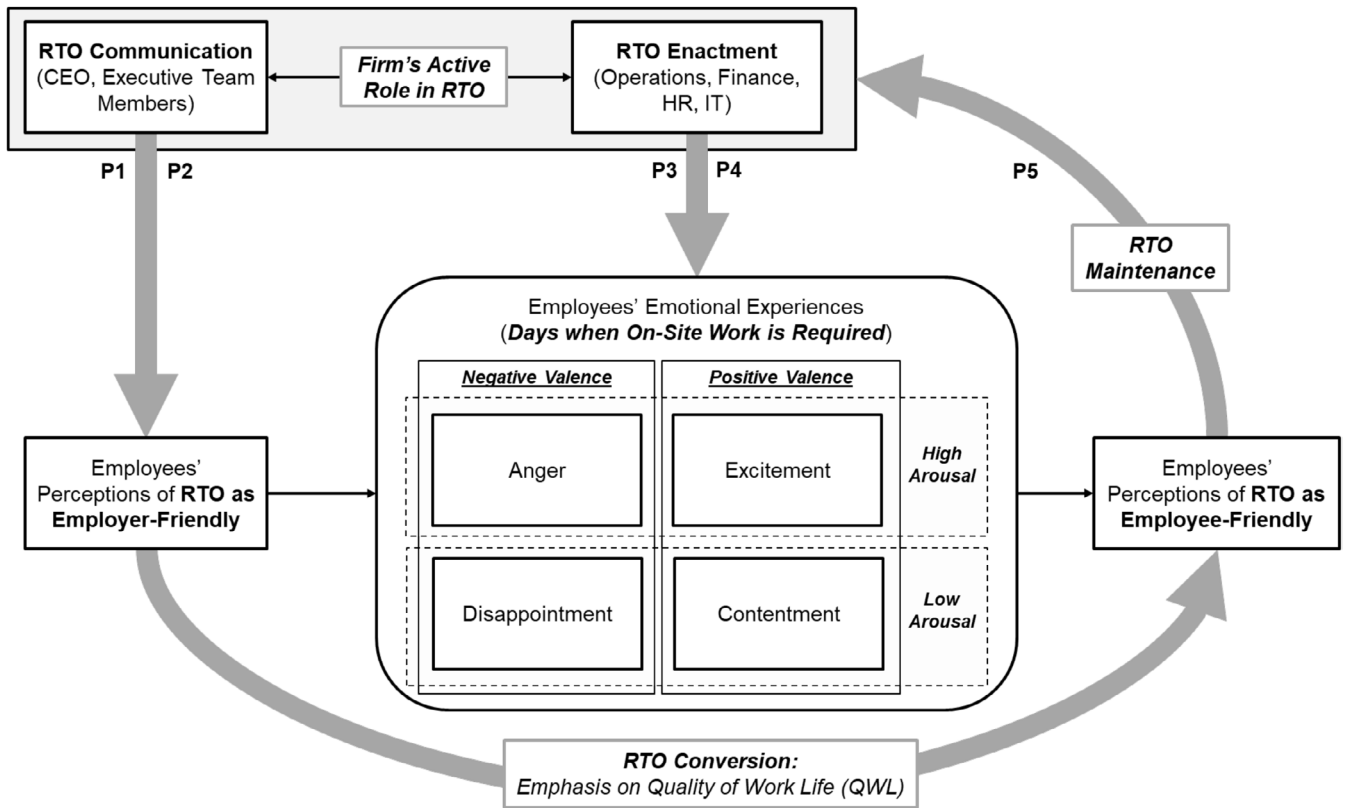


FIGURE 1 | Theoretical framework. RTO = return-to-office.

and as people, ensuring positive work attitudes and mutual trust in the employee-employer relationship (Andersén and Jansson 2024; Boon and Kalshoven 2014; Kim et al. 2018; Zhang et al. 2022).

Integrating these distinctions with Fleetwood's terminology, we position RTO policies along a unidimensional continuum (Tay and Jebb 2018) that ranges based on the extent to which firms consider and rectify how on-site requirements misalign with employees' preferences. At one end, *RTO as employer-friendly* reflects the view that the firm has low regard for how RTO runs counter to employees' preference for autonomy over where work occurs, suggesting that this change comes to the detriment of employees and that the firm will take limited or no action to rectify this. At the other end, *RTO as employee-friendly* reflects the view that the firm has high regard for how RTO runs counter to employees' preference for autonomy over where work occurs, suggesting that this change is initiated with the employees in mind and/or that the firm will take action to mitigate the loss of autonomy over where work occurs.

We theorize a process of *RTO conversion* where firms seek to shift employees' initial perceptions from RTO as employer-friendly to RTO as employee-friendly, integrating signaling theory to explain how this occurs through communication and enactment (Figure 1). If we consider that HRM system strength speaks to how a collective set of HR policies indicates a firm's view of its employees, signaling theory complements this perspective to account for how firms actively manage changes to an individual policy within the broader HRM system.

According to signaling theory, a *signaler* sends a *signal* to a *receiver*, which is then interpreted, resulting in subsequent *feedback* from the receiver (Connelly et al. 2011). We consider how the executive team communicates RTO, including how the messaging reinforces perceptions of RTO as employer-friendly (Proposition 1) or shifts perceptions to RTO as employee-friendly (Proposition 2). Next, we focus on RTO enactment, including how multiple business functions shape employees' on-site, emotion-laden experiences. We propose that negative experiences will reinforce perceptions of RTO as employer-friendly (Proposition 3) and positive experiences will shift perceptions to RTO as employee-friendly (Proposition 4). Finally, we address how employee feedback allows firms to engage in *RTO maintenance*, or the ongoing, dynamic efforts of firms to sustain converted RTO perceptions over time (Proposition 5).

