

HYBRID WORKS

The Case for Undiminished Hybrid Work at the University of Toronto

Findings from a Study of Hybrid Work, Equity, and Working Conditions Among USW Local 1998 Staff

Prepared for: USW Local 1998
Prepared by: Adam Zendel
June 2026



Executive Summary

In October 2025, the newly appointed President of the University of Toronto Melanie Woodin announced a Return-to-Campus (RTC) mandate requiring staff attendance across the three campuses. The stated rationale emphasized collaboration, workplace culture, campus vibrancy, service quality, and the institutional value of visible staff presence. In practice, the mandate represents a major change to the working arrangements of staff whose work since the COVID-19 pandemic has been organized around hybrid and remote working models.

This report presents findings from a mixed-methods study of affected USW Local 1998 staff-appointed members conducted during Winter and Spring of 2026. The study combines more than 2,800 survey responses with qualitative data from six focus groups. It examines how staff experience hybrid work, how return-to-campus requirements affect different groups of workers, and tests the President's assumptions underlying the mandate.

The results show that hybrid work is not simply a preference or convenience. For many staff, it has become an essential part of how they perform their jobs effectively, how stakeholders interact with the university, and how staff manage disability and caregiving responsibilities. The study demonstrates that the costs of the return-to-campus mandate are not evenly distributed.

Staff with disability, racialized staff, caregivers, women, and non-binary staff are going to be disproportionately harmed. Prefiguring any changes to working arrangements, the study identifies that women and BIPOC workers are already clustered in lower pay bands, meaning a larger share of their income will be spent covering the personal costs related to the mandate, such as commuting, or extended child care. Every equity-seeking group in the study reported significant benefits from hybrid and remote work. Remote and hybrid flexibility supports accessibility, reduces commuting, expands caregiving, expands psychological safety and workplace inclusion, and reduces time poverty. Removing or reducing that flexibility therefore does not create a neutral change in working conditions. It withdraws a set of supports that many equity-seeking staff rely on to work effectively and participate in the university on more equal terms.

When working remotely, staff with disabilities, women and non-binary, and BIPOC staff report levels of effectiveness and comfort indistinguishable to the general population. However, on campus, these same groups report feeling statistically significantly less effective and less comfortable. Put simply, hybrid work achieves parity in these measures for equity-deserving groups.

The one-size-fits-all mandate is poorly aligned with the realities of staff work. Ninety-two percent of respondents reported that their duties can be performed remotely. Staff reported that remote work improves focus, productivity, and collaboration for many roles. In contradistinction, many employees described their open offices as a cacophonous room filled with overlapping calls; few if any discussed their workspace as a site of meaningful in-person collaboration.

The mandate therefore risks producing the opposite of its stated goals. Instead of improving collaboration, it may concentrate workers in crowded spaces where they compete for quiet space and are distracted by the din. Instead of strengthening culture, the unilateral, non-negotiated and seemingly arbitrary implementation will reduce vertical trust. Instead of improving service, it risks reducing flexibility and threatening operational continuity. Instead of protecting institutional reputation, it may create retention and recruitment risks among skilled employees who can find flexible work elsewhere. Instead of being a keystone employer with a robust plan to improve workplace equity, it risks creating an equity crisis by driving out its most vulnerable equity-deserving workers.

The report recommends ending the return to campus (RTC) mandate and as a starting point, beginning with the already negotiated, role-based framework for remote work. Any future framework should be grounded in operational needs, employee rights and accessibility. A successful framework should have measurable outcomes. Flexibility has become part of the university's total employment offer, removing it without compensation, consultation, or evidence-based justification creates significant costs for workers and for the institution.

Executive Summary	3
Summary of Major Findings	6
Introduction: The Return-to-Campus Mandate	7
Study Design and Methodology	10
Survey Design.....	11
Respondent Profile and Workforce Context.....	13
Finding One: Pre-Existing Inequities Structure the Impact of the Mandate	15
Finding Two: Remote Work is the Rule, not the Exception	19
Donated Time.....	20
Finding Three: The Mandate Cannot Restore the Old Campus Culture.....	23
Finding Four: Impacts on Caregivers	26
Sick Days.....	26
Impacts to Racialized Care Givers	28
Finding Five: Impacts on Staff with Disability	30
Finding Six: Hybrid Work Improves Well-Being, Productivity, and Collaboration	35
Benefits for Staff with Disability	38
Benefits for BIPOC Staff.....	38
Benefits for Women and Non-binary Staff	39
Drawbacks of Remote Work	40
Finding Seven: The University's Physical Infrastructure Is Not Ready.....	43
Finding Eight: Retention and Recruitment Risks	47
Retaining Caregivers.....	49
Retaining Equity Deserving Groups.....	50
Finding Nine: Parity through Universal Access	53
Conclusion	56

Summary of Major Findings

Theme	Core finding	Policy implication
Remote compatibility	92% of respondents reported that their duties can be carried out remotely.	Work location should be determined by role, operational need, and service outcomes, not blanket attendance rules.
Equity	Women, BIPOC staff, non-binary staff, disabled staff, and caregivers report distinct harms from reduced flexibility.	Hybrid work should be treated as an equity and accessibility practice.
Productivity	More than 72% reported increased productivity as a benefit of remote work; only 3% identified decreased productivity as a drawback.	Performance should be measured through outputs and service quality rather than visibility.
Collaboration	Improved collaboration and communication were reported more often than reduced collaboration or communication issues.	Collaboration problems should be solved through intentional management practices, not default physical presence.
Infrastructure	More than one-third reported an insufficient availability of desks on campus; over 75% anticipated crowding if more staff returned.	The university lacks the physical workspace capacity to implement the return to campus mandate without operational costs.
Retention	60% agreed or strongly agreed they would seek another position if required to work fully on campus.	The mandate creates serious recruitment and retention risk.

Introduction: The Return-to-Campus Mandate

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the organization of work at the University of Toronto. Like many large institutions, the university rapidly shifted administrative functions into remote formats. Staff adapted with remarkable speed. Meetings moved online, paper-based processes were digitized, and services that had traditionally been delivered from offices and service counters were redesigned for virtual access. Employees established new communication practices, learned unfamiliar technologies, and reorganized workflows to maintain continuity during an extraordinary period of disruption. Despite the sudden loss of routine access to campus, the university continued to operate, students and faculty continued to receive services, and staff continued to carry out their duties.

These arrangements developed beyond their original scope as an emergency response. Staff and departments created durable systems for coordinating work across locations, managing documents, scheduling appointments, supporting students, and collaborating with colleagues and external partners. Virtual meetings became the norm in everyday operations. Hybrid work helped many positions and services become more accessible to people who could not easily attend campus in person. Managers and employees developed new expectations around availability, communication, and performance. Staff demonstrated that a range of duties could be performed without being physically present on campus every day.

For many employees the pandemic did not represent a temporary interruption followed by a simple return to an unchanged workplace. It marked the beginning of a different model of work. Nearly half of the current workforce was hired during or after the lockdown period, meaning that hybrid work has always been a condition of their employment. These employees were recruited, trained, and evaluated within systems that already incorporated remote work arrangements; in many cases remote work far preceded even lockdowns. Even among longer-serving staff, years of hybrid work have shaped household decisions, caregiving arrangements, commuting patterns, housing choices, and expectations about how work should be organized.

The workplace itself has also changed. Many meetings that once required staff to walk across campus now remain virtual. Teams are increasingly distributed across campuses and locations, and interactions with external partners frequently take place online. Requiring employees to return to campus does not recreate the pre-pandemic workplace.

Instead, staff may commute to campus only to spend much of the day participating in the same virtual meetings and digital workflows they performed remotely. Hybrid work should consequently be understood not as a temporary concession or an unfinished return to “normal,” but as an established organizational system that has become integrated into how the university delivers services, coordinates labour, and sustains its operations.

It is against this backdrop where hybrid work had become embedded in the university’s operations, that the institution initiated a move towards a more restrictive model of campus attendance. In October 2025, University of Toronto President Melanie Woodin announced a mandate intended to ensure a “critical mass” of staff were physically present across the university’s three campuses. The mandate was quickly implemented in early 2026 when divisions started reducing remote flexibility and increasing expectations for in-person attendance. Although individual departments and units retained some discretion over implementation, most began requiring staff to work on campus four or five days per week. The mandate was introduced unilaterally, outside the collective bargaining process and without meaningful consultation with affected staff or their union. The initial impact of the return has already disrupted systems, routines, and expectations that had developed over several years.

A rationale for increased campus attendance can be tested through six propositions implied by the mandate: that physical presence improves productivity; spontaneous “collisions” generate collaboration and innovation; visible staff create campus vibrancy; in-person service is inherently superior; workplace culture depends on face-to-face interaction; and institutional prestige requires a visibly present workforce. These propositions depend on several assumptions: that staff work is best performed on campus; that physical proximity produces meaningful interaction; and that the campus environment provides the space, technology, privacy, accessibility, and organizational support required for effective work.

The goal of this study is to test these assumptions against the experiences of staff. The evidence presented in this report suggests that the contemporary campus workplace often does not resemble the collaborative environment imagined in the university’s mandate and, in many cases, does not provide conditions that are as effective, equitable, or sustainable as previous hybrid arrangements.

This report does not suggest that campus-based work has no value or that all staff should work remotely. The University of Toronto is a physical institution, and aspects of teaching, research, student support, facilities, public programming, and community life depend on meaningful in-person interaction. Some roles and duties must be performed

on campus, while others benefit from staff gathering for particular services, meetings, events, or collaborative activities. And others still can be best performed remotely. The issue, therefore, is not whether the campus matters. It is whether a broad Return-to-Campus mandate, applied across diverse positions and operational contexts, is the most effective, equitable, and sustainable way to organize the work of staff whose roles have already demonstrated substantial remote compatibility and efficiency.

The consistency of the survey results, focus group testimony, and open-ended responses provides strong evidence that the RTC mandate is creating significant operational, equity, and retention risks. The evidence in the report points toward needing a more flexible, role-based approach. Rather than treating physical attendance as an end in itself, workplace arrangements should reflect the actual duties of each position, the needs of the people being served, and the conditions under which staff can perform their work most effectively. For some equity-deserving employees, including staff with disabilities, BIPOC staff, and non-binary employees, remote work is not merely more convenient; it can provide the accessible, psychologically safer, and supportive conditions in which they are best able to participate and perform. Preserving remote options where they remove measurable barriers is therefore necessary to achieving more equitable workplace outcomes. Such an approach would maintain purposeful on-campus work where physical presence contributes to service, collaboration, or institutional life, while protecting hybrid and remote arrangements where they might improve concentration, accessibility, productivity, and service continuity. The goal should not be to choose between campus and remote work as competing absolutes, but to build a workplace model that uses each deliberately and where it adds the greatest value, supports the needs and or preferences of the employee without diminishing the quality of the work to be done.

Study Design and Methodology

The Return-to-Campus mandate is expected to have particularly significant consequences for staff represented by United Steelworkers Local 1998 (USW Local 1998). The union represents staff working across all three University of Toronto campuses, as well as University of St. Michael's College, Victoria University, and The University of Toronto Schools. In preparation for collective bargaining, USW Local 1998 had already commissioned a study of members' workloads and working conditions, scheduled to take place in fall 2025. Because the Return-to-Campus announcement was made during this research period, changes to hybrid work quickly became a central concern raised by members for this round of bargaining.

Given the prominence of these concerns, the union commissioned a second, dedicated study to examine the consequences of the mandate in greater depth. The study was designed to assess how the University of Toronto's Return-to-Campus policy affects the working conditions, productivity, well-being, accessibility, and retention of USW Local 1998 members. The study also seeks to determine whether these effects are distributed equally across different demographic groups, particularly for staff with disabilities, caregivers, women, BIPOC staff, and non-binary employees.

The study was designed to test the employer propositions about the benefits of a return to campus:

1. Does increased on-campus presence improve staff productivity, accountability, and work performance?
2. Does working on campus produce stronger collaboration, communication, and innovation than remote or hybrid work?
3. Does greater staff presence meaningfully contribute to campus vibrancy and engagement?
4. Does in-person work improve the quality, accessibility, and reliability of services provided to students, faculty, and other stakeholders?
5. Is physical proximity necessary to build a strong workplace culture, or can trust, communication, and community be sustained through hybrid work?
6. Does increased staff presence on campus contribute to the university's institutional reputation and public standing?

Employer Proposition and Research Questions Tested by the Study

Employer claim	Question examined in this report
Visibility equals productivity	Do staff report better productivity on campus, or do remote arrangements support focus and output?
'Collisions' lead to collaboration	Are staff actually collaborating more in person, or commuting to take virtual meetings from crowded offices?
Physical presence creates vibrancy	Does staff presence in cubicles and back offices generate meaningful campus life?
In-person service is superior	Do students, faculty, and external partners require in-person service, or have virtual services become standard?
Culture requires face-to-face work	Does mandated attendance build trust and culture, or does it damage morale and professional autonomy?
Prestige requires commuting	Is institutional excellence connected to visible staff attendance, or to work quality, expertise, and service outcomes?

Survey Design

A novel survey was designed that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine staff experiences at a few important moments: how work was organized before the pandemic; how work shifted online during lockdown; how work returned to campus leading to their current working conditions, including those affected by the RTC.

The survey included Likert-scale questions, matrix questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended prompts. The survey contained a robust demographics questionnaire. These instruments allowed the measurement of workplace experiences, the reasons

staff gave for those experiences and the different experience of a diverse staff body. The survey was supplemented by six open-ended focus groups, each involving four to six members. One focus group was reserved for staff whose work is entirely on campus.

