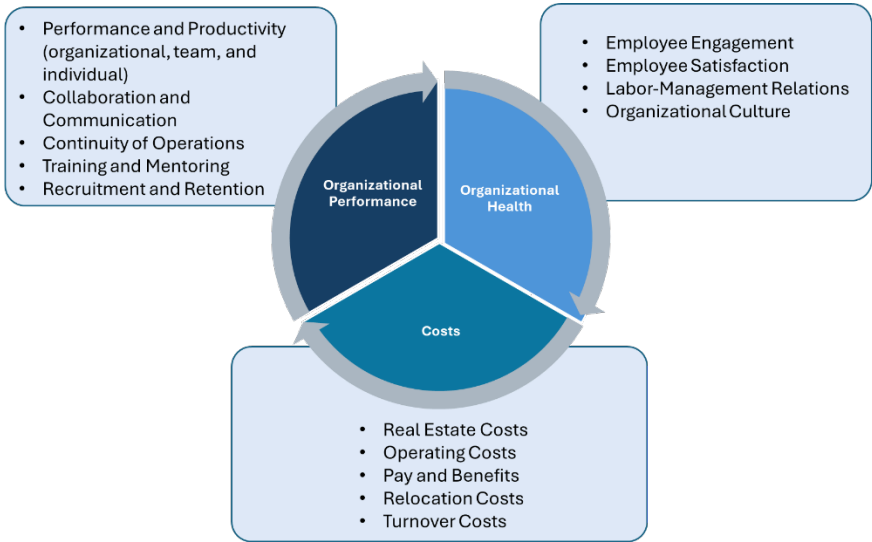


**Results In Brief**

On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025, the Trump administration issued a memorandum mandating federal employees to return to the office (RTO) five days a week. To meet the requirements of the memorandum, agencies have developed their RTO plans and new telework policies. This memorandum marks a significant shift from the previous telework arrangements in the federal government and departs from prevailing industry practices and broader societal expectations, where various forms of workplace flexibility have become the norm over the decades. More people, especially younger generations, prioritize work-life balance and flexibility over salary when making career decisions. The shift to full-time, in-person work also imposes significant, often unacknowledged, burdens on employees, such as increased financial costs and reduced child or elder care, which are shown to affect job performance and productivity.

Not all jobs require full-time, on-site presence of staff, and not all jobs are amenable to telework. As the environment continues to evolve rapidly, it is essential for federal agencies to continuously monitor the implementation of the RTO mandate and assess the benefits, challenges, and cost implications to make informed adjustments. As shown in the figure below, the Academy has developed a framework intended to serve as a tool for agencies to assess the impacts of the RTO mandate on agencies’ performance, organizational health, and costs.

**Returning to the Office Mandate Impact Assessment Framework  
(Overview)**



To support agencies’ assessments, the Academy’s framework includes a list of key questions for senior leaders to consider as they review the benefits and costs associated with the RTO mandate,

as well as guidance on key metrics and data sources to help agencies collect information to inform the decision-making process.

### ***Recommendations***

To assist agencies in navigating the RTO mandate, the Academy makes the following recommendations:

1. By the end of the calendar year, agencies should assess the effectiveness and cost implications of the RTO mandate and decide whether adjustments are needed.
2. Agencies should leverage all available workplace flexibility, such as alternative work schedule (AWS) and situational telework, as a strategic tool to improve organizational performance and increase productivity.
3. Agencies should devote resources to fostering meaningful in-person collaboration and coordination.
4. Agencies should create a space for learning, feedback, discussion, and exchanging best practices.

# Introduction

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On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025, the Trump administration issued a memorandum requiring the termination of remote work agreements and the return to the office (RTO) five days a week:

*“Heads of all departments and agencies in the executive branch of Government shall, as soon as practicable, take all necessary steps to terminate remote work arrangements and require employees to return to work in-person at their respective duty stations on a full-time basis, provided that the department and agency heads shall make exemptions they deem necessary.”<sup>1</sup>*

While agency heads have some flexibility to grant exemptions, the guidance generally directs full-time, in-person work. This white paper is intended to provide guidance to help agencies navigate the challenges as they manage the transition and ensure agencies’ long-term ability to fulfill their mission. In this paper, the Academy provides an assessment framework to guide the agencies’ review of the effects of the RTO mandate by the end of the calendar year and periodically thereafter.

The memorandum requires a sharp departure from longstanding and widespread practice in both the public and private sectors of permitting routine telework for at least part of the workweek. In 2010, under the Telework Enhancement Act, all federal agencies were given the liberty to decide their telework policies for qualified employees to best fit the needs of their mission. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a widespread shift to remote work in both the private and public sectors, and Congress enacted the Emergency Telework Act of 2020 to allow all qualifying federal employees to telework on a full-time basis during the pandemic. Regardless of the COVID-19-related increase in teleworking, the memorandum marks a significant shift from the previous telework arrangements. Agencies are tasked with seeking to maximize the benefits of in-person work five days a week while minimizing the challenges.