4 | RTO Communication: Senders, Messaging, and Receivers

A common way RTO is communicated is through internal memos sent from the CEO to all company employees. Some memos appear shrouded in secrecy, with publicly available information based on secondhand reporting. For example, CoStar News "viewed" an internal memo from The Washington Post announcing five-day RTO (Burke and Lehrfeld 2024); Business Insider reported on a "leaked memo" from Meta announcing three-day RTO (Garfinkle 2023); The San Francisco Standard "reviewed" an internal memo from Salesforce announcing RTO for certain employee groups (Nguyen 2024); an internal memo from Evan Spiegel, CEO

of Snap, announcing four-day RTO was “seen by” Bloomberg (Gordon 2022), and so on.

In the case of publicly posted announcements, open letters are addressed to employees. Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz (2023) three-day RTO announcement was addressed to “support partners”; Amazon CEO Andy Jassy (2024) addressed his five-day RTO announcement to the “team”; and Glenn Kelman (2023), CEO of real estate firm Redfin, posted a company-wide email sent to “Redfin” announcing two-day RTO. Full-length memos posted by media outlets include Disney CEO Bob Iger’s four-day RTO memo addressed to “Fellow Employees” (Huston 2023) and BlackRock COO Rob Goldstein and head of HR Caroline Heller’s four-day RTO memo addressed to “Colleagues” (Ungarino 2023). These examples align with guidance from the Society for Human Resource Management, as their sample “Notice of Return to Office” form suggests announcements should be delivered in the form of a written, internal memo that is sent from one or multiple executives and designates employees as the primary recipient (SHRM 2023). While RTO communication can be intended for external audiences, we focus our theorizing on CEO and executive team communication to employees.

4.1 | Communication Content

Based on signaling theory, we infer that the CEO has a true intention known only to them or a small circle (executive team), such that the firm’s RTO intention is “private” or “privileged” information—thus creating an information asymmetry between the firm (and its intentions) and employees (and their perceptions of the firm’s intentions) (Connelly et al. 2011). For example, a survey of over 1500 managers in the United States found approximately 25% of C-suite executives hoped RTO would encourage voluntary turnover, while approximately 20% of HR professionals admitted RTO “was meant to make staff quit” (Royle 2024). The report’s conclusion that “RTO mandates are layoffs in disguise” reflects the opaqueness underlying RTO intentions. While Peters and Heusinkveld (2010) discuss divergences between CEOs’ and HR leaders’ intentions, we set this aside for our theorizing to assume that—since employees are not privy to this information—they do not know with certainty the firm’s underlying RTO intentions.

Building on our assumption that an RTO policy serves as a de facto “negative signal” in and of itself (Essman et al. 2021), we argue that the content of the RTO message provides additional information—reducing information asymmetries—that will shape employees’ perceptions of RTO policies. Indeed, “the way HR policies are communicated to employees” actively shapes employees’ perceptions by reinforcing or reinterpreting intended signals (Li et al. 2011, 1826). This occurs through messaging that tells or indicates different organizational attributes (Bradley et al. 2024) and involves “deliberate communication of positive information in an effort to convey positive organizational attributes” (Connelly et al. 2011, 44).

Interestingly, much RTO messaging emphasizes the aim to enhance productivity. For example, Jamie Dimon, Chairman and CEO of J.P. Morgan, observed in 2020 that remote work

eliminated the “creative combustion” that occurs from the physical proximity of working next to co-workers (Zaroli 2020). Amazon’s justification for mandating RTO 5 days per week read, in part, “collaborating, brainstorming, and inventing are simpler and more effective” (Jassy 2024). Microsoft’s approach reflected similar thinking, with a contingency: RTO would not be mandatory unless productivity dropped (Hetzner 2024). Elon Musk opined as part of Tesla’s RTO justification, “There are of course companies that don’t require this [RTO], but when was the last time they shipped a great new product? It’s been a while” (Bursztynsky 2022).

Across these examples of rhetoric, employer-friendly signals that potentially neglect or omit employees’ preferences are persistent (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Foss et al. 2015; Wood et al. 2012). Some messaging goes so far as to make this explicit, as in the pre-pandemic RTO example of Best Buy where CEO Hubert Joly noted that employees “need to feel dispensable” (Valcour 2013). While productivity-oriented messaging likely sends a positive signal to external stakeholders and shareholders, we expect that this content—in providing additional clarity to employees about the firm’s RTO intentions and reducing information asymmetries—will serve to confirm or reinforce employees’ initial perceptions of RTO as employer-friendly.

Proposition 1. *RTO messaging emphasizing only productivity is more likely to reinforce employees’ initial perceptions of RTO as employer-friendly than it is to convert employees’ perceptions to RTO as employee-friendly.*

The Society for Human Resource Management—in advising CEOs on how to effectively communicate their RTO decisions in ways that solicit employees’ buy-in—argues that statistics and arguments around the importance of physical co-location to optimize productivity will not persuade employees who resist RTO. Instead, firms must generate compelling RTO visions:

Realize that “left-brain” persuasion won’t work. You can explain in detail all the rational reasons, cite the statistics you wish and convey all the evidence about the benefits of returning to the office. But if I’ve become accustomed to working from home and want to keep it that way, your reasons, statistics and evidence will bounce right off me.

You’ve got a better chance at persuading RTO resisters...by creating a compelling “why” – a vision of the future and how everyone benefits from in-person work. Generate some excitement and positivity, and perhaps tell a story. As opposed to relying on dry statistics or data, articulate an exciting future... (Janove 2023)

Reflecting this guidance, we argue that CEOs can signal RTO policies as employee-friendly by focusing their messaging on employees’ quality of work life (QWL) experiences.