The study yielded more than 2,800 responses, representing an approximate response rate of 40%. This is a substantial participation rate for an internal workplace survey for this size of the workplace, and therefore provides a robust statistical basis for drawing conclusions. The qualitative material also gives depth to the numerical findings by documenting how policy changes are experienced by workers in day-to-day practice.

A range of statistical techniques was used to identify patterns in the survey data and determine whether different groups of staff experienced work in meaningfully different ways. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare average outcomes across groups, such as whether reported productivity, comfort, accessibility, or pay-band placement differed by race, gender, disability status, caregiving responsibilities, or other characteristics. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) extended these comparisons by allowing other relevant factors to be held statistically constant, producing adjusted group estimates known as estimated marginal means. Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used where several related outcomes needed to be examined together. These methods also allowed the study to test interaction effects — for example, whether the experience associated with gender differed depending on race or disability status. Where an overall difference was identified, post hoc comparisons were used to determine which specific groups differed from one another.

Linear regression was used to assess the relationship between workplace characteristics and employee outcomes while accounting for multiple factors at the same time. This helped distinguish, for example, whether access to remote work was associated with greater effectiveness, well-being, or retention intentions after considering other demographic and employment characteristics. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to identify underlying themes within groups of related survey questions, reducing numerous individual items into broader dimensions such as well-being and productivity, virtual collaboration, and equity and structural support. Statistical significance tests, confidence intervals, effect sizes, and adjusted comparisons were considered together to assess both the reliability and practical importance of the findings. Collectively, these techniques allowed the research to move beyond reporting overall averages and demonstrate how workplace policies may be experienced differently across groups.

Respondent Profile and Workforce Context

Gender	Women	69%
	Men	24%
	Non-binary staff	1%
Race	White staff	46%
	BIPOC staff	54%
Disability Status	Staff living with a disability	23%
Care giving	Staff with caregiving responsibilities	51%
Remote Work Accommodations	Related to disability	< 1%
	Related to family care	< 0.25%
Remote Work	Duties can be carried out remotely	92%
Hiring Date	Hired before March 2020	52%
	Hired during lockdown	15%
	Hired after May 2022	33%
Pay Band	Pay band 10 and below	32%
	Pay band 11 and 12	30%
	Pay band 13 and above	38%

Two contextual points are particularly important. First, 92% of respondents reported that their duties can be performed remotely. This does not mean that every task should always be remote, but it does indicate that the overwhelming majority of work is

compatible with some level of remote performance. Second, 48% of respondents were hired during or after the lockdown period. For half the workforce, remote and hybrid work were not emergency measures at the margins of their employment. They were part of the employment reality into which they were recruited.

The data also show that workplace flexibility is rarely treated formally as an accommodation. Less than one percent of respondents reported that their remote or alternate arrangement was granted for accessibility needs even though 23% identified as living with a disability. Less than a quarter of a percent of respondents have remote work provisions for family care despite more than half population reporting caregiving responsibilities. This gap is central to the report's equity analysis: many staff rely on hybrid work to manage disability and caregiving needs, but very few have these needs formally recognized through accommodation processes.

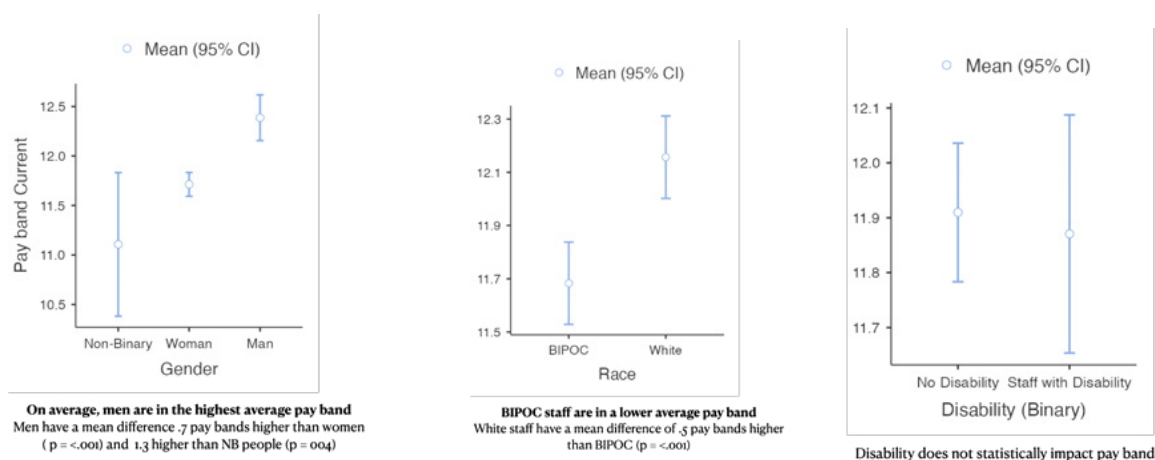
Finding One: Pre-Existing Inequities

Structure the Impact of the Mandate

The RTC mandate is being implemented across a workforce already structured by measurable inequities. These inequities are visible in pay-band distribution by gender and race. Commute costs, caregiving costs, housing costs, and job mobility are all shaped by income and social position; a uniform attendance rule will not have uniform impacts.

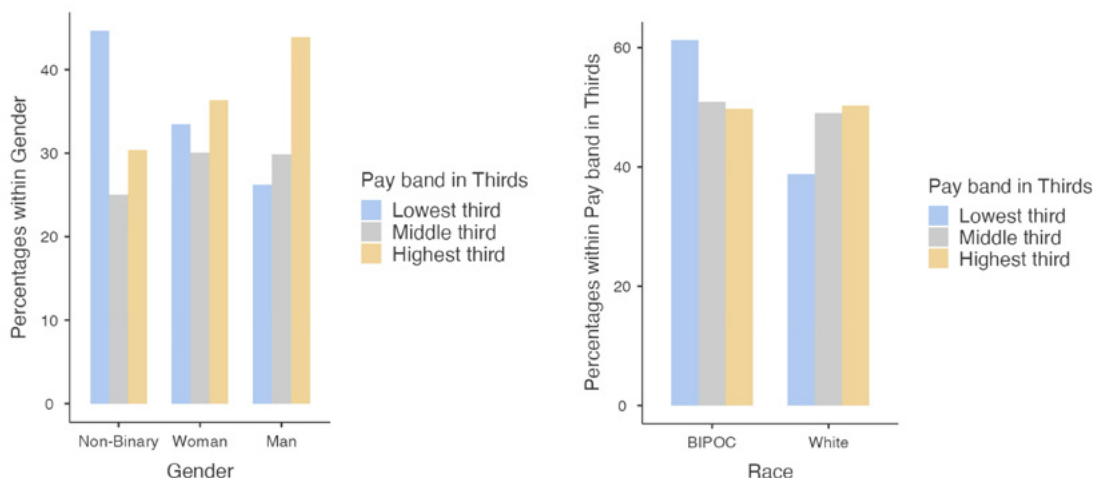
USW Local 1998 staff are organized within a formal pay-band structure. Although the full system spans a relatively wide range of pay bands, the workforce is concentrated within a much narrower segment. More than 70% of respondents are located between pay bands 9 and 15. Modest differences in average pay-band placement between demographic groups represent meaningful and persistent differences in access to higher-paid classifications, advancement opportunities, and long-term earnings.

To determine whether staff were distributed equitably across the pay-band structure, the study used a series of one-way ANOVA tests to assess whether average pay-band placement differs significantly across gender, racial, and disability groups. The results show that men were located in higher average pay bands than women and non-binary staff. Men had an average pay band of 12.4, compared with 11.7 for women and 11.1 for non-binary staff. White staff averaged pay band 12.2, while BIPOC staff averaged 11.7. These differences were statistically significant. Disability status was not a statistically significant driver of pay inequity.

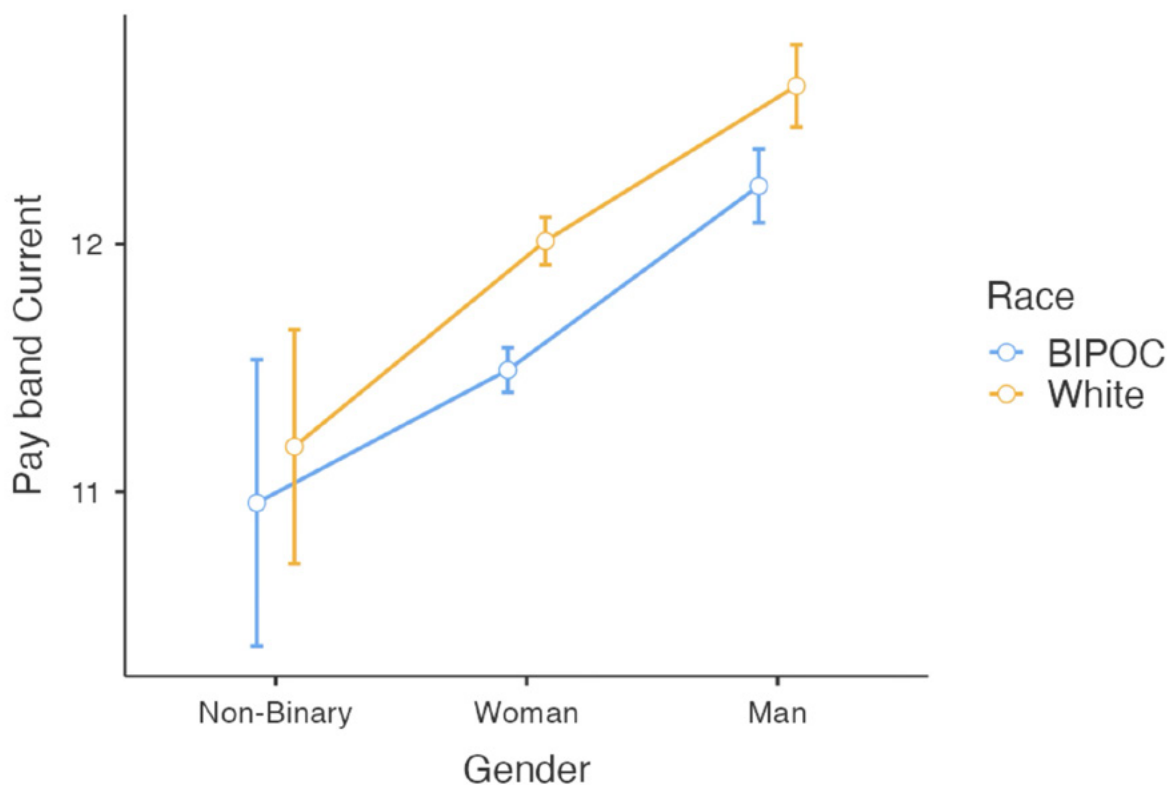


To better visualize how demographic groups are distributed across the pay structure, the pay bands were divided into three approximately equal categories: a lower third, a middle

third, and an upper third. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond differences in average pay-band placement and examine who is concentrated at the lowest and highest levels of the classification system. The results show a clear and statistically significant pattern of stratification. BIPOC and non-binary staff were overrepresented in the lowest third of the pay bands and underrepresented in the highest third, while White staff and men were more heavily represented among the highest-paid classifications.



Linear regression can reveal the combined relationship between race, gender, and pay-band placement. The overall model was statistically significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the demographic factors included in the model collectively explained meaningful differences in pay-band placement. The estimated marginal means reveal a racialized and gendered ordering: BIPOC non-binary staff had the lowest estimated pay-band mean at 11.0, followed by White non-binary staff at 11.2, BIPOC women at 11.5, White women at 12.0, BIPOC men at 12.2, and White men at 12.6. Bonferroni-adjusted comparisons confirmed several significant differences, including lower estimated pay-band placement for BIPOC women compared with BIPOC men, as well as lower placement for White women compared with White men. The resulting estimated marginal means plot illustrates this hierarchy of compensation.



Pay band differences matter because many of the costs associated with returning to campus are financial and are borne directly by employees without additional compensation. More frequent attendance can increase spending on transit fares, gasoline, parking, food costs and meals purchased on campus, work clothing and laundering, childcare, eldercare, and other forms of paid support that become necessary when staff spend more time away from home. Commuting also carries a substantial time cost. Hours spent travelling cannot be used for caregiving, rest, medical appointments, household responsibilities, or additional paid work. Although these expenses may appear routine when considered individually, together they can amount to a significant reduction in income and personal time.

The burden is regressive. The same transit fare, parking charge, or childcare bill consumes a larger share of the income of a lower-paid employee than it does for someone in a higher pay band. For staff already facing wage pressure or high housing costs, an additional day or two of commuting each week functions as a pay cut. Employees may also have less capacity to absorb unexpected costs, such as transit disruptions, emergency childcare, or the need to purchase meals because a longer

commute leaves less time for food preparation. A uniform attendance requirement does not create a uniform burden. Its practical impact depends on an employee's income, commute, household structure, access to care, and ability to purchase substitutes for the time lost to travel.

