

A GUIDE TO ENSURING FAIRNESS IN YOUR RETURN-TO-OFFICE STRATEGY

Unpacking the conversations HR can have with leadership to address 'location bias' in the workplace.



The fairness gap

Higher pay tied to more frequent office attendance

In the past two years:



68%

of companies have increased salaries based on an employee's office attendance

69%

are doing the same with bonuses



CHALLENGE

How can HR ensure managers remain objective and compliant when pay is being influenced by ‘subtle’ proximity cues rather than formal policy?

Attendance is not a reliable indicator of productivity, impact or outcomes, says Fiona Krautil CPHR, DEI Lead at Uniting and member of AHRI'S DEI Advisory Panel.



“Evidence consistently shows that employees working remotely can deliver equivalent – and in some cases higher – levels of performance when expectations and management practices are clear.” – **Fiona Krautil CPHR**

CHALLENGE

Employees with protected attributes are entitled to flexible work under the Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs, Better Pay) Act 2022. This includes employees who:

are pregnant	are the parent, or have responsibility for the care, of a child who is of school age or younger	have a disability
are a carer		are experiencing family and domestic violence
are 55 or older		
are caring for or supporting an immediate family or household member who requires care or support because they are experiencing family and domestic violence		

Note: As of 1 September 2026, all Victorian employees will have the legal right to work from home for two days per week.

CONVERSATION

“When HR sees leadership leaning toward attendance-based pay, the most effective approach is to reframe the conversation from presence to performance,” says **Krautil**.

She says HR can partner with leaders to protect both fairness and business performance by asking questions such as: “**What outcomes are we actually rewarding? If the goal is productivity, collaboration and results, then those should be measured directly.**”

“Rather than positioning this as resistance to return-to-office goals, HR can position it as a talent and performance strategy: organisations that enable flexible work access a broader talent pool, strengthen engagement and sustain higher productivity.”

The management blind spot

Proximity to leadership improves career prospects



77%

of leaders say proximity to leadership (achieved through regular office attendance) increases career development opportunities.

Source: Robert Half

“[Our] findings point to [an] emerging perception that time spent in the office can influence how contribution is judged, rather than a clear or formal rule being applied across organisations... The effect is likely to be indirect, where those who are more visible have greater access to decision makers and opportunities, which can then translate into progression over time.”

Clinton Marks, Director, Robert Half

CHALLENGE

How do you ensure employees have a fair shot at progression regardless of where they work from?

“Visibility is quietly becoming a form of currency in today’s workplace. While proximity to leadership can accelerate career progression, it also creates a challenge for organisations to ensure that recognition and opportunity are not unintentionally skewed toward those who are simply more present.”

**Clinton Marks, Director,
Robert Half**

CONVERSATION

Employers need to ensure equity in the provision of development opportunities among their workforce

HR plays a critical role in helping leaders recognise and mitigate ‘visibility bias’ – the tendency to equate physical presence with contribution and potential, says Krautil.

One practical starting point, she says, is to encourage leaders to conduct a self-audit ahead of performance reviews, which includes asking:

Who have I had the most informal interactions with?

Whose work is most visible to me – and whose might I be overlooking?

Am I evaluating outcomes, or proximity?

“Framing this as a leadership effectiveness issue – not a compliance issue – is key,” **says Krautil.**

CONVERSATION

Visibility bias can lead to ‘out of sight, out of mind’ decision-making, ultimately impacting talent retention, equity and the organisation’s ability to fully leverage its people.

Krautil says that HR can equip managers with practical tools, including but not limited to:

Structured
check-ins

Consistent
goal tracking

Calibration processes
that anchor performance
discussions in evidence,
not exposure

“Intentional leadership is required to ensure all talent – regardless of location – is seen, supported and developed.”

The two-tier workforce risk

Companies are encouraging people to return-to-office with both formal and informal perks.



state they require employees to attend the office more frequently than they did two years ago.



have taken deliberate steps to ease the transition by introducing a range of initiatives aimed at making in-office work more appealing, rewarding and sustainable.

DATA

Australian businesses say they have introduced:



33%

Wellness programs or mental health support



33%

Flexible working hours



32%

Team-building or social events



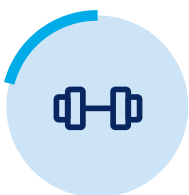
26%

Increased leadership visibility or engagement



26%

Free or subsidised meals/snacks in the office



21%

On-site amenities (e.g., gym, childcare, quiet rooms)



21%

Enhanced office facilities or redesigns



19%

Clearer career progression opportunities for in-office staff



16%

Commuter subsidies or travel allowances



13%

Parking support or shuttle services

CHALLENGE

How can HR enable equitable experiences and progression opportunities in a hybrid environment?

“Hybrid work is now a permanent feature of the workforce. The risk is not hybrid work itself, but how it is led”, says **Krautil**.

“Without intentional leadership, organisations can unintentionally create ‘in-groups’ – those in the office – and ‘out-groups’ – those working remotely – where contribution and opportunity are unevenly experienced.”

CONVERSATION

Employers need to balance the push for RTO with genuine support for remote employees.

Krautil says HR can guide line managers to lead hybrid teams inclusively by focusing on three priorities:

1

Set clear, shared expectations: Facilitate team conversations to co-design ways of working, ensuring clarity on how individual and team contributions are recognised and how inclusion is maintained.

2

Lead with intentional connection and care: Managers need to actively engage all team members – especially those working remotely – through regular, meaningful check-ins that go beyond task management to understand wellbeing, barriers and support needs.

3

Design inclusive moments that matter: Encourage teams to come together – virtually or in person – at key project milestones for learning and team relationship-building. These should be purposeful and mutually agreed, ensuring everyone has equitable access to connection and collaboration.

“Inclusive hybrid leadership is not accidental. It requires deliberate effort to create belonging, equity and high performance across all work arrangements.”

Gain the skills required
to support managers
to create engaged,
high-performing
teams.

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