QWL—which “at the end of the 1950s, was slowly taking root in the specific context of working conditions in the

industrialized countries” – was originally oriented around holistically improving employees’ experiences at the physical workplace (Martel and Dupuis 2006, 335). Original conceptualizations included various criteria such as safe and satisfactory working conditions; fair pay and reasonable compensation; supportive co-workers; a sense of community; and interpersonal openness (Davis and Cherns 1975; Mayo 1960; Nadler and Lawler 1983; Walton 1973). Subsequent studies linked autonomy over where work occurs to improved employee experiences (Bardoel and De Cieri 2014; Chen and Fulmer 2018; Ladge and Greenberg 2015; Rubery et al. 2015; Stavrou and Ierodiakonou 2016), leading to the addition of two QWL criteria associated with individual proactivity and flexible working (Grote and Guest 2017).

Recognizing a full-circle moment, RTO has reoriented the study of QWL away from the focus on flexible working and back to the physical workplace, in line with the original criteria established by Walton (1973) and others. This includes increased emphasis on both *physical features* such as facilities, noise, lighting, and odors, and *psychosocial features* such as feelings of belonging and relationships with colleagues (Martel and Dupuis 2006). Accordingly, within the RTO context we define an *emphasis on QWL* as referring to when firms focus on enhancing the physical and psychosocial features of the physical workplace to improve employees’ on-site experiences (Hamed et al. 2023; Tabassum et al. 2021). Modern-day parallels linking RTO to QWL include activity-based workspaces “purposely designed to accommodate different tasks” (Candido et al. 2019, 275) and tailoring acoustics in facilities design to minimize or amplify noise as needed (Bergefurt et al. 2023). These considerations inherently intertwine physical features and psychosocial features—as in the case of how background music played in the workplace (physical) affects employees’ emotions, cognitive depletion, and interactions with others (psychosocial) (Keeler et al. 2025).

When CEO Marissa Mayer ended remote work at Yahoo! in 2013 and required RTO, Jackie Rees (head of HR) spoke to how “great benefits” were associated with working on-site, including making the workplace more enjoyable, where “we can all feel the energy and buzz in our offices.” (Swisher 2013). Slack CEO Stuart Butterfield emphasized “building relationships” (Rosenbaum 2022), and John Stankey (CEO of AT&T) spoke of “building a great culture and environment” (Dungan 2024), both of which address intrinsic benefits associated with RTO. In contrast, Starbucks CEO Brian Niccol touted extrinsic RTO benefits associated with an on-site gym, daycare, free electric vehicle charging, and subsidized transit (Sirtori 2024).

The common thread is that QWL-oriented messaging addresses the lived employee experience—including promises of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators reflective of how the firm is considering its employees’ experiences when restricting autonomy over where work occurs—rather than confining the focus to the job itself and missing out on the more humanistic view of employees. These examples dovetail with recent evidence in the work-life flexibility literature around how a “deeply personal” element comes into play when employees spend many waking hours at the workplace (Luna 2021) and the need to focus on how employees feel a sense of belonging in their organization (Kossek, Vaziri, et al. 2025; Stollberger et al. 2022). Therefore:

Proposition 2. *RTO messaging emphasizing quality of work life is more likely to convert employees’ perceptions to RTO as employee-friendly than it is to reinforce employees’ initial perceptions of RTO as employer-friendly.*

5 | RTO Enactment: Daily on-Site Experiences

HRM (Sikora et al. 2015) and work-life flexibility (Crain and Stevens 2018) research point to line managers as critical to policy implementation. While “implementation” is a common term in the work-life flexibility literature (Ryan and Kossek 2008; Straub et al. 2018), we use “enactment” to describe RTO implementation since this entails distinct nuances: enactment is far more than line managers’ tracking of daily on-site attendance and involves, for example, operations and finance considerations such as real estate planning, facilities management, and space utilization (Chua et al. 2023; McKinsey and Company 2020; Naor et al. 2022).

Policy enactment should be consistent with policy communication to reinforce strong signals (Katou et al. 2014; Zhang et al. 2024). We suggest that firms seeking to couple QWL-oriented communication with QWL-oriented enactment will view the workplace as “more than geography” (Lawrence and Dover 2015, 371; Ashforth et al. 2024; Finnegan 2008). Offices are not simply a “site for productive labor” (Gieryn 2002, 35), but can be “enchanted spaces” (Johnston 2014; Siebert et al. 2017) that enhance on-site experiences, boost enthusiasm for daily attendance, and create competitive advantages for firms (O’Mara 1999). This requires signaling that shows or demonstrates the firm’s commitment to QWL—in terms of both the physical and the psychosocial features of the workplace (Bradley et al. 2024; Ross et al. 2025). A salient signal in RTO enactment is when the firm “provides services that employees would otherwise seek outside the workplace” such as an on-site health clinic or childcare services (Bourdeau et al. 2019, 173). A more subtle signal may be the choice of music a firm plays in its elevators or lobby, with characteristics associated with musical key, tempo, complexity, and volume suggested to affect mood at work and daily job performance (Keeler and Cortina 2020).

Since emotions “provide the ‘frames’ with which people make sense of particular issues” (Vaara and Monin 2010, 6; see also Lefsrud et al. 2020; Moisaner et al. 2016; Tracey 2016), employees’ on-site emotional experiences are a critical consideration. Specifically, we position the RTO conversion process as addressing employees’ cognitive-emotional experiences. To theorize the role of discrete emotions in RTO enactment, we focus on contentment, excitement, disappointment, and anger. We intentionally choose these four (illustrative, rather than exhaustive) emotions because they not only are distinctive emotions commonly studied in prior research (Cavanaugh et al. 2016; Van Dijk 1999) but also vary in valence and arousal—the two most fundamental properties of affective experiences (Barrett 1998; Kuppens et al. 2013). Valence refers to a subjective feeling of pleasantness (i.e., positive valence) or unpleasantness (i.e., negative valence), whereas arousal reflects whether one feels activated (i.e., high arousal) or more subdued (i.e., low arousal) (Russell 1980).

