

## Back to Work, Back To Reality

by BROCK WEIR

Are you among the many government employees who have been mandated back to the office this month?

Are you happy about it?

In a highly informal poll conducted amongst five impacted friends and acquaintances over the last week or two, feedback is decidedly mixed.

Those in favour of the full-on return-to-office scenario, rather than the minimum three-days-in-the-office model that carried Ontario into the New Year, have welcomed the opportunity to interact face-to-face with their coworkers once again, the novelty of seeing them through postage stamp-sized pane on their Zoom screen having worn off months, or even years ago.

They were looking forward to the chance of getting into a new routine with their coworkers and the informal exchange of ideas and views that are inextricably part of the in-person work process.

Those against the move, however, have a comparative laundry list of reasons they would rather stay put.

For some, it was the convenience factor of essentially being able to, as Dolly Parton so memorably sings, tumble out of bed, stumble to the kitchen, to pour themselves a cup of ambition ? or coffee, neither Dolly or I are here to judge what gets you going at the start of the day ? before presumably rolling or skipping to the desk to get cracking.

That wasn't the only matter of convenience that came up.

Others have cited their respective commute time from home to work and back again ? sometimes taking up close to three hours of their day ? as reason enough to stay put, noting this time, especially if endured five days a week, can be put to far better use, including more time to get, you know, the actual job for which they have been hired done.

It's not as though the impacted employees didn't have enough lead time to get themselves prepared ? mentally or otherwise. The move was announced this past August by Treasury Board President Caroline Mulroney.

?The government has been closely monitoring the evolution of in-workplace standards for public and private sector organizations,? she said in a statement. ?The return to five days per week in-workplace standard represents the current workforce landscape in the province and it reinforces our commitment to reflecting the people and businesses we serve across Ontario.

?Based on the nature of their work, over half of the Ontario Public Service are already required to attend the workplace full time. Starting on October 20, 2025, employees who have been attending their workplace for a minimum of three days per week will increase their attendance to four days per week as part of a gradual transition period to the full time in-office standard effective January 6, 2026. This transition is an important step that supports the government's ongoing efforts to build a more competitive, resilient, and self-reliant Ontario.?

In the five odd months since this announcement was initially made, I'm yet to be convinced that any element of this shift will result on a more competitive, resilient, and self-reliant Province, outside, perhaps, when it comes to the bottom line of businesses that strategically positioned themselves around places of government, sure in the knowledge there would be a steady stream of employees to take advantage of their products or services. They have undoubtedly sustained a heavy blow since we began to re-think our work models out of sheer necessity in 2020.

That said, however, I can see ? and have been on ? both sides of the coin.

When our world was quite literally locked down in that dark year, I anticipated something of a slowdown when it came to my weekly output. That didn't happen in the slightest and, as I settled into the work from home routine, I saw my own efficiency hit new heights.

Until they didn't.

I lasted about a year-and-a-half in the home office, not because the work was getting to be any more difficult to complete in the domestic setting as such, but rather because I started to feel the four walls of my home office start to close in around me. I made the decision to come back into the office earlier than many simply to preserve my own mental health and to re-establish clear lines between work and home.

Of course, I was afforded the luxury to choose ? an option that is no longer available to many government workers.

At the same time, for the people I manage, my own personal experience did nothing to influence my mindset that as long as the necessary work gets done, I don't really care whether it's completed at the office, at home, or any other place where you can set down a laptop for a few hours at a time. Of course, this line of work requires reporters go out to attend various events, meetings, and conduct in-person interviews, but as long as the job gets done, that's the main thing.

The move back to the office is meeting some resistance with a January 5 report from the CBC noting that, according to OPSEU, nearly 10,000 requests for ?alternative? work relations were still up for review.

?We should be asking who is this benefiting in the end?? OPSEU President JP Hornick told the CBC, adding the shift back doesn't make sense in today's work environment. ?The return to work seems to be based on pressure from perhaps corporate landlords from other municipalities.?

With myriad alternative options to keep employees engaged and productive, I'm inclined to agree with OPSEU that it ?makes no sense in this day and age.?

Yet, at the same time, one key benefit I see of going back into the office doesn't seem to be getting as much airplay ? that is, the benefits of getting out of your own environment and having real face-to-face interactions once more.

As Artificial Intelligence grows at a rate previously unfathomable and increasingly becomes an inextricable part of our lives whether we like it or not, the value of true human interaction can't be understated, nor can the importance of getting out beyond the walls we've created for ourselves.

Over the holiday downtime, I have to admit I succumbed one or twice to so-called ?doomscrolling,? which is defined as ?continually scrolling through and read depressing or worrying content on social media or a news site, especially on a phone.? And while some of the news was depressing enough, what was especially worrisome to me were those who found themselves questioning so many elements of established reality, however mundane, unable to determine real from fake, even casting doubt on some elements that are part of our collective lived experience and things we were able to see and hear for ourselves.

Some say the antidote for this is getting out and ?touching grass? ? and, fair enough ? but, at the end of the day, that all boils down to being a fully-fledged participant in our society, and this shift certainly couldn't hurt.

But efficiency? I still have my doubts.

Time will tell, but my one friend who is now anticipating a minimum 15 hours of commute time this week, will probably have something to say as well.