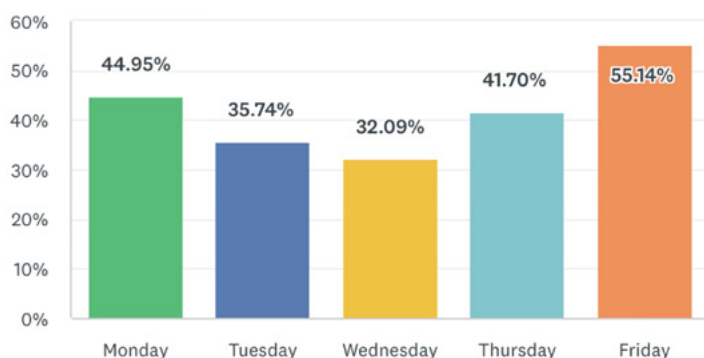
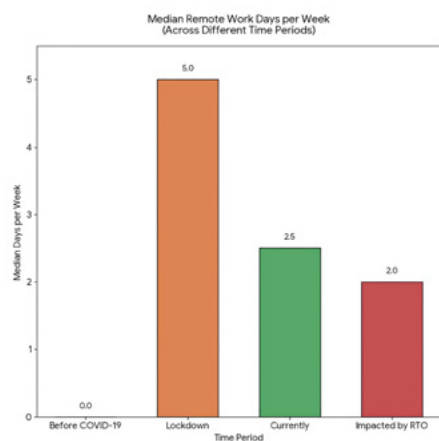
These financial pressures will then intersect and amplify existing gendered and racialized patterns of caregiving. Women continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care and household labour. BIPOC staff may be more likely to support extended family members and live in multigenerational households. Both women, non-binary and BIPOC staff face more constrained housing and family budgets given their lower average pay. As a result, the staff most likely to carry substantial caregiving responsibilities are also those with the fewest financial resources available to replace the flexibility lost through increased campus attendance.

The Return-to-Campus mandate will therefore compound existing inequalities rather than simply change where work is performed. Lower-paid caregivers will be forced to spend a greater proportion of their earnings on transportation and care, while also losing the time needed to coordinate family responsibilities. Over time, this can contribute to greater financial stress, reduced well-being, missed advancement opportunities, reduced working hours, or decisions to seek more flexible employment. Hybrid work does not resolve wage inequality or the unequal distribution of care, but it does reduce some of their day-to-day consequences.

Finding Two: Remote Work is the Rule, not the Exception

The second major finding is that hybrid work has become embedded in how staff and departments are organized. Remote work was uncommon before the pandemic and ubiquitous during lockdown. In the years since full lockdown, remote and hybrid work has since become an organizational feature of all divisions. The Return-to-Campus mandate is therefore not simply ending a temporary emergency arrangement, it is disrupting work systems that have become normalized, productive, and operationally integrated.

Current work patterns reflect an established institutional rhythm. Fridays are the most common remote-work day, while Wednesdays have the highest level of on-campus attendance. Focus-group participants explained that mid-week campus days are often reserved for meetings, collaborative activities, and other work that benefits from physical presence, while remote days are used for focused and independent tasks. The consistency of this pattern across the workforce suggests that departments have well-developed practices for coordinating hybrid work. Increasing mandatory campus attendance risks disrupting these established routines without clear evidence that the replacement model will improve how work is performed.



Nearly 90% of hybrid, remote, or alternate work arrangements were either formally established or contained formal elements. These are recognized and structured components of how work is organized across the university. Even the smaller number of informal arrangements generally reflect discussions between employees and supervisors about how duties can be performed most effectively while accommodating operational and personal needs; they are not hidden or unauthorized practices. The prevalence of formal and negotiated arrangements therefore points to an established working system in which managers and staff have already developed processes for coordinating attendance, accountability, service delivery, and productivity. Rather than evidence of inconsistency or lack of control, the existing arrangements offer evidence that hybrid work has been institutionally managed and integrated into day-to-day operations.

Very few hybrid or remote arrangements are established specifically as accommodations for accessibility or family responsibilities. This pattern may reflect two related dynamics. First, formal accommodations may be difficult, slow, or burdensome to obtain, an issue examined later in this report. Second, because most staff already have formally recognized hybrid or remote arrangements, many employees may be able to manage disability, caregiving, and other personal needs without requesting an individualized accommodation. This is an important feature of the existing system: broadly available flexibility can function as a form of inclusive planning and universal work design. Rather than requiring employees to disclose private circumstances, attain medical documentation, and seek exceptional treatment, hybrid work removes barriers in advance and allows a wider range of staff to participate effectively. The low use of formal accommodations should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that accessibility and family needs are uncommon, but instead show that universal access to hybrid work has reduced the need for employees to pursue individualized exceptions.

Donated time

A recurring theme in the qualitative evidence is that staff reciprocate remote-work flexibility with discretionary labour outside of regular working hours. Respondents were asked how often they worked outside their regular hours when working remotely and when working on campus, using a scale from 0 ("never") to 4 ("very often"). The median response was 2 on remote days, compared with 1 on campus days, a full one-point shift on a five-point scale. This is a meaningful difference: the typical staff member reported working beyond scheduled hours more frequently when at home than when on campus. Remote work does not simply change the location of the workday, it appears to expand its boundaries, making staff more likely to start early, finish late, respond to requests after hours, or adjust their schedules to meet operational needs.

Much of this additional labour is informal, unscheduled, and not necessarily recorded and compensated as overtime. It can therefore be understood as “donated time”: working time voluntarily reinvested in the university in good faith for the flexibility that remote work provides. The operational benefit is significant. This labour extends effective service hours, improves responsiveness, and helps staff maintain continuity when urgent or unexpected demands arise. The finding also points to a likely unintended consequence of the Return-to-Campus mandate. If flexibility is reduced and the workday becomes more firmly bounded by the commute and time spent physically on campus, staff may be less willing and less able to provide this additional labour. In attempting to increase visible attendance, the university may therefore reduce the invisible working time on which many units have come to rely.

One member summarized the trade-off plainly,

"I am happy to work more for the university with the flexibility of my remote days. I will be bound to do less work when on campus 5 days a week as I will not be bringing my laptop home... I will not do that extra work in the evening with my own computer."

Others explained that when work is defined strictly as office-based, they will treat the end of the office day as the end of their availability,

"If the expectation is you only work from the office then there cannot be an expectation that you work from home when it suits the employer."

This creates a significant operational and labour-relations risk. The university may gain greater visible attendance while losing flexibility, responsiveness, and the goodwill that currently supports additional discretionary effort.

At the same time, this labour should not be treated as a free or unlimited resource. Work performed outside regular hours remains work and should be recorded, compensated, or recognized in accordance with collective agreement provisions and applicable employment standards. Even where staff voluntarily provide additional time, healthy working conditions require clear temporal boundaries between work and personal life. Employees have a legal right to disconnect, recover, and protect time for family, care, and rest without feeling that flexibility must be repaid through unpaid availability. A sustainable approach would preserve operational flexibility while ensuring that after-hours labour is neither normalized nor invisibly absorbed by staff.

Staff across the study described the difficulty of coordinating in-person work with the realities of commuting in the Greater Toronto Area. Travel to campus often depends on unreliable transit systems, including TTC and GO routes affected by delays, overcrowding, weather, service disruptions, and construction. As a result, some staff reported avoiding early-morning meetings or hesitating to schedule time-sensitive in-person activities

because they could not reliably predict when they would arrive. Remote work removes this uncertainty. A staff member working from home is not delayed by transit, traffic, weather, or construction, and can begin meetings, respond to urgent issues, and maintain service continuity at the scheduled time. In this sense, remote work can increase reliability rather than reduce it, particularly for work that depends on punctual coordination across teams.

The Return-to-Campus mandate was already reducing remote-work access at the time of the survey. Staff whose units had not yet implemented the new requirements reported a median of 2.5 remote days per week, compared with two days among those already subject to the mandate, a loss of approximately half a remote day each week. Because the survey was conducted while implementation was still underway, this difference likely captures only the early stages of the shift. Many employees have since been told to expect four or more days on campus, leaving only one or no remote days per week. Few appear able to maintain the two- or three-day remote work arrangements that were common when the survey was administered. If the study were repeated today, the reduction in remote work would be larger.

At first glance, a reduction of half a day may appear modest. In practice, however, it represents a 20% reduction in the typical amount of remote-work flexibility available to affected staff. For employees managing long commutes, disability-related needs, caregiving schedules, or work requiring sustained concentration, half a day can determine whether an arrangement remains feasible. It may mean an additional commute, higher care and transportation costs, less time to respond to family needs, or the loss of a protected period for focused work. The significance of the change therefore lies not only in the number of hours removed, but in the disruption of the routines and supports that those hours make possible. What appears administratively small can have substantial consequences for accessibility, work-life balance, productivity, and retention.

Finding Three: The Mandate Cannot Restore the Old Campus Culture

The third major finding is that a return-to-campus mandate cannot restore the pre-pandemic workplace culture simply by requiring physical attendance. The nature of work, at the university and across the larger economy has changed. Meetings that once took place in rooms around campus now take place virtually. Service appointments that once occurred at counters are now booked virtually. Cross-unit coordination frequently involves participants across campuses, people's homes, third spaces, and external organizations. One staff member explains this well,

"The culture has changed. When I worked in an office before the pandemic, we had meetings on campus. That meant you had to get up from your desk 20 minutes before, walk across campus, go to your meeting, then you walk back again, you're outside, you get fresh air. People took breaks, people took lunch... All of that has been lost. It feels like they want us to be chained to our desk from 9:00 to 5:00."

Members describe their work from home days as responding to emails, doing focused work, and attending virtual meetings. Similarly, members describe their work from campus days as responding to emails, doing focused work, and attending virtual meetings. The important difference being that campus days are spent in open offices with headphones on, distracted by interruptions and apologizing to fellow virtual meeting attendees for background noise.

This experience is not the collaborative campus environment imagined in the return to office mandate's rationale. It is a hybrid-work system forced into an on-campus office setting. In this context, co-presence does not create collaboration. Instead, mandatory on-campus attendance simply relocates virtual work to a less effective environment. As one staff explains,

"We sit in zoom calls, with headphones on, two feet from people. It is everyone's least favourite way to work and we all try to structure our workflow so that we can get things done during our days at home because it is so hard to be productive during our mandatory on-campus days."

Staff reported that the mandate has shifted management attention from work quality to attendance. Rather than measuring output, responsiveness, service quality, or project completion, managers focus on physical presence. Staff described increased monitoring, reduced professional trust, and pressure to justify time away from desks. In the words of a staff member,

"I have also observed that managers and supervisors closely monitor how frequently employees are physically present in the office. This emphasis on attendance rather than performance undermines professional trust and contributes to stress. Employees feel evaluated based on visibility rather than outcomes."

Vertical trust is the confidence employees place in managers and senior leadership. Vertical is a foundational element of workplace culture. It develops when staff believe that leadership acts fairly, communicates honestly, respects professional judgment, and in a professional office setting evaluates employees on the quality of their work rather than on their physical visibility. A workplace can be organized in a paranoid manner around surveillance, where attendance, desk time, and constant oversight are considered substitutes for performance. A paranoid workplace will not foster vertical trust.

A workplace can also be organized around vertical trust, where employees are given autonomy and held accountable for clear outcomes. Attendance-based monitoring and micromanagement push the university toward a paranoid model. Surveillance signals that staff are not trusted in their responsibilities unless they can be seen, even after years of successful service. Because vertical trust is difficult to build and quick to be lost, the loss of it can have consequences beyond the Return-to-Campus policy itself, including weakening morale, discretionary effort, openness, cooperation, and confidence in future decisions made by leadership.

Vertical trust matters for workplace culture. Culture is not produced by proximity alone. It is produced by trust, respect, communication, fairness, and meaningful shared experiences. When employees are required to commute in order to sit in crowded spaces and attend virtual meetings, the symbolic value of presence can become detached from the actual work being performed.

For many staff, the return to campus has not restored the lively, collaborative workplace imagined by senior leadership. Instead, it has created what might best be described as a "Zoom farm": employees commute across the region only to spend the day tethered to a desk, wearing headphones, and speaking to colleagues through a screen. The promised spontaneous "collisions" of campus life are difficult to achieve when staff are booked into consecutive virtual meetings, searching for a quiet room, or trying not to overhear several other Zoom calls at once. Rather than increasing connection, the result can feel like remote work with a longer commute, less privacy, and a supervisor close enough to confirm that everyone is visibly online.

The Return-to-Campus mandate risks damaging vertical trust. Vertical trust is built gradually. It is difficult to create because each positive interaction adds only incrementally to workers' confidence in leadership, yet it can be lost quickly when major decisions are imposed unilaterally or appear disconnected from operational realities. By reducing

established flexibility without meaningful consultation, emphasizing attendance over outcomes, and increasing perceptions of surveillance and micromanagement, the mandate signals that leadership does not trust staff to manage their work responsibly. Once that confidence is weakened, the consequences can extend beyond the policy itself, including greater resistance to organizational change, and declining confidence in future commitments made by the university.

Finding Four: Impacts on Caregivers

"What we have today is not a luxury; it is a lifeline, particularly for those of us caring for children, aging parents, or both... Amid wage stagnation, a tepid economy, skyrocketing housing prices, and mounting caregiving burdens, hybrid work is the only reform that has materially helped middle-class workers live with greater dignity and balance" - Staff Appointed USW1998 Member

The Return-to-Campus mandate will disproportionately affect staff with caregiving responsibilities. More than half of respondents reported caring for children, aging parents, or other dependents, including members of the "sandwich generation" who are responsible for both younger and older family members. Caregivers are especially sensitive to demands on their time and location because their daily routines are organized around school and daycare drop-offs, after-school activities, medical appointments, eldercare, and the possibility of unexpected emergencies. Remote work provides the flexibility needed to coordinate these responsibilities while remaining productive and available to the university.