5.1 | Less Emphasis on QWL in RTO Enactment

When firms place less emphasis on QWL, we anticipate they will create emotional experiences (both low arousal and high arousal) for employees that are more negative in valence. In the examples below, we emphasize in our theorizing the role of the firm and how its neglect of employees' QWL-related preferences will reinforce perceptions of RTO as employer-friendly.

Disappointment is a low arousal emotion that is negative in valence (Frijda 1986). People feel disappointed when a situation that is somewhat unexpected is appraised as negative, as in the case of when a desirable situation is anticipated but does not occur (Frijda et al. 1989; Lelieveld et al. 2011). As one example, a survey of more than 2300 workers across 25 countries rated on-site restaurants and cafes as the most important—but worst-performing—aspect of the workplace experience (JLL 2024; Lee 2025), pointing to how firms risk disappointing employees over one of their most basic and fundamental existence needs (i.e., food). As a second example, employees might be eager to meet on comfortable couches in refurbished collaboration spaces only to realize that these are ideal for sitting “in a hotel lobby talking with friends” but not “with a group of colleagues trying to design a new product” (Rogal 2025). Such disappointments may be inherently tied to the building itself, where commercial real estate office buildings are distinguished from Class A (“built to impress”) to Class C (“if priority is price over polish”) properties (Colacino 2025), underscoring the importance of CFO and COO input.

Anger is a high-arousal, unpleasant emotion one experiences when the attainment of a personally relevant goal is obstructed, and another party is responsible for the aversive situation (Tangney et al. 2007). Employees feel anger when an undesirable situation is unnecessary or unjustified (Dill and Anderson 1995). One example is when employees are required to adhere to RTO mandates only to sit in Zoom meetings all day with co-workers located in other geographic regions (Ballentine and McNeely 2022). In this situation, we anticipate that RTO experiences will lead employees to blame the firm for forcing them to work on-site for no apparent reason. As a second example, people spend \$42 more per day when working on-site versus working remotely (Owl Labs 2024). When an employee has this epiphany (e.g., when using a personal credit card to pay for the commute), we again anticipate the employee to place blame on the organization for forcing them to incur unnecessary costs when they could have completed their work at home.

Proposition 3. *When firms place less emphasis on QWL in RTO enactment, employees will be more likely to experience (a) disappointment, and (b) anger on days when they are required to work on-site, reinforcing perceptions of RTO as employer-friendly.*

5.2 | More Emphasis on QWL in RTO Enactment

When firms place more emphasis on QWL in RTO enactment, we anticipate they will create emotional experiences (both low arousal and high arousal) for employees that are more positive in valence. We again highlight in our theorizing the role of the

firm and how its emphasis on QWL can convert perceptions of RTO.

Contentment is a relaxed, positive feeling where one's needs are fulfilled (Ahn and Shin 2015). Since it arises from the appraisal that a situation is safe, certain, and in need of low effort (Ellsworth and Smith 1988), it drives individuals to enjoy the current moment rather than driving them to explore and make use of new opportunities (Griskevicius et al. 2010). One way that firms can foster a sense of contentment among their employees is to make available window views (e.g., in shared office spaces and breakrooms), as per a survey of 1614 North American employees where more than 50% listed natural light as their most important perk (View 2024). A second amenity that can breed contentment is the availability of fresh coffee, particularly for employees whose routine is to begin their workday with coffee in hand (Stroebeak 2013). Highlighting the importance of the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) and the IT department, an easy-to-use online desk reservation system can also foster contentment (DePass 2024).

Excitement is a high arousal emotion and positive in valence; it involves a positive appraisal of the future (Brooks 2014). That is, the future is perceived as an opportunity full of potential for positive outcomes (Brown and Curhan 2013; Lerner and Keltner 2001). One way that firms may foster feelings of excitement on days when on-site work is required is by supporting or making space available for informal after-hours social gatherings where employees look forward to socializing with co-workers whom they also consider friends (c.f., Arifeen 2020). This is but one of many possible examples of how firms can incorporate the emergent HRM concept of workplace fun, emphasizing “characteristics or features of the work environment of a social, playful, and humorous nature, which have to potential to trigger positive feelings of enjoyment, amusement, and light-hearted pleasure in individuals” (Michel et al. 2019, 99).

Proposition 4. *When firms place more emphasis on QWL in RTO enactment, employees will be more likely to experience (a) contentment, and (b) excitement on days when they are required to work on-site, shifting perceptions to RTO as employee-friendly.*

6 | RTO Maintenance: Sustaining Perceptions of RTO as Employee-Friendly Over Time

Beyond converting employees' perceptions of RTO through communication and enactment, firms must maintain employees' perceptions of RTO as employee-friendly over time. Whereas the examples above are described as mostly one-off daily experiences, we refer to RTO maintenance as an active, ongoing process involving signal frequency and feedback.

Signal frequency refers to the “number of times the same signal is transmitted” (Connelly et al. 2011, 52). Frequent signals are critical since, as demonstrated through decades of research in the organizational development literature, a regression to the mean effect is likely to occur when change is not reinforced over time (Boss et al. 2018). For example, CEOs and COOs might notice a positive initial response when they engage in “office peacocking” – that is, updating the workplace with “fancy decor, stocked kitchens and

comfortable furniture” (Robinson 2024) – to coincide with their RTO decision. Yet such amenities require constant upkeep such as ensuring that vendors re-stock items and that mechanics fix malfunctioning equipment. Firms are more likely to maintain perceptions of RTO as employee-friendly to the extent that a weekly social event remains exciting yet risk inviting perceptions of RTO as employer-friendly to the extent that such activities become monotonous or feel compulsory.

