

FROM SPECULATION TO IMPLEMENTATION: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF RETURN-TO-OFFICE RESEARCH AND ITS IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONS

Short Paper

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic determined a massive shift to remote work, challenging traditional workplace norms. However, as restrictions eased, many organizations began mandating a "Return-to-Office" (RTO), requiring employees to resume working from physical workplaces. This reversal frequently prompted employee resistance and talent attrition, highlighting a significant tension between managerial objectives and shifting employee expectations. Despite its widespread organizational impact, research on RTO is limited and fragmented, as the phenomenon is still emerging. This systematic review addresses this critical gap by comprehensively analyzing the emerging RTO organizational trend. We identify three distinct phases—Anticipation & Adaptation (2020-2021), Transition & Contestation (2022-2023), and Evaluation & Inequality (2024-2025)—demonstrating a shift from speculative discussions to critical evaluations of RTO's varied and often unequal impacts. Our findings extend distributed work literature by establishing RTO as an emerging ramification of remote work studies and offer crucial, evidence-based guidance for practitioners to develop equitable and effective RTO strategies, emphasizing the need for nuanced, context-specific approaches.

Keywords: Return-to-Office, Remote Work, Distributed Work Models, Organizations, Digital Innovation.

1. Purpose and Background

Technological advancements and contextual changes frequently promote the emergence of innovative ways of working (Bolici et al., 2025). A notable example of this dynamic is the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered the largest remote work experiment in history. This global disruption challenged long-standing assumptions about where, when, and how work should be conducted, leading to an unprecedented rise of interest in distributed work arrangements.

In the early stages of the pandemic, research indicated that distributed work might become a lasting feature of organizational life, with many studies showing that employees favored continuing remote work arrangements (Marzban et al., 2021; Thulin et al., 2023). However, as pandemic restrictions were lifted, a growing number of organizations began mandating a return to physical workplaces, partially defying widespread expectations about the future of work (Gibson et al., 2023). High-profile companies such as Apple, Microsoft, and SpaceX exemplified this shift by implementing partial or full return-to-office policies, reflecting a broader organizational trend (Bogosian & Byrd-poller, 2023).

The widespread implementation of these practices has led to the emergence of the term "Return-to-Office" (RTO), signaling a notable reversal in the trajectory of remote work adoption (Mohapatra & Duggal, 2023). RTO policies have frequently triggered employee resistance, talent attrition, and public criticism, underscoring growing tensions between managerial objectives and employee preferences (Fan & Moen, 2025; Gintova, 2024a; Pandita et al., 2024). As a result, organizations face the complex task of designing flexible work arrangements that reconcile operational

demands with shifting employee expectations, while balancing the perceived benefits of distributed work with RTO mandates.

Despite its prominence in current discourse, RTO remains an emerging phenomenon, with research and organizational experiences still limited and fragmented. This gap motivates the present study, which aims to provide a comprehensive review of existing literature on RTO. Specifically, the review addresses two guiding research questions: (1) How has the concept of RTO evolved and gained prominence within the discourse on distributed work models? and (2) What organizationally relevant dimensions are emphasized in the shift from distributed work to physical office-based arrangements?

Our analysis identifies three distinct phases in the evolution of RTO research: Anticipation & Adaptation (2020-2021), Transition & Contestation (2022-2023), and Evaluation & Inequality (2024-2025). We found that over time, scholarly discourse has shifted from treating the return to physical workplaces as an inevitable outcome to critically questioning its necessity and examining its varied impacts across different demographic groups. Recent studies increasingly emphasize that effective RTO strategies require flexible, context-specific approaches rather than uniform mandates, with particular attention to the risk of exacerbating inequalities, especially among marginalized employee populations.

2. Methods

We implemented a systematic literature review following PRISMA guidelines to ensure high rigor and replicability. The literature search was conducted in April 2025 using Scopus as our database platform. Our search query targeted all works including within their title, abstract or keywords the string "return to office" or "returning to office" or "return to the office" or "back to office" OR "back to the office".