For many caregivers, this flexibility is not a convenience but a "lifeline." Working from home can reduce the time lost to commuting, make it easier to respond when a child or parent becomes ill, and provide reassurance that assistance is close at hand if an emergency arises. These arrangements allow staff to balance paid work with responsibilities that cannot simply be postponed or transferred to someone else. By requiring more frequent campus attendance, the mandate threatens this carefully maintained balance, increasing stress, financial pressure, and the likelihood that some caregivers will be forced to reduce their work hours, seek other employment, or leave the workforce altogether.

Sick Days

"As a parent, it allows me to care for my children when they are ill without needing to take personal or sick leave, while still maintaining my work responsibilities" - Staff Appointed USW1998 Member

Across the study, caregivers described the constant work of coordinating work with family responsibilities. While family care obligations frequently arise, the USW Local 1998 Collective Agreements limits sick leave solely to employee illness or injury. Members are able to use personal days or vacation days to provide care for family. Members who use

sick leave to care for sick relatives operate outside contract guidelines, exposing themselves to potential workplace discipline. As such staff do not have access to sick days and medical leaves when a child, parent, or other dependent requires care.

Respondents explained that remote work allowed them to manage brief or unexpected caregiving needs without taking a sick day or multiple days of leave and exposing themselves to potential discipline. In these circumstances, staff could remain productive while staying close enough to respond to a sick child, an aging parent, or make an urgent appointment. This flexibility can support operational continuity by reducing short-notice absences, limiting the need to redistribute work, and allowing services to continue with less disruption.

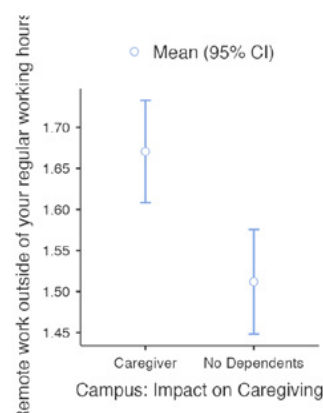
The Return-to-Campus mandate will reverse these benefits to the institution. When employees are required to be far from the people they care for, even a relatively minor family emergency may require a full day's absence because the commute makes a partial or flexible response impossible. Greater campus attendance may therefore increase the use of sick days or extended leaves among caregivers, while also creating additional scheduling and workload pressures for their colleagues and units. This should not be interpreted as a reason to discourage legitimate leave or expect staff to work while providing care. Rather, it demonstrates that hybrid work can complement leave protections by giving employees more options to manage short-term disruptions without sacrificing either their family responsibilities or the continuity of their work.

When working remotely staff describe being able to manage both caring for their dependents and doing their jobs. As one explains,

"My child's home is sick. No worries. I don't need to take the day. I can set them up with an iPad if I need to and I can work. When that happens [under the mandate], my sick days will be used. My personal days will be used to the fullest extent that they're available"

As with "donated time," remote work can allow caregivers to absorb short or intermittent family-care demands without fully stepping away from their jobs. Caregivers reported working outside their regular hours significantly more often than staff without dependents when working remotely ($p < .001$), suggesting that they frequently reorganize their working day around care responsibilities. A mildly ill child resting at home, a brief interruption involving an aging parent might require minutes of time,

Remote work outside of your regular working hours



but not a full day. When working remotely, staff can pause to deal with the issue, adjust their hours as demonstrated through the “donated time” metric, and complete their responsibilities later in the day.

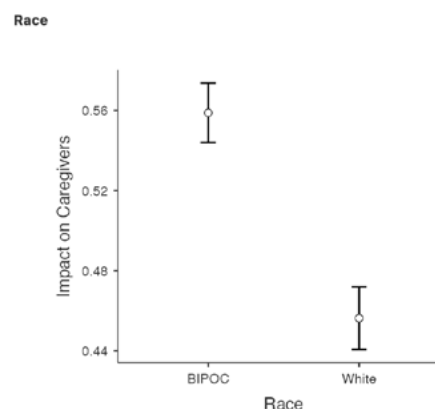
This form of operational continuity depends on flexibility. If employees must be on campus, the same caregiving event may require them to take a full sick day. The Return-to-Campus mandate will increase absences among caregivers while reducing the additional labour they currently provide outside regular hours. This does not mean that employees should be expected to work while providing care or discouraged from using negotiated leave. It means that remote work gives caregivers more options and, in doing so, benefits the university through greater continuity, fewer disruptions, and more flexible service delivery. Removing that flexibility imposes costs on both staff and the institution.

Impacts to Racialized Care Givers

The study found that racialized caregivers experienced significantly greater impacts from the Return-to-Campus mandate than white caregivers ($p = .001$). Racialized staff were more likely to report caregiving responsibilities and greater difficulty managing the time, cost, and scheduling demands associated with increased campus attendance.

These differences are inseparable from the pay-band structure documented earlier in this report. BIPOC staff are overrepresented in the lower pay bands and underrepresented at the top of the wage hierarchy.

As a result, additional expenses for transit, gasoline, parking, childcare, eldercare, and other costs of living consume a larger share of their earnings. A uniform attendance requirement therefore imposes a substantially heavier financial burden on workers with fewer economic resources.



These inequalities are further intensified by Toronto’s racialized housing and settlement geography. Escalating housing costs and gentrification near the university’s campuses have pushed many lower-income households farther from the city centre and, in some cases, across municipal boundaries. Racialized workers are more likely to be affected by these pressures and may face longer, more expensive, and less predictable commutes, particularly when travelling across multiple transit systems. Families living farther from campus may also have fewer affordable childcare options close to either their homes or workplaces, making fixed drop-off and pickup times more difficult to coordinate. The Return-to-Campus mandate therefore does not affect all caregivers equally. It

compounds an existing racial wage gap by requiring lower-paid, disproportionately racialized staff to absorb greater commuting and caregiving costs while surrendering more of their time. What appears to be a neutral attendance policy can consequently reproduce and deepen the racialized income and geographic inequalities already present within the workforce.

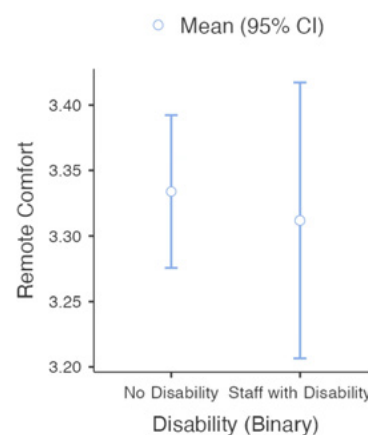
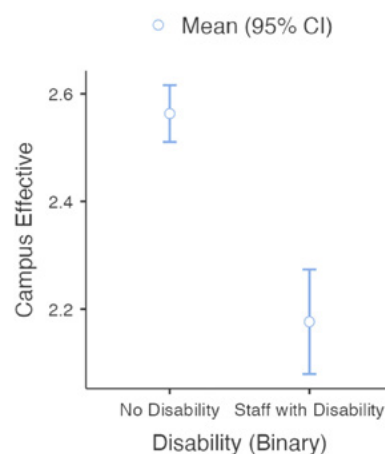
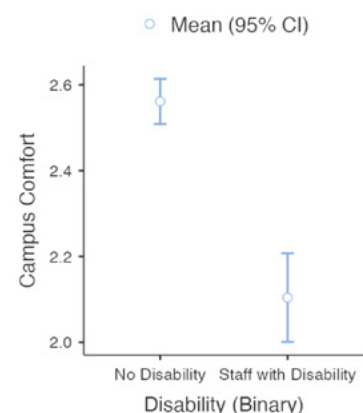
The epigraph above describes hybrid work as a “lifeline”. The staff member captures its real significance for caregivers: it is not a perk, but a practical condition that allows many staff to work while meeting responsibilities to children, aging parents, and other dependents.

Finding Five: Impacts on Staff with Disability

Accessibility emerged as one of the clearest areas in which work location shapes staff experience. Nearly one-quarter of respondents identified as having a visible or invisible disability. With great consistency across all measures staff with disabilities reported significantly greater difficulty with campus-based work and a clear preference for remote work than staff without disabilities. The most important finding, however, is what happens when employees work remotely: the differences between staff with disability and their able bodied counterparts in reported comfort and effectiveness largely disappear, with no statistically significant gap between the two groups. Remote work creates parity for staff with disability, while the campus environment creates disparities in employees' ability to work comfortably and effectively.

The variance found between experiences on campus suggests that the issue is not inherent to the employee or their capacity to perform the work. Instead, it is produced by the physical demands, environmental conditions, and organizational practices associated with on-campus work.

To assess whether staff with disabilities experienced their work environments differently from staff without disabilities, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with four statements related to their effectiveness and comfort working on campus or remotely: "My on-campus workstation and environment allows me to perform my job effectively," "My work setup on campus is comfortable and ergonomically sound," "My remote work equipment and environment allows me to perform my job effectively," and "My remote work setup is comfortable and ergonomically sound." Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and compared by disability status using one-way analysis of

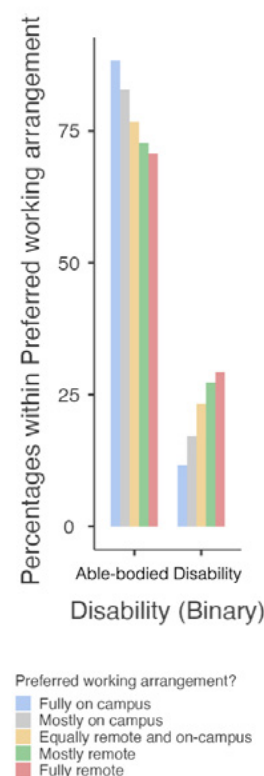
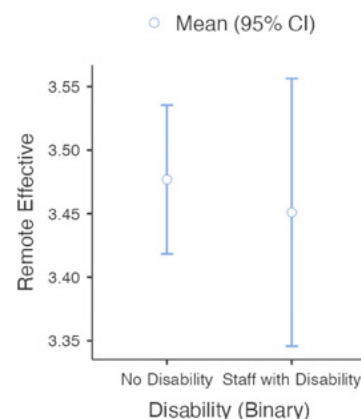


variance (ANOVA), where median scores illustrate the direction and magnitude of the group differences.

Staff with disabilities reported substantially lower comfort and effectiveness on campus. Their median campus-comfort score was 2.16, compared with 2.56 among staff without disabilities, while the corresponding effectiveness scores were 2.10 and 2.56. Both differences were statistically significant ($p < .001$). By contrast, no statistically significant differences emerged on either remote-work measure. The pattern suggests unequal working conditions. The campus environment produces a clear disability-based gap in comfort and effectiveness, while remote work largely removes that gap and allows staff with and without disabilities to report comparable experiences on par with their colleagues.

When an equity-deserving group reports outcomes comparable to those of the majority group, it suggests that parity or equity has been achieved on that particular measure. Equity does not require every employee to have identical experiences; it means that workplace conditions do not systematically disadvantage one group or prevent its members from participating and performing on equal terms. In this study, the absence of a measurable gap between staff with and without disabilities in remote work environments indicates that remote work removes the barriers producing unequal outcomes on campus. This is evidence of parity: not parity as a future aspiration, but parity already achieved through the existing remote work policies.

Staff with disabilities prefer working remotely at a higher rate than able-bodied staff. This preference is clear across a range of studied variables. Staff with disabilities were far more likely to identify improved accessibility as a benefit of remote work: 70.5%, compared with 33.2% of the full sample. They were also more likely to report benefits extending beyond physical access, including better mental health, greater flexibility to manage personal needs, stronger collaboration and communication, improved relationships with colleagues, and a healthier, less toxic workplace culture. For example, 62.2% of staff with disabilities identified a healthier workplace culture as a benefit of remote work, compared with 52.8% of respondents overall. Remote work also reduces social and psychological barriers,



increases employees' control over how they organize their work, and creates conditions in which staff with disabilities are better able to participate, contribute, and maintain their wellbeing.

Many people experience disability temporarily. Disability is understood and experienced in different ways, and many employees live with "disabling" conditions that affect their work without defining either their identity or their professional capacity. Staff may experience temporary, recurring, or episodic periods of pain, fatigue, reduced mobility, sensory sensitivity, neurodivergence, or other health-related limitations. While some circumstances require medical leave, others can be managed with little or no interruption to work when appropriate accommodations are available. One respondent, for example, explained that pain and limited mobility did not prevent them from performing their duties remotely; what prevented them from working was the requirement to travel to and navigate the campus. In such cases, the impairment itself is not the primary barrier, the inflexibility of the workplace is what makes the condition disabling.

"I slipped on the ice in front of my apartment and I've been on crutches since then. I'm doing physio and I still had to return to the office because of the transition that we're in right now... [when I ask to work remotely] I was told I had to go to health and wellness..."

This employee remains capable of performing their duties remotely while also supporting a safe and timely recovery. If required to attend campus, however, the likely alternative may be an extended medical leave, not because they are unable or unwilling to work, but because commuting and navigating the workplace would aggravate the condition or make attendance impractical. Where medically appropriate, remote work allows employees to remain productive during periods of temporary or episodic limitation, preserving both income and operational continuity. A rigid attendance requirement can therefore turn a manageable health condition into a complete absence from work, creating unnecessary costs for the employee, their colleagues, and the university.