Further, employees can provide feedback in the form of “countersignals” that articulate asymmetries or inconsistencies relative to how previous signals are interpreted or experienced (Gupta et al. 1999), which the firm can use to adjust and improve subsequent signals (Gulati and Higgins 2003). For example, decreased usage of amenities or declining participation in voluntary activities might be interpreted as a countersignal that indicates the over-provision of certain benefits or opportunities, so much so that the CFO steps in to assess whether these provisions yield diminishing returns or harm profits (e.g., Meyer et al. 2001). This also speaks to the importance of bottom-up mechanisms so that employees (including line managers) can voice opinions that influence adjustments to ongoing RTO enactment (Georgiadou et al. 2024).

Consistent with Perry-Smith and Blum (2000), firms can gain a competitive advantage in RTO when they sustain perceptions over time by using feedback (countersignals) to adjust subsequent signals better tailored to employees’ ongoing (and shifting) preferences and needs. As an illustration, Owl Labs (2024) State of Remote Work survey found only 11% of employees indicated that they would not mind losing remote work access. RTO conversion is critical to helping firms expand that number, tapping into groups of employees who would look for a new job elsewhere that provides greater flexibility (41%), expect a pay increase (22%), stay and be less happy (14%), stay but not work as hard (6%), or quit their jobs (6%). Yet RTO maintenance is critical to helping firms retain those gains over time, lest those employees revert to their previous preference or shift into a different category. We conclude:

Proposition 5. *When firms (a) emphasize QWL as part of RTO more frequently, and (b) adjust QWL-oriented RTO based on feedback, they will be more likely to sustain employees’ perceptions of RTO as employee-friendly over time.*

7 | General Discussion

In striving to address how firms can counter employees’ resistance to RTO, we integrated HRM system strength and signaling theory to address how active QWL-focused communication and enactment of RTO can convert employees’ perceptions from RTO as employer-friendly to RTO as employee-friendly. Below we discuss the theoretical contributions our work makes to the work-life flexibility literature, an agenda for future research, and implications for practice.

7.1 | Theoretical Implications

Our work makes three significant contributions to the work-life flexibility literature. First, we alter a dominant paradigm in the

work-life flexibility literature, highlighting RTO policies as an exception to the view that policies restricting (enhancing) employees’ autonomy are typically associated with negative (positive) perceptions. By theorizing the different ways in which RTO policies are communicated and enacted with an emphasis on QWL, we augment Bourdeau et al.’s (2019) work to crystallize how “enclosing” policies that restrict autonomy over where work occurs may be perceived as employee-friendly when they take into consideration employees’ preferences and needs. We move away from adversarial views that firms seek to control where work occurs at employees’ expense (c.f., Edwards 1979; Perlow 1998): just as firms can create “win-win” outcomes for themselves and employees when affording autonomy over where work occurs (Beauregard and Henry 2009), so too can firms create similar win-win outcomes when restricting autonomy over where work occurs and requiring employees on-site. Our theory captures this with the analogy of QWL as a fulcrum: restricting autonomy over where work occurs upsets balance (for the worse) yet enhancing the physical and psychosocial features of the workplace restores balance (for the better), thus quelling employees’ resistance to RTO.

Second, we position firms as far more proactive in dictating where work occurs compared to previous views that position firms as passive, where actions are heavily influenced and shaped by a variety of external factors including normative expectations (e.g., national culture and industry-specific practices) and laws and regulations (Kossek et al. 2023). Indeed, Goodstein (1994, 350) described such action as “strategic responsiveness” (see also, Milliken et al. 1998; Osterman 1995). We not only seized the rapid contemporary shift to on-site work as an opportune time to recognize firms’ proactivity in initiating such change, but also—in the context of work-from-home backlash (Perrigino et al. 2018) and employees’ experiences with hybrid and on-site work (Blom et al. 2025; Gajendran et al. 2024) – developed a framework to address how firms proactively address recoil effects involving employees’ ongoing RTO resistance.

Finally, whereas previous studies focus on the extent to which line managers are crucial to work-life flexibility policy implementation, we highlight the active role of firms in enacting RTO policies. We addressed this from the perspective of upper management (while recognizing the important role of employees across all levels in providing feedback or countersignals), including how RTO is shaped by different business functions. To this point, we identified an important contrast between RTO policies versus other work-life flexibility policies: whereas work-life flexibility policies that enhance autonomy over where work occurs create positive signals (rendering implementation important, albeit not always necessary for yielding positive work attitudes; Allen et al. 2013), RTO policies create a negative signal by reducing autonomy over where work occurs. Thus, beyond QWL-oriented communication, QWL-oriented enactment functions as a critical positive signal to counter the negative signal embedded in the firm’s initial RTO decision and is critical for converting *and* sustaining employees’ perceptions of RTO.

7.2 | Directions for Future Research

Since our work is conceptual, we first encourage future research to operationalize RTO perceptions based on our proposed

continuum that ranges from employer-friendly to employee-friendly. Item generation can be informed by Nishii et al.'s (2008, 545) work addressing employees' HR attributions about why policies exist (e.g., "so that employees will feel valued and respected – to promote employee well-being."). Scale development work can also distinguish subscales as the basis of a 2×2 typology that separates RTO communication (productivity versus QWL-oriented; Propositions 1 and 2) and RTO enactment (less versus more QWL emphasis; Propositions 3 and 4). Since we focused on employees' perceptions, this corresponding scale and 2×2 typology can be expanded into a broader taxonomy encompassing firms' intentions underlying RTO. For example, firms with HRM systems characterized by employer-friendly views of their human capital might benefit when coupling productivity-oriented communication with enactment that places less emphasis on QWL, reinforcing strong signals and aligning this form of RTO across other policies in the HRM system (Propositions 1 and 3). Future research in this area can not only consider (mis)matches between how employees and the firm (e.g., executive team) perceive RTO but also explore whether the executive team is unified or disagrees with each other in their approach to RTO (Peters and Heusinkveld 2010).