## **Methodology**

The National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) assembled a team of both Fellow volunteers and Academy staff. The methodology for this study involved several key components:

1. **Background Research:** Academy staff conducted background research on the history and use of telework in the public and private sectors. This component included a review of past legislation on telework policies and mandates, dating back to 2010.
2. **Interviews:** Academy staff conducted interviews with knowledgeable individuals during the six weeks of data collection. Interviewees include current and former government officials, subject matter experts, and other relevant stakeholders in both the public and private sectors. These interviews provided valuable insights on the potential benefits and challenges associated with the implementation of the RTO mandate and the guidance and support agencies need now and in the medium term.

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<sup>1</sup> "Return to In-Person Work – The White House," January 20, 2025

3. **Document Review:** Academy staff reviewed relevant policies, reports, and other documents surrounding RTO assessments. This review helped staff contextualize the current and future state and identify best practices and lessons learned.
4. **Analysis and Synthesis:** Academy staff analyzed and synthesized the data collected from interviews and document reviews to identify common themes and develop findings and recommendations.

This paper is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis and actionable guidance for managing the transition back to in-person work. It outlines findings and recommendations, which are organized into two key areas:

- Leveraging workplace flexibility to improve RTO implementation to ensure performance.
- Exploring opportunities to address logistical challenges and create a better staff experience.

Each section provides detailed insights and practical recommendations to help agencies navigate the complexities of the RTO mandate and promote effective and efficient operations.

## Leveraging workplace flexibility to improve RTO implementation to ensure performance

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The implementation of the RTO mandate varies across agencies. Some agencies are swiftly implementing the RTO mandate for quick compliance, while others are taking a more phased approach. At least one agency has already hit reverse on its RTO mandate--the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has reversed its RTO mandate weeks after returning staff to the office, allowing drug review staff and supervisors to resume telework at least two days a week.<sup>2</sup>

Workplace flexibility is needed to ensure that RTO policies are implemented in ways that sustain and advance, rather than interrupt, agencies' continuity, efficiency, and mission. Workplace flexibility refers to adaptable work arrangements, such as telework and flexible work schedules, which allow agencies to adjust how work is organized and delivered.

Some interviewees pointed out that flexibilities are embedded in the executive order—department and agency heads have the authority to “make exemptions they deem necessary.”<sup>3</sup> According to OPM, agencies may grant exemptions to the RTO mandate for employees with disabilities, qualifying medical conditions, or other compelling reasons.<sup>4</sup> Agencies need some flexibility to ensure that they meet performance targets and manage operational constraints. Most stakeholders Academy staff spoke with believe that, as the environment continues to change quickly, agencies' RTO/telework policies will evolve accordingly. Continuous monitoring and improvement are foundational.

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<sup>2</sup> "FDA Reverses Office Order, Lets Staff Work from Home," U.S. News, April 10, 2025, [<https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2025-04-10/fda-reverses-office-order-lets-staff-work-from-home>]

<sup>3</sup> "Return to In-Person Work – The White House," January 20, 2025

<sup>4</sup> Office of Personnel Management, "Guidance on Presidential Memorandum Return to In-Person Work," January 22, 2025

There is uncertainty among stakeholders on the objectives of the RTO mandate (e.g., enhancing oversight, fostering collaboration, boosting productivity, and reducing the federal workforce). It is important to clarify the desired outcomes when introducing a new policy or program, so agencies are in a position to evaluate whether the policy or program is meeting its objectives.

### ***Potential Benefits of Returning to Work***

In-person work offers some potential benefits that contribute to productivity and organizational performance. The office environment fosters collaboration and teamwork in ways that are difficult to replicate remotely. It is easier for team members to have spontaneous interactions, brainstorming, and quicker problem-solving. In-person interactions allow for deeper conversations to occur. Some interviewees highlighted that in-person interactions facilitate better training and mentoring. Being present in the office provides employees the opportunity to directly observe how more experienced colleagues perform their role, learn how to navigate politics in a highly complex environment, and gain exposure to organizational culture. Other continually cited benefits include the increased opportunities for camaraderie amongst staff as well as enhanced communication, and opportunities to foster community within an organization.