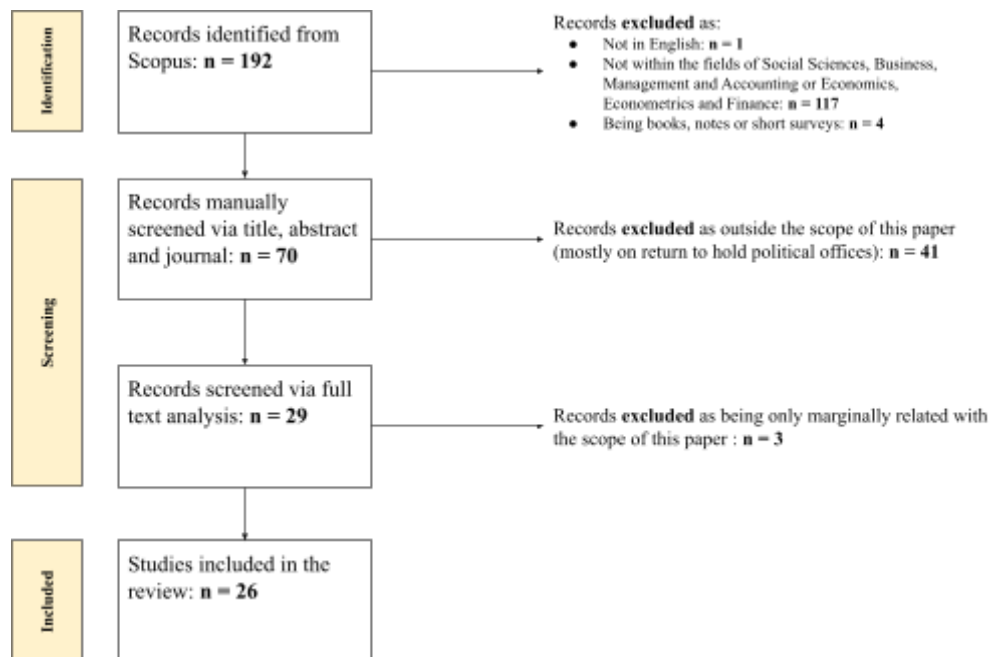


Figure 1. PRISMA protocol implementation.

The identification, selection and inclusion process is reported in Figure 1. Our final analysis incorporated 26 papers. The analysis revealed three distinct chronological phases in RTO research evolution:

- Phase 1: Anticipation & Adaptation (2020-2021) – 3 papers examining early remote work experiences while anticipating eventual returns, characterized by speculation about

post-pandemic work arrangements and documentation of both benefits and challenges of remote work.

- Phase 2: Transition & Contestation (2022-2023) – 9 papers analyzing early implementation experiences and emerging impacts, marked by competing framings of RTO and increasing critical examination of organizational rationales.
- Phase 3: Evaluation & Inequality (2024-2025) – 14 papers assessing implemented RTO policies with increasing focus on differential impacts across demographic groups.

3. Main Findings

This section outlines the three phases that characterize the evolution of the RTO concept: Anticipation & Adaptation, Transition & Contestation, and Evaluation & Inequality. Understanding these phases offers essential context for interpreting the current state of RTO research and organizational practice.

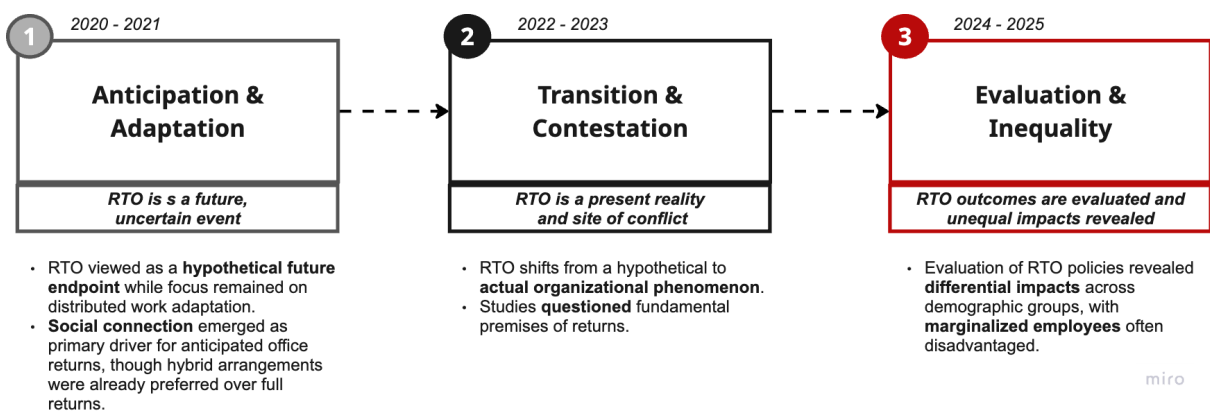


Figure 2. Summary of the three Phases of RTO evolution.

3.1 Phase 1 - Anticipation & Adaptation (2020-2021)

During the initial stages of the pandemic, scholarly attention primarily focused on the immediate crisis response and the rapid, forced adaptation to widespread remote work. Within this context, the concept of RTO remained largely an abstract endpoint rather than an imminent concern. Early research captured the raw experience of transitioning to work-from-home (WFH) arrangements, documenting the blurring of work-home boundaries and the coping strategies individuals employed to manage this shift (Lebert, 2020). RTO was often framed through the lens of uncertainty, with researchers speculating on how the intense WFH experience might reshape future work practices, even in anticipation of a potential return to the office (Lebert, 2020).