Whereas the ideas above for scale development focus on *why* firms do what they do, scale development should also consider *what* firms do—specifically in terms of how they emphasize QWL related to the physical and psychosocial features of the workplace. Beyond surveys that attempt to capture employees' awareness of what (if any) changes to the workplace coincide with RTO, objective measures—such as capital expenditures associated with expanding the firm's physical footprint (e.g., converting unusable space within an existing building; purchasing adjacent land or a secondary location) – can be linked to objective metrics (e.g., organizational turnover; revenue) to determine whether these actions result in a positive (or negative) return on investment (ROI).

Second, while we held RTO policies as constant for our theorizing, future research should consider variations in how our model unfolds based on the number of days required on-site (e.g., two versus 5 days per week). When more days are required on-site, we expect greater resistance from employees and, correspondingly, greater effort required from firms to convert RTO perceptions. Based on previous research, we assumed that RTO will generally be met with negative responses since it restricts employees' autonomy over where work occurs. However, there are various reasons to consider why some employees might desire RTO without the need for firms to "cajole" them to work on-site (Perlow 1998), as in the case of individuals who prefer to segment spatial work and nonwork boundaries or lack personal resources (e.g., a strong Wi-Fi connection) to conduct remote work effectively. It will also be worth considering whether "full" five-day RTO holds advantages compared to "hybrid" RTO, or whether firms reach a point where they optimize RTO in ways that allow them to "give back" some control over where work occurs (i.e., determining five-day RTO is too much).

Third, while evidence suggests a common way to communicate RTO is via an internal memo to employees from one or more executives to the employee population, future research can focus more specifically on the communication content and tactics.

This includes considering the pros and cons associated with the medium used (Byron 2008), such as whether the most effective messaging from a CEO occurs through a company-wide email, an in-person town hall, an interview on television, or a quote in a trade publication. This also includes considering what type of work-life ideologies (i.e., "beliefs about how work and life are related"; Leslie et al. 2019, 72) firms invoke and whether the rhetoric within the messaging is oriented around appeals to logic, emotion, or morality (Brown et al. 2012; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). As a final point regarding communication, we are cognizant that our theorizing emphasized the change aspect associated with RTO: we encourage the field to remain in step with practice—including when firms stop referring to "return to office" and instead describe these as more static, established "on-site requirement" HR policies.

Fourth, the complexity of emotions that employees experience on days where work is required on-site warrants attention. Beyond empirically testing the effects of the four discrete emotions we used for our theorizing—including how information processing results in the experience of discrete emotions and how those emotions are processed (Scherer and Moors 2019) – future research can incorporate other emotions. When firms provide extrinsic and intrinsic benefits, on-site employees might experience gratitude (appreciation towards the firm) or indebtedness (a sense of obligation to repay the firm), which are positive and negative in valence, respectively (Wu et al. 2025). Daily RTO experiences are also ripe for advancing research on *affect spin*, or "variability of going from one affective state to a qualitatively different affective state" (Clark et al. 2018, 3177). Throughout the workday, employees experience emotions that vary in valence and arousal at work (e.g., Perrigino et al. 2024) and during the daily commute (McAlpine and Piszczek 2023). Finally, RTO might also yield *emotional ambivalence*, or "the simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotions" (Fong 2006, 1016). An employee may experience competing emotions when sitting in a conference room with window views (contentment) yet realize no one else is on-site (anger). Unpacking the emotional complexity of RTO experiences will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the connection between specific RTO experiences and the RTO conversion process.

Building on these ideas, future research should explore distal outcomes associated with employees' RTO experiences. On the one hand, we expect RTO will affect many of the same work attitudes and behaviors impacted by other work-life flexibility policies (job satisfaction, commitment, turnover, job performance, and absenteeism; Butts et al. 2013; Kossek et al. 2023). On the other hand, it is possible that the way in which RTO unfolds will affect unique outcomes worthy of exploration—as in the case of, for example, how employees' anger over limited work-life support can prompt unethical pro-family behaviors (Wu and Perrigino 2025).

Finally, we highlight the importance of adding contextual moderators to our framework (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault 2017). Given a correlation between emotions and gender differences (Brebner 2003), gender is an important moderator to incorporate in future research in terms of how the model unfolds across gendered occupations and industries (e.g., how RTO is communicated) and individuals (e.g., RTO perceptions). Cross-cultural

differences also warrant consideration since emotions are experienced differently across cultures (Mesquita and Frijda 1992). We were careful in referring to “firms” rather than “organizations,” as our theorizing most directly applies to (public and private) for-profit organizations that have the resources to enact RTO in the QWL-oriented ways we described above (and assuming that such firms are not affected by economic austerity; Lewis et al. 2017; Sweet et al. 2014). Thus, it is important for future research to consider how similarly our model applies to third sector organizations (e.g., NGOs, research institutions, charities) and firms that are financially strained.

7.3 | CEO Decision-Making and RTO

The signaling effects of work-life flexibility policies that enhance autonomy over where work occurs are well documented (Piszczyk and Berg 2020; Williams et al. 2021), including the finding that the availability of a policy can be more impactful than its actual use (Allen et al. 2013). Available policies signal positive organizational attributes to current employees and afford advantages in recruiting top talent (Casper and Harris 2008; Thompson et al. 2015). Indeed, upon seeing first-mover benefits for early adopters in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many firms sought to copy or imitate these policies (Goodstein 1994). We see similar mimicry with RTO, as per Sweetgreen CEO Jonathan Neman's remark when Amazon announced five-day RTO: “That was the big turning point where, everyone's like: ‘Oh, they're doing it, now we can do it’” (Boyle and Griffis 2024). Yet consistent with our proactive stance, we recommend that *CEOs should devise RTO initiatives that best suit their own business needs, rather than following or imitating other organizations* (Kossek, Hill et al. 2025; Perrigino and Raveendhran 2025).