Similarly, this staff member explains that their at home working arrangements allows them to manage their injury,

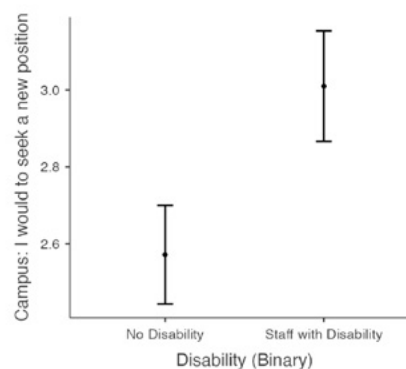
"After experiencing a back injury earlier this year, I have found it difficult to maintain a comfortable and sustainable working position. This contrasts significantly with my remote workspace, where I have a standing desk and do not need to constantly adjust my setup to accommodate others who may use the cubicle in my absence. Being in an open, shared space also makes it awkward for me to stretch or walk around when I need pain relief during flare-ups."

Neither employee would necessarily require formal accommodation if universal workplace flexibility allowed them to manage a temporary injury by working remotely.

If campus attendance is required, the employer is effectively left with three options: permit remote work, place the employee on medical leave, or develop and implement an individualized on-campus accommodation. Of these, remote work is the least costly, least disruptive, and most supportive of operational continuity because it allows an employee who remains capable of working to continue performing their duties. Medical leave removes that employee from the workplace entirely, while an on-campus accommodation may require assessments, equipment, workspace modifications, and administrative coordination. The latter two alternatives also require substantial management and human-resources time for documentation, medical review, approvals, coordination, implementation, and ongoing monitoring. These administrative costs could be avoided by permitting an employee who is capable of working remotely to do so. In these circumstances, it is not the injury alone that prevents the employee from working; it is the requirement to attend a workplace that has become disabling when a viable remote alternative already exists.

Taken together, the findings show that hybrid work is an important mechanism of workplace accessibility. When working remotely, staff with and without disabilities report comparable levels of comfort and effectiveness, suggesting that remote work substantially reduces the barriers that produce unequal experiences on campus. Difference only appears when staff are required to work on campus, where employees with disabilities report less suitable workstations, reduced access to quiet and private space, and lower effectiveness. The fact that relatively few of these arrangements were established through formal accommodation (~1%) supports the argument that hybrid work is functioning as a form of universal access. The universal nature of the outgoing model supported many employees without requiring them to disclose private medical information or repeatedly prove their need for flexibility.

"If I was required to work fully on campus, with no hybrid or remote option, I would to seek a new position at the university or with another employer?"



The consequences of removing this flexibility would extend beyond individual discomfort. Staff with disabilities expressed a significantly stronger intention to seek other employment if required to work fully on campus, indicating that the mandate creates a disproportionate retention risk for an equity-deserving group. A blanket return-to-campus requirement would therefore risk recreating barriers that remote work has helped to remove, increasing pressure on the already stressed accommodation system and potentially pushing skilled employees out of the university entirely. An equitable approach

would preserve flexible, role-appropriate working arrangements and assess employees according to the quality and outcomes of their work rather than their physical presence. In this context, hybrid work should be understood not as an exception to normal operations, but as an established universal accessibility practice that allows staff with disabilities to participate on more equal terms without needing to disclose and discuss.

Finding Six: Hybrid Work Improves Well-Being, Productivity, and Collaboration

The survey asked respondents a large number of questions about the perceived benefits and drawbacks of remote and on-campus work. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to reduce the number of variables by examining how closely responses to these questions were related. Rather than treating each survey item as an isolated finding, EFA clusters corollary responses into broader underlying “factors.” In practical terms, it reduces a large set of individual questions into a smaller number of connected themes that help explain how staff experience different working arrangements.

The factors identified through EFA are themselves an important finding because they show which benefits respondents tend to experience together. Naming each factor requires informed interpretation to examine the questions most strongly associated with a cluster and assign a label that best captures their shared meaning. In this study, the analysis identified three broad benefit factors relating to wellbeing and productivity, collaboration, and equity and workplace support. These findings demonstrate that the benefits of hybrid and remote work extend well beyond convenience. The resulting factor scores can then be compared across groups using fewer variables, allowing the study to more accurately identify differences by disability, race, gender, caregiving status, and other characteristics.

Factor 1: Wellbeing, Focus, and Productivity

The first factor brings together the time, health, and performance benefits of remote work. Its strongest item is time and cost saved from not commuting, followed by improved mental health, greater ability to focus, increased productivity, and flexibility for caregiving and personal needs. These items suggest that staff experience wellbeing and productivity as closely connected rather than as competing outcomes. When employees recover commuting time and gain greater control over their working environment and schedule, they are also more likely to report lower stress, better concentration, and higher productivity. The factor therefore captures the way remote work can create the personal and practical conditions that support effective performance.

Factor 2: Virtual Collaboration and Connection

The second factor captures the collaborative benefits of remote work. Improved communication and collaboration load most strongly on this factor, and meaningfully correlate to improved relationships with colleagues. This pattern challenges the assumption that meaningful collaboration depends on physical proximity. For many staff, virtual tools appear to make it easier to exchange information, coordinate work, include colleagues across locations, and maintain professional relationships. The factor shows that remote work can actively support communication and teamwork.

Factor 3: Structural Access and Workplace Inclusion

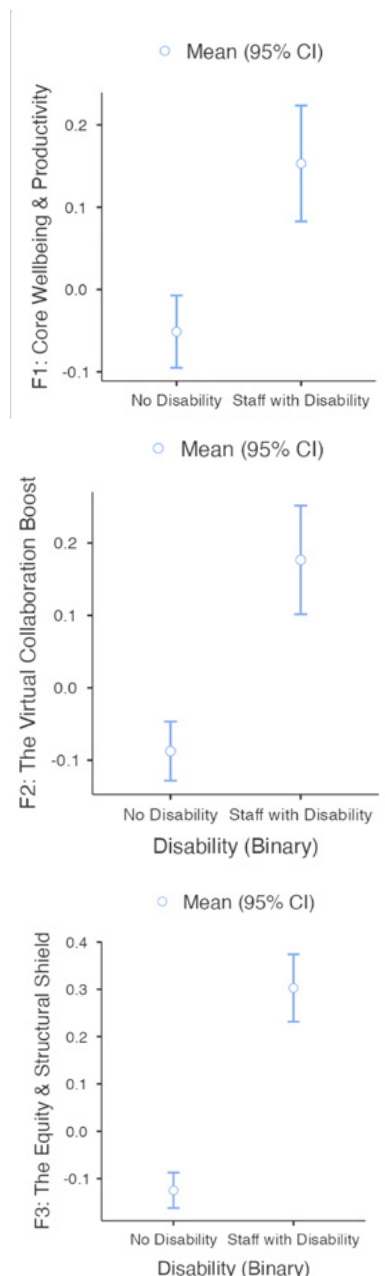
The third factor brings together benefits that expand employees' ability to participate in work on equitable and sustainable terms. It includes geographic and housing flexibility, better accessibility, access to appropriate technology, career visibility, and a healthier workplace culture. Unlike the first factor, which centres on individual wellbeing and performance, this factor reflects the broader structural conditions that shape who can access, remain in, and advance within the workplace. Remote work can reduce barriers associated with disability, location, housing costs, technology, and exclusionary workplace environments. It therefore functions not simply as a change in work location, but as a form of organizational infrastructure that can widen access and support inclusion.

Using these factors, we examined whether different groups experienced the benefits of remote work in systematically different ways. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to compare average factor scores between staff with and without disabilities, BIPOC and White staff, and women and non-binary staff compared with men. These tests allowed us to determine whether observed differences between groups were larger than would be expected through random variation alone.

Factor Loadings	F1: Wellbeing & Productivity	F2: Virtual Collaboration	F3: Equity & Workplace Support
Time and cost saved from [not] commuting	0.911		
Improved mental health (e.g., less stress)	0.818		
Greater ability to focus	0.791		
Increased productivity	0.710		
Flexibility for caregiving/personal needs	0.667		
Improved communication		0.835	
Improved collaboration		0.737	
Improved relationships with colleagues		0.434	0.419
More housing options/geographic flexibility			0.559
Better accommodation for accessibility needs			0.507
Access to better technology			0.484
Increased career visibility/advancement opportunity			0.473
Healthier, less toxic workplace culture			0.364

Benefits for Staff with Disability

Across all three factors, staff with disabilities reported significantly greater benefits from hybrid and remote work than staff without disabilities ($p < .05$). This pattern is especially important because disability is not a single or uniform experience. It encompasses physical and mobility limitations, hearing and visual impairments, chronic pain and fatigue, neurodivergence, mental-health conditions, sensory sensitivities, and temporary or episodic conditions whose effects may vary over time. Remote work can address these needs in different ways: by reducing the physical demands of commuting, allowing employees to control noise, lighting, and sensory exposure, improving access to assistive technology, supporting concentration and psychological safety, and making it easier to manage symptoms, treatment, and periods of reduced mobility. These benefits were reflected across the full factor structure. Staff with disabilities reported stronger gains in wellbeing, focus, and productivity (F1); communication, collaboration, and workplace relationships (F2); and accessibility, flexibility, and organizational support (F3). The findings therefore show that remote work is not merely a physical accommodation for a narrow group of employees. It is a flexible form of workplace access that supports participation across a broad spectrum of disabilities. Although the analysis identifies significant associations rather than proving causation, the implication for the Return-to-Campus mandate is clear: reducing remote-work access will also reduce, and in some cases remove, benefits that staff with disabilities rely on to work effectively, remain connected, and participate on more equal terms.

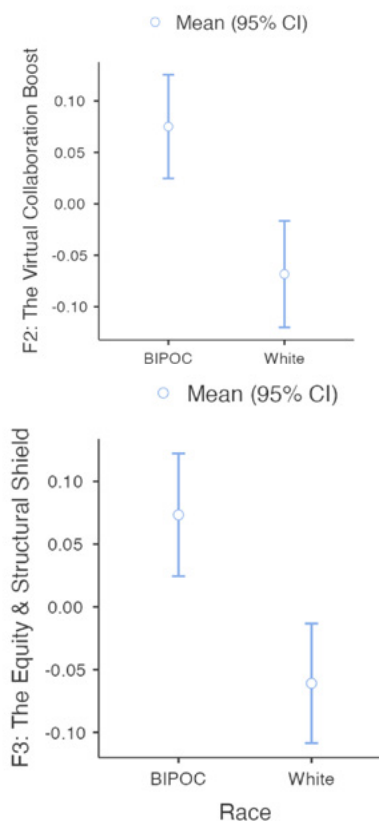


Benefits for BIPOC Staff

BIPOC staff reported significantly greater benefits than White staff on both the Virtual Collaboration factor (F2) and the Equity and Structural Benefits factor (F3), with both differences statistically significant at $p < .05$. This finding challenges the assumption that

physical proximity necessarily produces stronger communication or more meaningful collaboration. For many racialized employees, virtual work may create more structured and equitable opportunities to contribute by reducing reliance on informal networks, increasing control over how and when interactions occur, and making participation less dependent on navigating workplace hierarchies. Digital communication can also create clearer records of decisions and contributions, potentially reducing the influence of subjective judgments about visibility, tone, personality, or who appears to “fit” within a team.

These benefits must be understood in relation to the conditions BIPOC staff may encounter on campus. Racialized employees can experience microaggressions, stereotyping, heightened scrutiny, exclusion from informal networks, and disproportionate monitoring of their attendance, behaviour, or performance. These pressures can make in-person collaboration more emotionally demanding and weaken psychological safety, particularly when ordinary disagreement, assertiveness, or working styles are interpreted differently than they are for White colleagues. Remote work does not eliminate racism, surveillance, or structural inequality, but it can reduce exposure to some of their everyday expressions and give employees greater control over workplace interactions. The statistically significant differences in F2 and F3 therefore represent more than a preference for convenience: they suggest that remote work can act as a partial remedy to inequitable interpersonal and organizational conditions, allowing BIPOC staff to feel more collaborative, supported, and able to participate on fairer terms. Reducing access to remote work may consequently remove an important protective structure and return racialized staff to environments they do not experience as equally safe, trusting, or inclusive.