Studies from this period identified key drivers for a potential return to physical workplaces. Although self-reported productivity under remote conditions remained high, the desire for social interaction and face-to-face engagement emerged as primary motivators for resuming office work (Marzban et al., 2021). At the same time, researchers also documented the perceived benefits of remote work—such as increased flexibility, autonomy, and the elimination of commuting—which laid the groundwork for future tensions in post-pandemic work models (Lebert, 2020; Marzban et al., 2021),

By 2021, scholarly attention began shifting toward more concrete considerations regarding RTO. Marzban et al. (Marzban et al., 2021) reported that while 97% of Australian knowledge workers had adapted rapidly to remote work, the majority anticipated a hybrid model moving forward. Specifically, 69% expressed a preference for working from home two to three days per week in the post-pandemic period. Some studies also began addressing the practical preparations needed for RTO. For example, (Gaur et al., 2021) proposed training frameworks that included both telecommuting skills and

“back-to-office conduct,” framing RTO as a planned transition rather than a return to pre-pandemic norms. They emphasized that “the transformation will be evident even after returning to the workplace,” thus highlighting the enduring impact of the pandemic on organizational practices

3.2 Phase 2: Transition & Contestation (2022-2023)

In the immediate post-pandemic period, Return-to-Office (RTO) shifted from a hypothetical future scenario to a tangible and often contested organizational reality. Research during this phase moved beyond the relatively straightforward anticipatory framing of the earlier period, presenting multiple, and at times conflicting, interpretations of RTO. A key development in this stage was the emergence of studies that positioned RTO not as a peripheral aspect of remote work discourse but as a primary focus of scholarly inquiry. Among nine studies reviewed, three explicitly centered on RTO: a case study of RTO planning in an Indian IT firm (Mohapatra & Duggal, 2023), a critical examination of return mandates (Gibson et al., 2023), and an analysis of RTO decisions on firm performance (Bogosian & Byrd-poller, 2023).

Gibson et al. (2023) challenged the foundational assumption that employees should be required to return to the office, framing RTO as a conscious organizational decision that demands evidence-based justification rather than being treated as an inevitable outcome. This perspective aligns with (Pass & Ridgway, 2022, p. 264) cautionary view: “Rather than hoping for a 'return to normal', there is a fear that the 'old normal' will return, and perhaps that is the worst thing that organizations can do. By defaulting to prior working practices, the hard-won trust will have reneged.” Such arguments portray RTO as potentially regressive, undermining progress achieved during the remote work period.

In contrast, Mohapatra & Duggal (Mohapatra & Duggal, 2023) framed RTO as a necessary but complex transition, emphasizing the need for deliberate organizational strategy: “As companies plan a strategy to bring employees back to physical workspaces after working from the comfort of their homes, the transition is being referred to as the Return to Office (RTO) phase. Organizations need to take transformative action and smooth the execution in order that the situation is handled properly and there is no value leakage.” This operational framing underscores managerial challenges, focusing on effective execution rather than questioning the desirability of RTO itself.

Bogosian & Byrd-poller (Bogosian & Byrd-poller, 2023) further extended the discussion by characterizing poorly executed RTO mandates as potentially retraumatizing events. They warned that leadership decisions in the post-COVID period could inadvertently cause further organizational harm, highlighting the psychological and emotional consequences of RTO beyond logistical or operational considerations.

While these studies examined RTO from critical and strategic angles, others focused on the underlying motivations behind partial returns. Thulin et al. (Thulin et al., 2023), though primarily concerned with telework adaptations, found that a key reason employees desired partial office returns was the lack of informal interactions and peer support, suggesting that social connection remains a persistent driver of workplace attendance.

The legal dimensions of RTO also began to surface more explicitly in this phase. Nath and Lockwood (Nath & Lockwood, 2022) for example, explored the implications of UK equality law for workplace returns. They highlighted potential discrimination risks affecting women with caregiving responsibilities, older workers, and individuals with disabilities—issues largely overlooked in earlier RTO debates. This framing positioned RTO not only as a managerial or cultural issue, but also as a legal compliance challenge, requiring organizations to account for differential impacts across protected characteristics.

Psychological dimensions also featured prominently in this phase. Kismono et al. (Kismono et al., 2023) examined how psychological acceptance shaped remote work experiences and attitudes toward returning to the office. While acceptance of negative emotions associated with WFH did not directly impact life satisfaction or job stress, it emerged as a psychological resource that contributed to

improved work-life balance. Similarly, Zdelar & MacMahon (Zdelar & MacMahon, 2023) found that remote work fostered new work identities among Millennials, which complicated their reintegration into office settings. As they noted, “people had changed, and to unchange them back would require ‘unfreezing’ their new state” (p. 5). Complementing this perspective, Wolor et al. (Wolor et al., 2022) investigated post-pandemic job performance, identifying compassion, communication, engagement, and satisfaction as critical variables influencing employee effectiveness during RTO transitions.