CEOs must understand the different signals that work-life flexibility policies and RTO policies send. Whereas the first salient cue employees perceive about available work-life flexibility policies is enhanced autonomy (positive signal), the first salient cue employees perceive about RTO is restricted autonomy (negative signal). We articulated this distinction above, emphasizing here that CEOs must recognize that simply adopting RTO because other firms are legitimizing the practice will produce intense headwinds (recoil effects), rather than the tailwinds afforded through traditional work-life flexibility policies (e.g., recruitment advantages). Therefore, we recommend that—regardless of the firm's intentions—*CEOs should include QWL-related messaging when announcing and introducing RTO policies* as an initial effort to convert employees' RTO perceptions and counter the initial negative signal.

75% of employees believe their employer is reintroducing on-site requirements because that is “how it's [work] always been done” (Owl Labs 2024). CEOs not only require better rationale to communicate RTO decisions, but also—to the degree this statistic accurately reflects CEOs' mindsets—can benefit from altering their own philosophies about remote work and RTO. Indeed, many jobs can be performed the same way they were performed prior to the pandemic (i.e., on-site), perhaps even more efficiently than if they were to remain remote. The challenge is that employees' mindsets and expectations have changed, where they perceive that RTO is not a “return to normal” but

the taking away of something they deserve and have become accustomed to as a core condition of their employment (i.e., autonomy over where work occurs) (Smite et al. 2023). Accordingly, *CEOs should engage in deeper exploration to fully appreciate the pros and cons of both remote and on-site work* such as reading evidence-based findings from academic and practitioner articles, consulting with HR, and launching small-scale pilot programs. In doing so, CEOs will gain a deeper appreciation of the nuanced effects of RTO before launching and later regretting or undoing full-scale initiatives due to recoil effects.

RTO is less of an industry-level phenomenon as it is a job-level phenomenon (e.g., Starbucks requiring RTO when baristas are already required on-site; Disney requiring RTO when park employees are already required on-site), highlighting the gap in white-collar access versus blue-collar restrictions in flexibility over where work occurs (e.g., janitorial staff at technology firms). CEOs may leverage RTO to reduce occupational inequalities between jobs with (“haves”) versus without (“have nots”) access to flexible work arrangements (Kossek and Lautsch 2018; Kossek et al. 2024). Since RTO is a major organizational change initiative, CEOs can further entrain other adjustments to when and how work occurs (Granqvist and Gustafsson 2016). This could involve restrictions (stricter scheduling requirements; limiting parental leave policies to legally mandated minimums) or enhancements (more flexible start/end times; more generous vacation policies) to complement or offset, respectively, restrictions over where work occurs. The overarching principles of our framework should apply, but CEOs will need to be mindful of potentially subtle differences in how they communicate and enact such changes (c.f., Perrigino and Raveendhran 2025). Therefore, *CEOs should time other changes involving where, when, and how work occurs with their RTO implementation*.

7.4 | Implications for HR Leaders, Strategies, Policies, and Practices

Continuing the previous section, we consider: once the CEO or executive team makes an RTO decision, how can this be implemented in ways consistent with our theorizing above? To answer this question and inform practice, we begin by considering four real-world examples.

In November 2022, cosmetics company L'Oreal opened a “plush new headquarters” in El Segundo, California, in what was a former aircraft manufacturing facility (Vincent 2022). This “option-laden” office (with photo documentation provided by Gary Coronado of the Los Angeles Times) included a vegetable garden, where employees are welcome to pick and bring home fresh vegetables; drop-in workstations and spaces for employees to use throughout the day for independent or collaborative work activity; a concierge for services including picking up employees' laundry and pets; subsidies for the price of food in on-campus restaurants (operated by chef Wolfgang Puck's company), including a Café California coffee shop that serves breakfast and pastries; a L'Oreal store that sells personal care products at a discounted price; the Cabana Room, where employees gather for coffee and after-hours drinks; the ProLab Academy, where professionals can learn about new beauty products; and brightly colored company-themed art throughout the campus facilities.

In May 2023, Amazon shared photos and a promotional video documenting thousands of employees returning to the office (Amazon 2023). These included positioning welcome ambassadors in the lobby, offering free bananas at the Community Banana Stand, re-opening Amazon Spheres (more than 58,000 square feet of tranquil space as part of Amazon's urban rainforest located in downtown Seattle), and the return of "Amazon dogs" (as the company has more than 10,000 dogs registered to work on-site with their owners or caretakers on campus).

In June 2025, Nasdaq posted a video about how they instilled Fika, a Swedish tradition of taking time in the afternoon to chat with co-workers while eating sweets and drinking coffee or tea (Nasdaq 2025). Beyond using levity to enhance the messaging's appeal (such as introducing the video with a facetious "404: Boredom Not Found" error message), the core idea coincides with research emphasizing the importance of engaging in brief, nonwork activities between tasks or meetings as an ideal way for employees to clear their minds, refocus on work, and boost work engagement later in the day—whether that involves time alone or spent with others (Perrigino et al. 2024). Although this originated in the Vilnius, Lithuania, office, Fika became a common practice across worldwide Nasdaq office locations on Wednesdays at 2:00 pm local time.

In September 2025, clothing manufacturer The Gap welcomed back more than 2000 employees to its San Francisco, California-based headquarters (Pena 2025). The implementation of their five-day RTO policy was timed alongside a worldwide "Back in Denim" viral marketing campaign. Set in a white soundstage where walls were designed to vibrate to the beat of the music, the marketing campaign video featured K-pop group KATSEYE dancing to the song "Milkshake" by singer Kelis and generated more than 20 million views in the first three days of its release. Describing the soundstage for the video as "a piece of art," Calvin Leung explained:

It is a hydraulic system that really brings the space to life and makes the wall move, and all you do is click and hold it a little longer as fast or slow as you want to go – and the idea is to really make it move to the beat to the song and bring some energy.