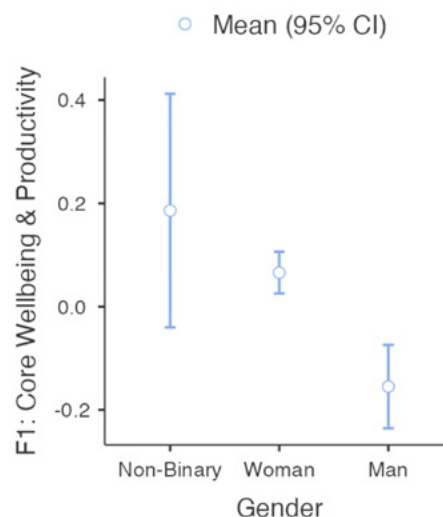


Benefits for Women and Non-binary Staff

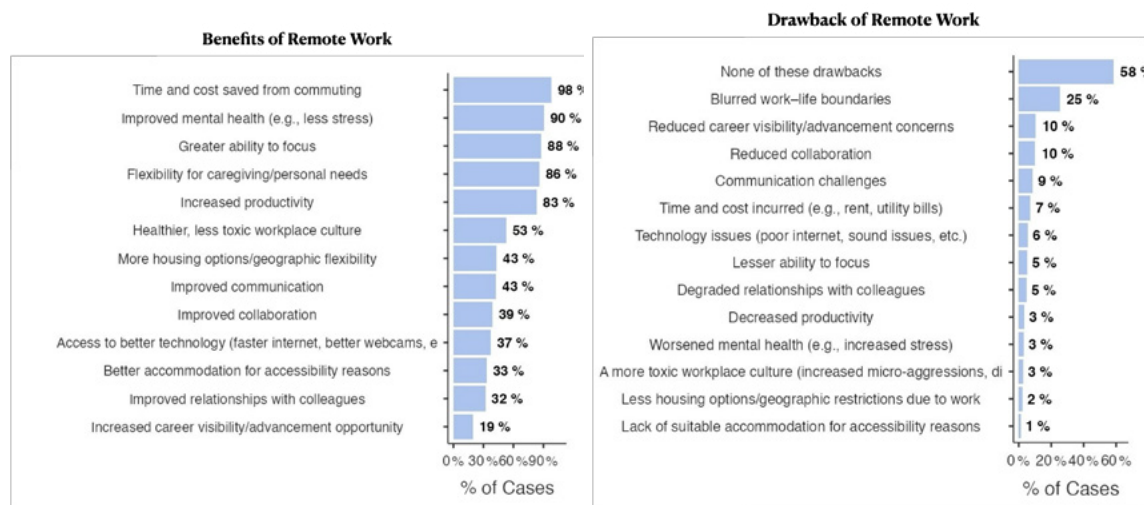
Women and non-binary staff reported significantly greater benefits than men on Factor 1: Wellbeing and Productivity ($p < .05$). The difference indicates that the time, flexibility, and control provided by remote work are especially valuable to employees who may face greater demands on their time and wellbeing outside the workplace. By reducing

commuting, remote work can return hours that would otherwise be unavailable for caregiving, household labour, medical needs, rest, or recovery. It can therefore reduce time poverty—the condition in which essential responsibilities leave individuals with too little discretionary time to maintain their health, family life, and personal wellbeing.

This pattern reflects broader gender inequalities in the organization of paid and unpaid work. Women continue to perform a disproportionate share of caregiving and household labour, while non-binary staff may face additional stress, scrutiny, misgendering, or exclusion in physical workplace settings. Mandatory campus attendance adds commuting time, expense, and emotional strain to these existing pressures. Remote work does not eliminate gender inequality, but it can lessen some of its daily effects by giving employees greater control over when, where, and how work is completed. Restricting hybrid work would therefore remove an important source of work-life balance and intensify time pressures for women and non-binary staff, even though the same arrangements are also associated with stronger focus, wellbeing, and productivity.



Drawbacks of Remote Work



The benefits and drawbacks reveal a strikingly uneven pattern. A majority of respondents (58%) reported experiencing none of the listed drawbacks of remote work. Blurred work–life boundaries was the only concern identified by more than one-quarter of staff, at 25%; every other individual drawback was reported by 10% or fewer. Reduced collaboration and concerns about career visibility were each identified by 10%, communication challenges by 9%, technology problems by 6%, and reduced focus or weaker relationships with colleagues by only 5%. Reports of decreased productivity, worsened mental health, or a more toxic workplace culture were rarer still, at 3% each. These concerns are real, but clearly require a surgical and individualized approach. However, any broad interventions should be weighed against the more widely reported benefits of remote work.

The comparison is especially important for evaluating claims about collaboration and productivity. While 10% reported reduced collaboration, 39% identified improved collaboration as a benefit; similarly, 43% reported improved communication, compared with only 9% who experienced communication challenges. Improved relationships with colleagues were reported by 32%, while only 5% reported degraded relationships. The productivity findings are even more pronounced: 83% identified increased productivity as a benefit, compared with just 3% who reported decreased productivity, while 88% reported greater focus and only 5% reported a reduced ability to focus. Remote work may not be ideal for every activity or employee, but the overall evidence does not support the assumption that physical presence is generally necessary for effective communication, collaboration, or performance.

The reported benefits also extend far beyond productivity. Almost all respondents (98%) identified the time and money saved by avoiding the commute as a benefit. This includes staff who do not have access to remote work as part of their regular duties! Large majorities reported improved mental health (90%) and greater flexibility for caregiving and personal needs (86%). More than half identified a healthier, less toxic workplace culture (53%), while substantial proportions reported greater housing and geographic flexibility (43%), access to better technology (37%), and better accessibility accommodations (33%). These population-wide findings reinforce the subgroup analyses: staff with disabilities reported especially strong benefits across wellbeing, collaboration, and workplace support; BIPOC staff reported greater benefits from virtual collaboration and structural inclusion; and women and non-binary staff reported greater gains in wellbeing, productivity, and control over their time.

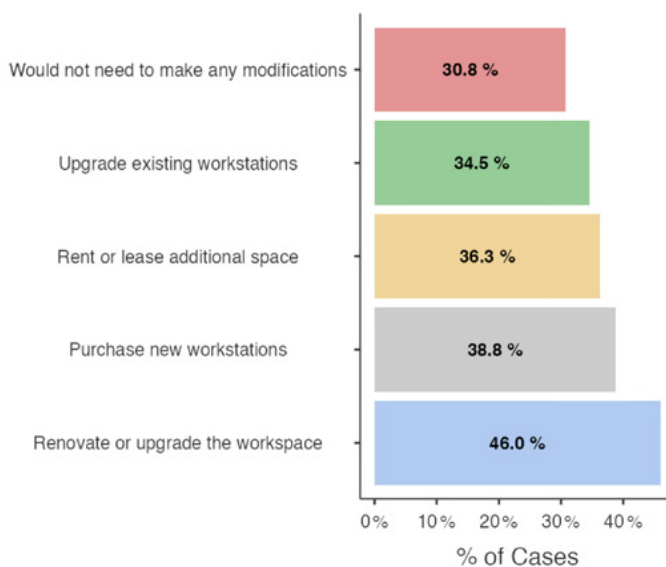
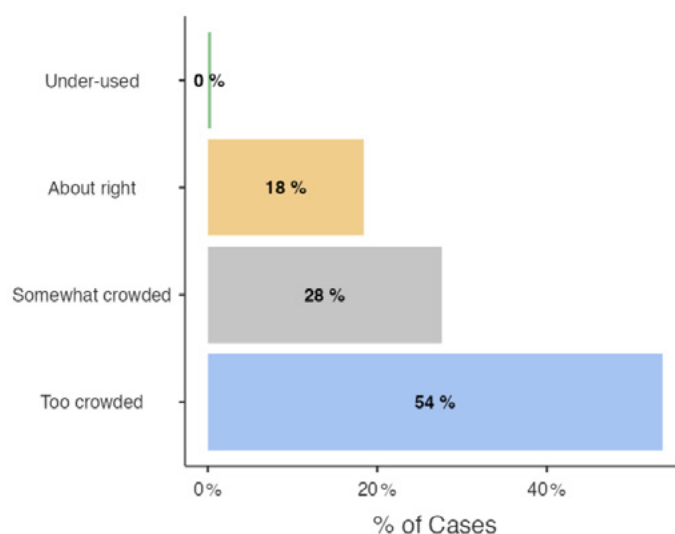
The central finding is not that remote work has no drawbacks, but that its benefits are widespread and substantial while most specific drawbacks are isolated and considerably less common. A broad Return-to-Campus mandate risks removing benefits experienced

by most staff while addressing concerns experienced by comparatively few that should be managed more directly without dismantling hybrid work.

Finding Seven: The University's Physical Infrastructure Is Not Ready

The university does not appear to have adequate physical infrastructure to support a broad return to campus without degrading working conditions, harming work quality, or incurring costly renovations. Across all workplaces on campus, staff described inadequate desks, crowded offices, dysfunctional open-concept environments, limited private space, and insufficient areas for confidential conversations or focused work.

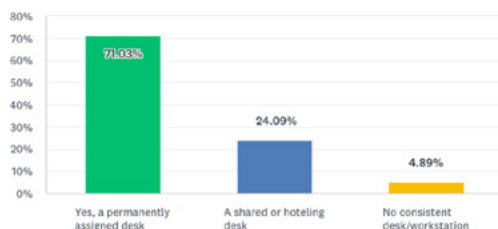
The survey findings indicate that many units do not currently have the physical infrastructure required to accommodate a substantial increase in on-campus attendance. Less than a third (31%) of respondents believed that their unit could accommodate the full complement of staff on a regular basis without making any modifications. These respondents are more likely to already have access to private space or have an easier time finding private space. More than one-third of staff reported that their unit did not have enough desks for all employees to attend simultaneously. Similarly, more than three-quarters expected their office to become either somewhat (28%) or too crowded (54%). Similarly, almost half of all staff (46%) anticipated that their workspace would need to be renovated or upgraded. Staff believe their department will need to find or lease additional space (39%), purchase new workstations (39%) and more than a third (35%) believe they will need upgrades to existing workstations. These



findings suggest that implementing the Return-to-Campus mandate may require significant capital and operating expenditures simply to recreate the physical capacity that hybrid work has given the university for free. In the same way that staff “donate time” they also donate space when they work remotely.

The comparison between on-campus and remote workspaces demonstrates the impact of donated space. Although 71% of respondents had a permanently assigned desk on campus, nearly one-quarter relied on a shared or hoteling desk and 5% had no consistent workstation. At home, 92% reported always, and 6% most of the time having a dedicated workspace, while roughly 2% sometimes or had no dedicated space. The difference was even greater for privacy and focused work. Only 44% of respondents said they always or usually had access to a quiet or private space on campus, and 32% said such space was rarely or never available. Remotely, almost all staff reported always (91%) or most of the time (7%) having a private space for confidential calls or focused work. For the many staff whose duties involve confidential conversations, virtual meetings, or sustained concentration, the remote environment provides more reliable working conditions than the campus environment, challenging the assumption that campus necessarily provides a more ergonomic, productive or more professional work environment.

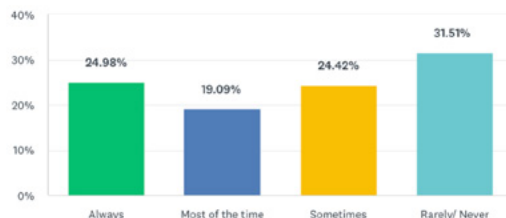
When working on campus, do you have access to a dedicated workstation or desk?



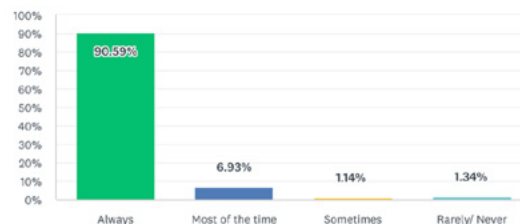
When working remotely, do you have access to a dedicated workspace?



When working on campus, do you have access to a private or quiet space for confidential conversations or focused work?

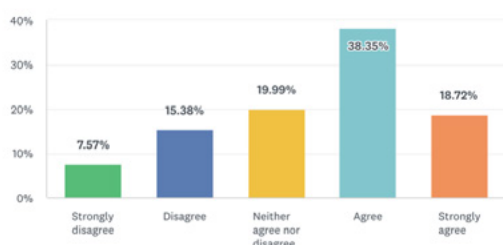


When working remotely, do you have a private space for confidential calls or focused work?

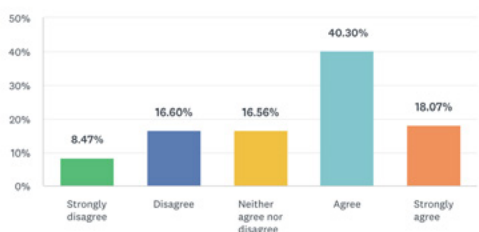


These physical differences are reflected in staff assessments of their effectiveness and comfort. Approximately 57% agreed or strongly agreed that their on-campus workstation and environment allowed them to perform their job effectively, compared with 89% who said the same of their remote equipment and environment. Similarly, 58% described their campus setup as comfortable and ergonomically sound, compared with 86% for their remote setup. The university cannot assume that bringing staff back to campus will place them in a better-equipped, more private, or more productive environment. In many cases, the mandate would require staff to leave a dedicated and effective workspace in order to commute to a crowded office where desks, privacy, quiet space, and appropriate equipment may be less readily available.

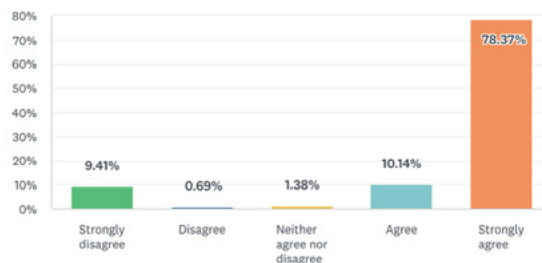
How do you agree with the following statement "My on-campus work station and environment allows me to perform my job effectively?"



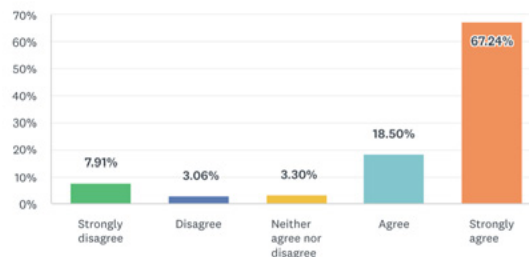
How do you agree with the following statement "My work setup on campus is comfortable and ergonomically sound."



How do you agree with the following statement "My remote work equipment and environment allows me to perform my job effectively?"



How do you agree with the following statement "My remote work setup is comfortable and ergonomically sound."