Altogether, this body of research highlights the contested, multi-dimensional nature of RTO during the transition phase. Far from being a simple reversion to pre-pandemic norms, RTO emerged as a complex site of negotiation involving operational, psychological, legal, and relational dimensions—each requiring deliberate, context-sensitive responses from organizations.

3.3 Phase 3: Evaluation & Inequality (2024-2025)

By 2024–2025, the research focus shifted from merely anticipating or contesting RTO policies to critically evaluating the implementation of these practices and their varying impacts across workforce segments. Of the fourteen studies reviewed in Phase 3, seven specifically focused on RTO phenomena. Increasingly, researchers began to challenge the fundamental assumptions underlying RTO mandates while documenting substantial differences in how workplace returns were experienced by various demographic groups.

During this period, perspectives on RTO policies underwent significant evolution. Researchers questioned the rationale provided by organizations for enforcing office returns. Gajendran et al. (Gajendran et al., 2024) demonstrated that remote work offered modest benefits with minimal drawbacks, even for employees who spent significant time working away from the office. These findings directly challenged organizational concerns underlying RTO mandates. Similarly, Williamson et al. (2024) argued that rigid mandates requiring employees to return to the office or limiting remote work opportunities were not only unnecessary but often led to negative outcomes for workforce well-being and productivity. Pandita et al. (Pandita et al., 2024) described RTO as “rewinding back into the old normal,” emphasizing that such mandates caused employees increased stress as well as issues such as work-family conflicts, emotional exhaustion, and presenteeism.

A relevant theme across studies during this phase was the role of power dynamics in how RTO policies were implemented and experienced by employees. Gintova’s (Gintova, 2024b, 2024a) analysis of Canadian public servants revealed that they questioned whether transitioning to mandatory hybrid work meant going back to pre-pandemic practices, specifically to have people in the office to monitor their productivity and performance, emphasizing communication issues, equity impacts, and operational challenges. Lewis et al. (2024) showed that supervisory discretion in telework approvals disproportionately disadvantaged marginalized groups, including black, Latino, disabled, and younger employees. Fan and Moen (2025) argued that remote work had reduced psychological job demands for many in these groups – benefits that may be lost with RTO, given traditional office norms favoring white male workers. Lastly, Román-Calderón & Gentilin (Román-Calderón & Gentilin, 2025) challenged the idea that co-location builds trust, finding that mutual cognitive trust may be stronger in virtual settings.

Numerous studies documented how RTO policies disproportionately impacted employees from historically disadvantaged groups. While remote work was generally associated with consistent productivity and work-life balance gains (Lapshun & Madero Gómez, 2024), Araki (2025) found that, despite fewer opportunities, non-regular female workers in Japan experienced greater psychological benefits from telework between 2020 and 2023. Coherently, Rangaswamy et al. (Rangaswamy et al., 2024) found that women perceived remote work as significantly more effective than men, pointing to gendered preferences in RTO. Similarly, Fan & Moen (Fan & Moen, 2025) found that women of color experienced the greatest loss of autonomy when returning to offices. Family caregivers experienced limited benefits from remote work regardless of location, suggesting a need for broader societal

changes beyond work location flexibility. These findings suggest that organizations need to reconsider the broad impacts of their policies to better address systemic inequities.

Research has explored how to facilitate RTO and seize its opportunities. Lathabhavan & Mehendale (Lathabhavan & Mehendale, 2025) found that the transition from WFH to hybrid models increased psychological distress and reduced life and job satisfaction, but mindfulness mitigated these effects, providing a potential intervention strategy. Andrews (2024) emphasized the need for new office designs as “homey studios” or collaboration hubs. Hensher et al. (Hensher et al., 2024) observed that ideal WFH should stabilize at 1–2 days per week by 2022, warning organizations pushing for 4-5 days of office attendance were risking damage to organizational relationships.

4. Contribution

This paper makes three contributions. First, we extend distributed work literature by establishing RTO as an emerging ramification of remote work studies. This supports analytical and conceptual continuity in examining a phenomenon with substantial organizational impact, creating a foundation for future research. Second, our chronological analysis tracks RTO's evolution through three distinct phases – from Anticipation & Adaptation (2020-2021), through Transition & Contestation (2022-2023), to Evaluation & Inequality assessments (2024-2025). This developmental trajectory reveals how research focus has matured as the phenomenon itself has evolved. Third, by systematizing findings across these phases, we offer practitioners evidence-based insights for managing workplace transitions, highlighting how differential impacts across groups must be considered to develop equitable and effective RTO strategies.

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