As part of its RTO launch, The Gap brought the soundstage to company headquarters and allowed employees to see, experience, and use the soundstage. In reference to the name of the song from the campaign, they also provided free milkshakes to all employees.

Collectively, these examples provide tangible evidence as to how firms are emphasizing QWL in terms of both the physical features and psychosocial features of their workplaces. Accordingly, we infer numerous implications from these examples. Specifically:

- From an HR partner standpoint, active communication will be essential with line managers to standardize and promote the enactment of the more "fun" or "nonwork" aspects associated with RTO—such as encouraging participation

in activities like Fika at Nasdaq and the use of Amazon Spheres for moments of tranquility.

- From a work design perspective, RTO can support employee resource groups that are positioned as learning communities (Green 2018) by affording literal hands-on training and skill development (thus supporting another priority of the HR function)—such as the on-site learning activities that occur at L'Oreal's ProLab Academy.
- From an attraction and recruitment standpoint, photos and videos can help prospective employees visualize and "bring to life" on-site work experiences—such as how the references we included for the examples of L'Oreal, Amazon, Nasdaq, and The Gap all provide photo and/or video content. Indeed, this speaks to research on how visual materials such as pamphlets and pictures on company websites can enhance (or hinder) recruitment-related efforts (Avery 2003; Rai and Kothari 2008; Sisodia and Chowdhary 2012)

Finally, we draw attention to a common thread across the examples from L'Oreal, Amazon, Nasdaq, and The Gap—that all four firms' efforts emphasize QWL in terms of both physical features *and* psychosocial features. This leads us to two final considerations.

First, if CEOs can accept that employees' expectations have permanently changed but do not wish to limit their RTO push, they should not only appreciate the importance of an increased emphasis on QWL as a substitute for remote work but also the potential costs that come with it. All four examples above reflect significant investments, both in terms of capital expenditures for purchasing or leasing tens of thousands of square feet of space (physical features) and administrative expenses associated with providing various services (e.g., L'Oreal's concierge service; the sweet treats and coffee offered weekly as part of Nasdaq's Fika) to enhance the psychosocial features of the workplace. Since CEOs are more likely to focus on the bottom line and minimizing such costs (see Duxbury and Haines Jr 1991; Peters and Heusinkveld 2010; Schein 1996), we highlight the importance of HR leaders in nudging and informing CEOs of the tangible and intangible benefits that these investments yield. For example, HR leaders can frame this as a transactional tit-for-tat exchange to particularly resistant CEOs, emphasizing how such investments are recouped via higher retention, lower turnover rates, and enhanced organization reputation (M. M. Arthur 2003). If CEOs fail to budge from their pre-pandemic mindsets and equate these increased costs with "bribing" employees to return to the office, they risk undermining the employer-employee relationship (perpetuating the notion of the employment relationship as adversarial, whether that is their underlying intention or not) and failing to comprehend how RTO encompasses the removal of what employees now see as a deal-breaking condition of employment. Viewed in terms of maintaining equity, *CEOs should consider what they can offer as a fair substitute in exchange for taking away employees' autonomy over where work occurs.*

Second, the CEO-HR partnership is critical in answering this question to determine which among a range of "perks" (e.g., Amazon's free bananas from the Community Banana Stand) to "distractions" (e.g., the hydraulic soundstage at The Gap) is ideal, feasible substitutes for remote work and how they can be tailored

to their employees' preferences. CEOs may not possess the emotional aperture (i.e., "the ability to recognize the composition of diverse emotions in a collective" Sanchez-Burks and Huy 2009, 22) to anticipate or identify which aspects of RTO are likely to best address employees' resistance to RTO. To this point, CEOs should be mindful that individual employees' preferences vary, not only in terms of how they organize their workweeks in terms of days worked on-site versus days working remotely (Biron and Van Veldhoven 2016; Gajendran et al. 2024), but also in terms of their different motivations and differences in how they interpret (the same) RTO communication or experience (the same) RTO enactment. Again, HR—for example, by launching pulse surveys to capture employees' current attitudes—can inform CEO decision making by providing valuable information around which QWL-related aspects are most important. For example, when extrinsic aspects of QWL are the strongest motivator for employees, firms may focus on offering on-site amenities while allowing employees added flexibility to choose which days they attend to fulfill their weekly quota (e.g., if L'Oréal were to maintain operating hours at its on-site Café California five days per week, even though employees can choose which days they work on-site to satisfy the three-day requirement). When intrinsic aspects of QWL are the strongest motivator for employees, firms may prioritize fostering a sense of community by requiring specific days on-site to facilitate relationship building and face-to-face interactions (e.g., if Nasdaq were to count Wednesday as a required on-site workday to maximize Fika participation at 2:00 pm on those afternoons). Thus, *CEOs should leverage the CEO-HR partnership to best customize and tailor RTO to fit employees' needs.*

8 | Conclusion

Moving beyond questions of why firms are rescinding pre-RTO work-life flexibility policies (Perrigino et al. 2018) and whether RTO is the right approach (Kossek, Hill, et al. 2025), we began with the premise that RTO will persist even though firms have yet to solve the recoil effect of widespread employee resistance. We theorized a process of RTO conversion, where firms can communicate and enact RTO in ways that enhance daily on-site experiences and shift perceptions such that RTO does a better job of factoring in employees' preferences. Our hope is that our framework jumpstarts research that enhances understanding of how RTO systematically yields positive outcomes for firms and employees alike.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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