This is not a minor implementation issue. If employees are required to be physically present but lack desks, quiet rooms, ergonomic workstations, or private meeting spaces, the mandate will reduce work quality. Staff who handle confidential academic, financial, employment, or personal client matters cannot always do so appropriately in open offices. Staff who attend frequent virtual meetings cannot do concentrated work if they are surrounded by other employees doing the same thing. Furthermore, with the

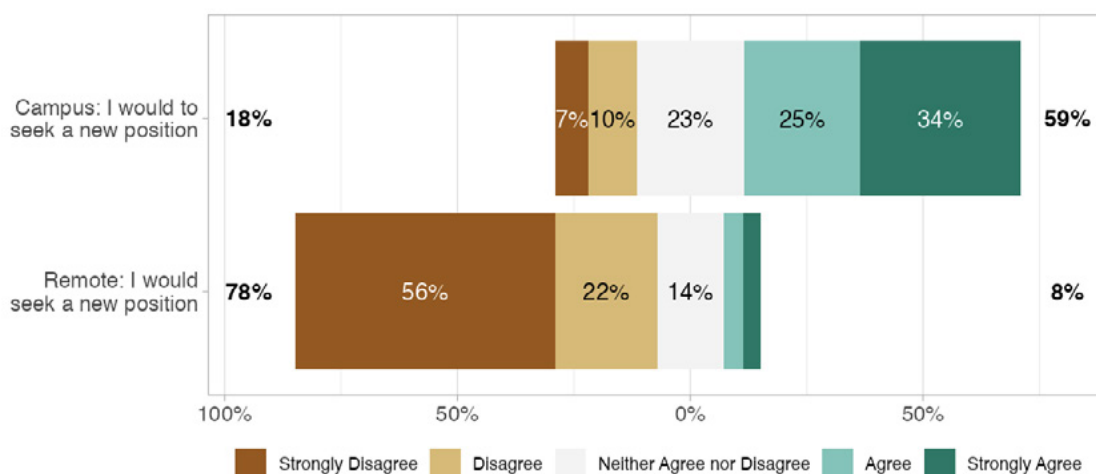
Return-to-Campus mandate in effect, meetings that require privacy will now be contingent on their being private space available.

The workspace problem also exposes another inequity in the mandate. If the institution believes physical presence is essential, it must provide physical conditions that support effective work. Requiring attendance without adequate infrastructure shifts the burden of poor planning onto staff.

Finding Eight: Retention and Recruitment Risks

"If I was required to be 100% on campus, I would have to leave the university and find another job." - Staff Appointed USW1998 Member

The eighth major finding is that the RTC mandate creates significant retention and recruitment risk. Staff were asked to agree or disagree with the statements "If I was required to work (fully on campus/fully remote), I would seek a new position at the university or with another employer?" The results are staggering; 59% (n= 1,692) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed if they were expected to work fully on campus while 78% disagreed or strongly disagreed if their work was fully remote. While not every respondent who expressed intention to seek work elsewhere ultimately will, the result signals a major deterioration in employment attachment and institutional loyalty. This finding should be treated as an indicator of serious institutional risk and a looming threat to operational continuity, one against which the "golden handcuffs" of employee pensions might not protect.



Staff who said they are looking for other work explained they are looking for more flexible positions and more flexible employers. These employees explain that the deciding characteristic they are looking for is flexibility,

"I literally search for jobs and the one key word is [remote]. I'm looking for jobs that are more flexible, not jobs that are less flexible"

Many emphasized that the university already struggles to compete on compensation and that flexibility has become one of the key benefits. Hybrid work for many staff is treated as a part of their total compensation. Hybrid work reduces commuting costs. Hybrid work increases their autonomy over their time. Hybrid work improves work-life balance. Given that half of all staff have been hired during or after the COVID-19 lockdowns, half of all staff have made life decisions over the past six years based on hybrid work. Removing flexibility is therefore a cut to their compensation package, even if their wages remain unchanged.

Retention risk is expected to be concentrated in three particular groups: employees with greater labour market mobility, employees with greater care responsibilities, and staff from equity deserving groups.

The most highly skilled staff, particularly those in roles with external comparators, and employees with specialized experience will be best positioned to leave. This can produce a paradox: the employees most able to find flexible work elsewhere may also be among those the university most needs to retain. As this staff member explains,

"Myself and other senior technical staff would likely leave if forced to work fully on campus. After working at the University for 12 years, the president's email, its tone, delivery, and content, has driven me to apply externally"

The problem is further explained by this staff member,

"A near- or full-time return-to-office mandate will disproportionately drive away U of T's highest-performing staff, who have the greatest mobility in the job market... There will be retention issues to keep the BEST employees if forced back on-site in-person; those best skilled people will have fully remote options with other employers"

The university employs a range of staff with quickly transferable skills across the labour market. These include a range of critical positions related to IT services, finance, marketing, and more. Furthermore, there are a dozen or more post-secondary institutions, and countless education and public sector institutions where nearly every single USW 1998 member would be an asset. While certain public institutions, notably The Ontario Provincial Government, are trying to bring staff back into the office, few if any private sector employers are doing the same. Companies like Shopify, Meta and Google, all with major downtown Toronto offices are remote-first employers.

A competent IT expert such as a technology specialist or network technician with little friction can transfer their work skills to a bank, government, or other education institution. Furthermore, we can expect that potential recruits will share similar values as the outgoing staff. It is difficult to imagine a job market where equally skilled workers seeking the same position have polar opposite values in regards to flexibility.

Retaining Caregivers

Caregivers, if faced with choosing between their work or their dependents will choose their dependents. More than half the staff have caregiving responsibilities. For the past six years, they have organized their lives around remote and hybrid work. This includes a range of decisions including housing location, day care, schooling, elder care facilities, and more. Prior to the RTC, the median days of remote work was 2.5 days per week; most of the staff had either two or three days a week working remotely in any number of configurations. These staff can live further from campus in more affordable housing, near preferred schooling for their dependents, nearby other family supports, and in doing so they can realize a host of other benefits. These staff decide to organize their lives around a period commute rather than a daily commute. As they explain,

"Hybrid work is not equally beneficial—it is most beneficial to those with the least flexibility: caregivers, parents of young children, and those supporting ill or elderly family members... Without this balance, I would either have to pay for services I cannot afford, or reduce my work hours, or worse—leave the workforce entirely"

"If my role becomes fully on site, I will have to either work with management to get an exception or seek a job elsewhere, mostly due to caregiving duties for my son"

"Flexibility is not a perk; it is an equity issue. It directly affects retention, mental health, and the ability for skilled employees to sustain long-term careers. The loss of flexibility risks disproportionately pushing working parents, especially women, out of leadership pipelines or into burnout"

The intersection of commuting and caregiving emerged as one of the most significant sources of resistance to the Return-to-Campus mandate. For caregivers, commuting destabilizes their tightly coordinated schedules, financial arrangements, and emergency plans. One single parent described the pre-pandemic reality of “dropping my kids off at day care just after 7am and not being back to pick them up until after 6pm,” adding that transit delays left them “constantly rushing at work” to compensate for arriving late or to ensure they could leave in time. Another respondent stated, “I am bound by the before/aftercare schedule, which dictates how early I can drop off to catch a train, and how early I must leave work in order to ensure I pickup by 6:00 pm,” concluding that “the prospect of full-time RTO would completely derail my life as a parent.” These logistical pressures also produce a direct financial penalty. As one staff member explained, “If I were required to be on campus 4–5 days per week, I would incur significantly higher childcare costs due to the need for extended after-school programs. In addition, transportation costs would increase substantially.”

The distance travelled during a commute further limits caregivers’ ability to respond to emergencies. One parent noted, “If one of my children fall sick at school, I am required to

commute to pick them up. I have no alternate options,” while another with a 1.5-hour commute described being “constantly concerned about my son’s safety” and unable to reach him quickly if needed. The burden is particularly acute for members of the “sandwich generation,” many of whom are caring for both children and aging relatives.

As one participant observed, staff “may now, for example, not be able to support their family and loved ones in an evening, because instead they spent 90 minutes on the street car.” These accounts show that remote work allows caregivers to reclaim commuting for family care. Hybrid work reduces the cost of extended childcare and transportation, and enables staff to respond more quickly when dependents need assistance. Removing that flexibility does not merely inconvenience caregivers; it places additional strain on already fragile care arrangements and makes continued employment at the university more difficult to sustain.

This risk also has important equity implications. Caregiving responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on women, including many highly skilled employees who have developed substantial institutional knowledge and may be progressing toward senior or leadership roles. A policy that makes employment less sustainable for caregivers may therefore weaken the university’s leadership pipeline, reduce gender diversity, and accelerate the departure of experienced staff. A broad Return-to-Campus mandate imposes disproportionate costs on staff with caregiving responsibilities. The loss of hybrid flexibility lengthens the working day through commuting, and it increases childcare and transportation expenses, reduces employees’ ability to respond to family emergencies, and makes already complex care arrangements more difficult to sustain. These pressures are not distributed evenly: they fall especially heavily on women, single parents, members of the “sandwich generation,” and staff caring for children, aging relatives, or family members with health needs. For some employees, the result is increased stress and reduced well-being; for others, continued employment at the university may no longer be practical. A rigid campus-attendance requirement therefore risks turning a workplace-location policy into a retention and equity problem, pushing experienced staff to reduce their hours, abandon advancement opportunities, seek more flexible employment, or leave the workforce entirely.

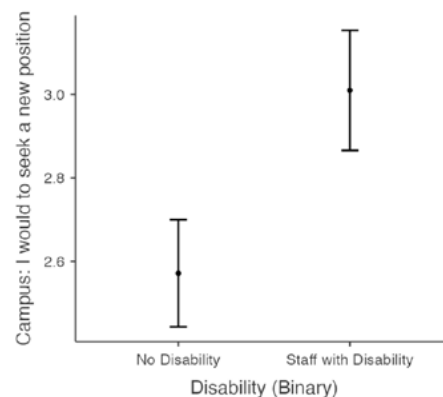
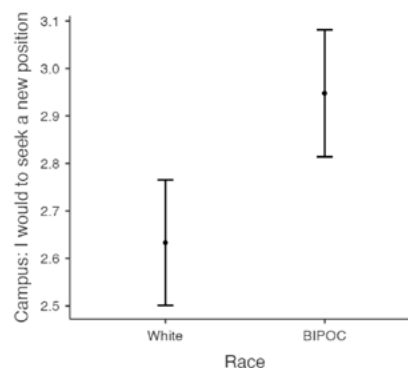
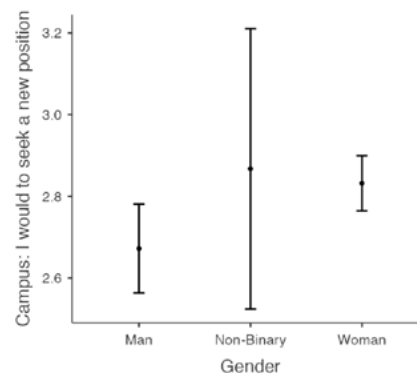
Retaining Equity Deserving Groups

The Return-to-Campus mandate presents a significant retention risk for equity-deserving groups, particularly staff with disabilities. The implications extend beyond an overall increase in turnover of BIPOC staff, and non-binary employees. For staff with disabilities, reduced access to remote work may reintroduce barriers related to commuting, fatigue, sensory conditions, mobility, unsuitable workstations, and limited access to quiet or

private space, making continued employment more difficult to sustain. BIPOC and non-binary staff may also face greater exposure on campus to microaggressions, stereotyping, misgendering, heightened scrutiny, exclusion, and other forms of interpersonal hostility that can weaken psychological safety and belonging. Remote and hybrid work do not eliminate discrimination, but they can reduce exposure to some of these daily harms and give employees greater control over their working environment and interactions. By removing this flexibility, the university risks pushing skilled employees from already underrepresented groups to seek work elsewhere, reducing workforce diversity, weakening leadership pipelines, and losing valuable institutional knowledge. Retaining equity-deserving staff therefore requires treating hybrid work not as a discretionary perk, but as an important component of accessibility, inclusion, and long-term employment sustainability.

When asked whether they would seek a new position if required to work fully on campus, BIPOC staff, staff with disabilities, women, and non-binary staff all reported a significantly greater likelihood of leaving than White staff, staff without disabilities, and men, respectively. Each of these group differences was statistically significant at $p < .001$, indicating that the observed patterns are highly unlikely to be explained by random variation alone. The results show that the retention consequences of the Return-to-Campus mandate would not be evenly distributed across the workforce. Employees who already experience greater barriers in relation to accessibility, caregiving, workplace inclusion, compensation, or psychological safety are also the employees most likely to reconsider their future at the university if hybrid flexibility is removed.

Diminishing hybrid work risks producing a form of unequal or “soft” attrition in which a formally uniform policy pushes members of equity-deserving groups out at higher rates. In practice, a rigid return-to-campus requirement could function as a form of indirect or



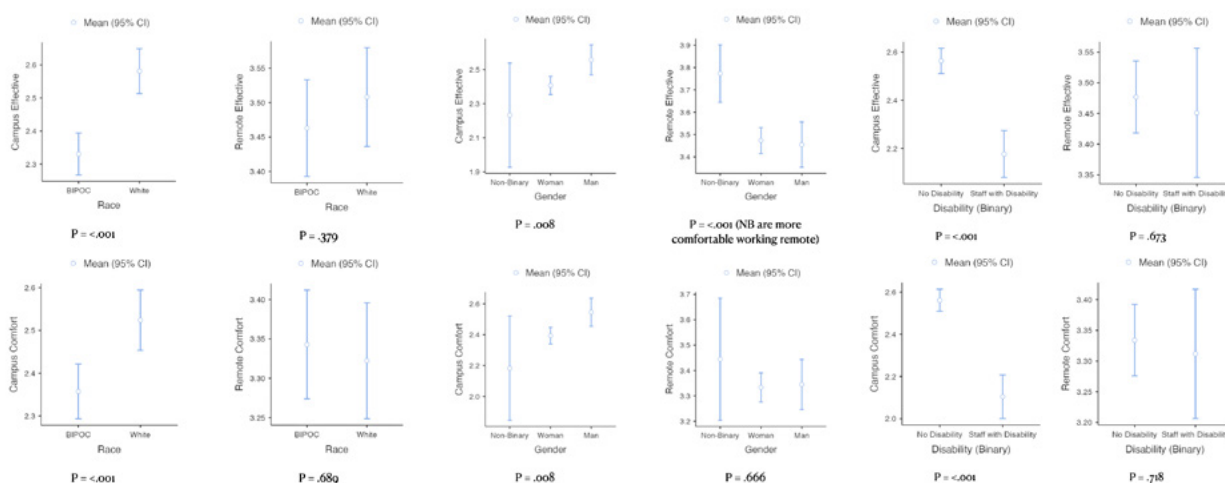
“soft” layoffs: employees are not formally dismissed, but the conditions of employment become incompatible with their family responsibilities. Preserving role-appropriate hybrid work is therefore not only a retention strategy but an equity measure that allows caregivers to sustain long-term careers without sacrificing the safety and well-being of those who depend on them.

Any unexpected departure has lasting organizational consequences. The university could lose skilled employees, and with them accumulated institutional knowledge, and established relationships across departments and communities. Disproportionate turnover among women, BIPOC, disabled, and non-binary employees would also weaken workforce diversity and narrow future leadership and advancement pipelines. Recruitment may become more difficult if prospective employees view the university as less flexible or less inclusive than competing employers. The findings suggest that hybrid work should be treated as a central component of the university’s retention and employment-equity strategy, rather than as a discretionary benefit that can be withdrawn without unequal consequences.

Finding Nine: Parity through Universal Access

The ninth major finding is that remote work creates parity in experience for equity deserving groups. Remote work allows workers to manage disability, chronic pain, neurodivergence, caregiving responsibilities, and environmental needs without requiring disclosure, permission, or individualized negotiation in every case.

The study directly compared staff experiences of campus and remote work environments. Across race, gender, and disability, equity-deserving groups reported significantly poorer experiences on campus, but comparable experiences when working remotely. BIPOC staff reported significantly lower comfort and effectiveness on campus than White staff, while no significant difference appeared between the two groups in remote-work environments. Women and non-binary staff reported lower comfort and effectiveness on campus than men, while non-binary staff reported significantly greater effectiveness when working remotely. Staff with disabilities similarly reported significantly lower comfort and effectiveness on campus than staff without disabilities, with no significant difference between the groups when working remotely. In practical terms, the campus environment produces measurable equity gaps in comfort and effectiveness, while remote work largely closes those gaps. The key exception is non-binary staff, who reported even stronger remote-work effectiveness than both women and men.



This pattern is central to the report's argument: the physical workplace is not experienced equally. For some employees, campus is a productive and supportive environment; for

others, it introduces barriers that directly affect comfort, effectiveness, and participation. Staff may face accessibility barriers, sensory overload, fatigue from commuting or navigating campus, open-office distractions, lack of privacy, microaggressions, harassment, heightened scrutiny, or pressure to perform professionally in ways that are unequally applied. These conditions are not incidental. They shape who can work comfortably, who is seen as effective, who feels safe speaking up, and who must spend additional energy managing the workplace itself before they can begin their actual work.

Remote work does not eliminate ableism, racism, sexism, transphobia, or other forms of workplace inequality. It also does not remove the employer's responsibility to make campus environments accessible, safe, and inclusive. However, the findings show that remote work can reduce exposure to some daily harms while giving staff greater control over their work environment, interactions, sensory conditions, privacy, and time. This is why remote work functions as more than an individual preference; it is a practical mechanism of equity and universal work design. By closing measurable gaps in comfort and effectiveness, remote work allows many equity-deserving staff to participate on more comparable terms. The Return-to-Campus mandate therefore risks reversing an existing source of parity and returning staff to workplace conditions that the data show are not experienced equally.

The formal accommodation system appears insufficient for the scale and nature of the need identified in this study. Fewer than one percent of all respondents reported having remote work as a formal accessibility accommodation, even though nearly one-quarter of staff identified as having a disability and more than half reported caregiving responsibilities. This gap does not mean that accessibility and care needs are rare. Rather, it suggests that many employees are managing those needs through broadly available hybrid arrangements instead of entering individualized accommodation processes that can be slow, burdensome, stigmatizing, or dependent on disclosure. This finding connects directly to the broader pattern in the data: remote work largely closes measurable gaps in comfort and effectiveness between staff with and without disabilities, while campus work reopens them. Universal flexibility by way of hybrid work therefore appears to function as a form of inclusive work design. It reduces barriers before they become individualized crises, allows staff to remain productive without having to prove exceptional need, and limits the administrative burden placed on employees, managers, human resources, and accommodation systems. The Return-to-Campus mandate risks reversing this logic by transforming needs that are currently managed through ordinary hybrid work flexibility into formal accommodation requests, medical leaves, grievances, or departures from the university.

The significance of these findings is that remote work appears to achieve what equity and inclusion policies are intended to produce: parity in workplace outcomes for groups

that have historically and socially been disadvantaged. Equity does not mean that every employee has the same needs, faces the same barriers, or uses the same support. It means that workplace conditions are designed so that those differences do not translate into systematic disadvantages. In this study, staff with disabilities, BIPOC staff, women, and non-binary staff reported poorer experiences in campus environments, but differences disappeared when work was performed remotely. That is not a minor administrative detail, it is evidence that the hybrid system that existed before the Return-to Campus mandate had been creating more equal conditions for participation, comfort, and effectiveness. The Return-to-Campus mandate therefore threatens to undo a form of parity that has already been achieved. For an institution committed to equity, accessibility, and inclusion, the goal should be to preserve and strengthen working arrangements that allow equity-deserving staff to participate on comparable terms—not remove them in the name of uniform attendance.

Conclusion

University administrators, including the President, have justified the Return-to-Campus mandate by arguing greater physical presence of staff will improve productivity, generate collaboration through spontaneous interaction, restore campus vibrancy, strengthen in-person service, rebuild workplace culture, and reinforce the university's prestige. These claims form the central case for requiring staff to spend more time on campus. The arguments used to justify the Return-to-Campus mandate do not withstand the evidence from this study.

First, physical visibility is not a reliable measure of productivity: 83% of respondents identified increased productivity as a benefit of remote work and 88% reported greater focus, while only 3% reported decreased productivity and 5% reported a reduced ability to focus. The productivity myth is the most clearly contradicted by the evidence. Many explained that productivity improvement comes from fewer interruptions, better focus, more control over the work environment, and improved access to private space. Productivity and well-being are closely correlated; a policy that impacts well-being will also impact productivity.

Second, collaboration does not depend on spontaneous in-person "collisions": 39% reported improved collaboration remotely, compared with 10% who reported reduced collaboration; 43% reported improved communication, compared with 9% who experienced communication challenges; and 32% reported improved relationships with colleagues, compared with only 5% who reported worse relationships. This suggests that the relevant question is not whether staff are physically present, but whether teams have effective collaboration norms, technology, meeting practices, and management support. If collaboration is currently an issue, it is more likely that certain staff feel excluded based on their gender, race or ability. It is therefore worth investigating the various gaps in comfort and effectiveness experienced by equity deserving groups.

Third, staff presence alone does not create campus vibrancy. Existing hybrid arrangements already concentrate meetings and collaborative activities on common mid-week campus days, demonstrating that purposeful presence can be coordinated without requiring near or full-time attendance. The vibrancy argument confuses visible presence with meaningful community. Staff working in back offices, cubicles, and crowded open spaces do not automatically create student-facing energy or campus life. Vibrancy is produced through programming, events, academic activity, public engagement, and intentional community-building. Requiring administrative staff to commute into unsuitable workspaces does not necessarily advance that goal. Furthermore, the campus presently is a hostile and inhospitable place to many, requiring their presence will only expand their discomfort.

Fourth, in-person work is not inherently better for service delivery, nor is the campus prepared for full attendance. Staff reported working outside regular hours more frequently on remote days than on campus days allowing them to extend service hours, respond to urgent needs, and maintain operational continuity. Students and external partners seem to prefer online service. Moreover, they receive better service in a hybrid setting as almost 97% staff have access to private space working remotely, while less than 45% have private space on campus. Members reported that students, faculty, and external partners often prefer virtual appointments, and that in-person walk-ins are limited outside peak periods. Remote service can expand access for clients with mobility issues, caregiving responsibilities, or scheduling constraints. It can also allow staff to extend service hours or maintain continuity during disruptions. Staff are rarely late to meetings working remotely. But with Toronto's traffic, who knows if 9:00am meetings are a viable option.

Fifth, workplace culture is not built through physical proximity alone. Staff with disabilities reported comparable comfort and effectiveness in comparison to staff without disabilities when working remotely, BIPOC staff reported significantly greater benefits from virtual collaboration and workplace support, and 53% of all respondents identified a healthier, less toxic culture as a benefit of remote work. The culture argument is perhaps the most important. A unilateral mandate introduced without consultation can damage the very culture it claims to protect. Staff do not experience workplace culture through proximity. They experience it through autonomy, respect, fairness, inclusion, and trust. A policy that replaces trust-based work with surveillance and attendance monitoring will weaken culture rather than strengthen it.

Finally, institutional prestige is not affected by hybrid work. The University of Toronto maintained essentially the same elite international position in nearly every rank and index throughout the pandemic lockdowns and hybrid-work period. In terms of prestige, what the University risks is losing its status as a keystone employer by making employment less attractive; approximately 60% of respondents (1,692 staff) said they would seek another position if required to work fully on campus.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that the Return-to-Campus mandate risks weakening productivity, collaboration, service continuity, workplace culture, retention, and the university's reputation as an employer, which are the very outcomes the administration seeks to improve.

The Return-to-Campus mandate further risks creating a broader set of organizational problems. It weakens vertical trust by signalling that staff cannot be relied upon to manage their work unless they are physically visible and subject to closer attendance monitoring. Trust between employees and senior leadership takes years to build but can be damaged quickly when professional judgment is replaced by surveillance and

micromanagement. The Return-to-Campus mandate increases commuting time, travel and living expenses, intensifies caregiving pressures, reintroduces accessibility barriers, and makes already demanding jobs less desirable. This is particularly counterproductive for a university that benefits from its position as a keystone employer: a large, respected public institution that should be able to attract and retain skilled workers by offering stable, inclusive, and high-quality employment. At a time when many employers use flexibility to compete for talent, the university is moving in the opposite direction by making work more costly, less accessible, and more difficult to reconcile with life outside the workplace.

The hybrid system that existed before the implementation of the Return-to-Campus mandate supported operational continuity in the short term by allowing staff to respond outside regular hours, reorganize work around temporary caregiving or health needs, and avoid full-day absences when they remain capable of working remotely. Over the longer term, flexibility strengthens recruitment, retention, institutional knowledge, and the university's reputation as an employer of choice. By dismantling these arrangements, the university may gain greater visible attendance while losing the trust, discretionary effort, continuity, and workforce stability on which its operations depend.

The Return-to-Campus mandate does not affect all employees in the same way. For staff with disabilities, the Return-to-Campus mandate reintroduces physical, sensory, psychological, and environmental barriers that remote work eliminates. These employees will need formal accommodations or take medical leave when they are otherwise capable of working. For BIPOC staff, the Return-to-Campus mandate removes some of the more structured and equitable conditions created by virtual collaboration and increases exposure to microaggressions, informal hierarchies, heightened scrutiny, and exclusionary workplace dynamics. For women, the Return-to-Campus mandate adds commuting time and expense to already unequal caregiving and household responsibilities, deepening time poverty and making work-life balance more difficult to sustain. For non-binary staff, the Return-to-Campus mandate may increase exposure to misgendering, social scrutiny, and workplace environments that feel less psychologically safe or inclusive. For caregivers, the Return-to-Campus mandate reduces the ability to coordinate school schedules, eldercare, medical appointments, and family emergencies without losing an entire workday, while increasing the likelihood of leave use, reduced hours, or departure from the university. The Return-to-Campus mandate has ripple effects that will inevitably harm workers and their families as it dismantles arrangements that have supported accessibility, equity, while placing the greatest burden on employees who already face the most significant structural constraints.

A sustainable policy should begin from an understanding that the reality of the university has already changed. Staff work is increasingly digital, cross-campus, client-responsive,

and dependent on virtual tools. The question is not how to return to a pre-pandemic workplace that no longer exists. The goal should be how to build a fair, effective, and accessible workplace for the institution that exists now. The university should be trying to improve its function as a hybrid employer, not sabotaging it.

For USW Local 1998 members, hybrid work flexibility is not a perk. It is part of the infrastructure that allows them to do their best work while sustaining their health, families, and long-term employment. A policy that removes this infrastructure without evidence, consultation, or compensation imposes real costs. Those costs will be borne by workers, but they will also be borne by the university through lower morale, reduced trust, weakened retention, and avoidable operational disruption. The path forward is not a blanket mandate. It is a negotiated, evidence-based hybrid work framework that respects workers, supports equity, and measures success by the quality of work performed rather than the visibility of workers performing it.



STRENGTH IN SOLIDARITY