### ***Benefits of Workplace Flexibility***

Academy staff's research has highlighted the value of telework and other workplace flexibility. Over the years, the value of workplace flexibility has been the subject of numerous publications and studies. First, as many studies and articles have noted, telework generally has positive impacts on productivity. For example, in its July 2023 report, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reviewed eight studies that examined the relationship between telework and worker productivity and firm performance. These studies found that telework or other flexible work arrangements enhance worker productivity in several specific settings.<sup>5</sup> In its report *Telework: Private Sector Stakeholder and Expert Views*, GAO highlights "increased worker productivity" as a potential benefit of telework. Telework generally appears to enhance productivity by providing employees with more flexibility to manage their time and reducing workplace distractions.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, telework serves as a strong recruitment and retention tool for the federal government. Offering telework options can significantly increase the pool of applicants. For example, an OPM study shows that remote job announcements posted on the USAJOBS received, on average, 17 times more applications than non-remote jobs.<sup>7</sup> Multiple studies have shown that pay is not the only factor driving applicants' career decisions, and more people, especially younger generations, prioritize work-life balance and flexibility over salary when deciding whether to accept a job offer.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Government Accountability Office, "Telework: Growth Supported Economic Activity during the Pandemic, but Future Impacts are Uncertain," July 2023

<sup>6</sup> Government Accountability Office, "Telework: Private Sector Stakeholder and Expert Views," May 2025

<sup>7</sup> "OPM COA Oversight Written Testimony," Oversight House, March 9, 2023, [[https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/OPM-COA-Oversight-Written-Testimony\\_030923.pdf](https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/OPM-COA-Oversight-Written-Testimony_030923.pdf)]

<sup>8</sup> Hayes, Julian II, "Winning the Talent War: How to Attract and Retain Top Employees," *Forbes*, March 20, 2024, [<https://www.forbes.com/sites/julianhayesii/2024/03/20/winning-the-talent-war-how-to-attract-and-retain-top-employees/>]

A report from the Congressional Budget Office indicates that many people are open to accepting lower salaries if they are allowed to work remotely.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, remote work offers significant cost savings to the government by reducing expenses related to office space, utilities, and employee commute. According to an OPM study, telework allows the federal government to save more than \$90 million in costs, including commuting costs, reduced absences, training costs, rent, utilities, etc.<sup>10</sup>

The federal government is not alone in seeking these benefits. In the private sector, some form of telework has become the norm.<sup>11</sup> Research shows that 68% of US-based firms offer workplace flexibility, and there has been a growing trend towards the adoption of “structured hybrid”<sup>12</sup> models.<sup>13</sup> A Stanford study finds that only 12% of the CEOs who participated in the survey plan for an RTO mandate in 2025.<sup>14</sup> While some Fortune 500 companies, such as Amazon, ordered their staff back to the office five days a week last year, they did not enforce this requirement due to concerns of losing talent. In a survey of Amazon employees, over 70 percent of survey respondents considered leaving the company after the RTO mandate.<sup>15</sup> According to Work Forward’s Flex Report, a growing compliance gap exists between companies’ RTO requirements and actual attendance.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, not all jobs are amenable to telework, and not all jobs need to be done in person. Interviewees highlighted two driving factors of whether telework is appropriate: the nature of the job and the performance of the employee. For example, some jobs that require in-person interactions and collaboration may not be suitable for telework. Some interviewees suggested that agencies reexamine their jobs and positions to identify which jobs are fit for telework and which are not. The ultimate objective is to strengthen agencies' ability to deliver their missions effectively and efficiently.

Last but not least, the RTO mandate shifts significant, often-unacknowledged costs and burdens to employees, such as increased financial costs (e.g., commuting costs, childcare/eldercare costs, etc.), loss of flexibility and disrupted work-life balance, long commutes, disruption of routines, and heightened stress and burnout. The discussion has primarily focused on the potential benefits and challenges for agencies since the RTO mandate was issued, while the employees’ added burdens are often overlooked. Research in the private sector suggests that the misalignment

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<sup>9</sup> Congressional Budget Office, “Comparing the Compensation of Federal and Private-Sector Employees in 2022,” Washington, D.C., April 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Office of Personnel Management, “Status of Telework in the Federal Government Report to Congress,” Fiscal Year 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Elliott, “Flexibility at Work: Latest Data and Research,” April 22, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Employers have set specific requirements on when employees work from an office.

<sup>13</sup> Flex Index Q4 2024 report

<sup>14</sup> Jose Maria Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, Steven Davis, Kevin Foster, Brent Meyer, Emil Mihaylov, “US executives predict work from home is here to stay”

<sup>15</sup> Liu, Jennifer, CNBC, “Survey: 73% of Amazon workers are considering quitting after 5-day in-office mandate,” September 26, 2024 [<https://www.cnbc.com/2024/09/26/73percent-of-amazon-workers-considering-quitting-after-5-day-rto-mandate.html>]

<sup>16</sup> Flex Index Report [<https://www.flexindex.com/stats>]

between the RTO mandate and employee preferences leads to higher turnover and recruitment and retention challenges.<sup>17</sup>

### **Recommendation 1**

**By the end of the calendar year, agencies should assess the effectiveness and cost implications of the RTO mandate and decide whether adjustments are needed.**

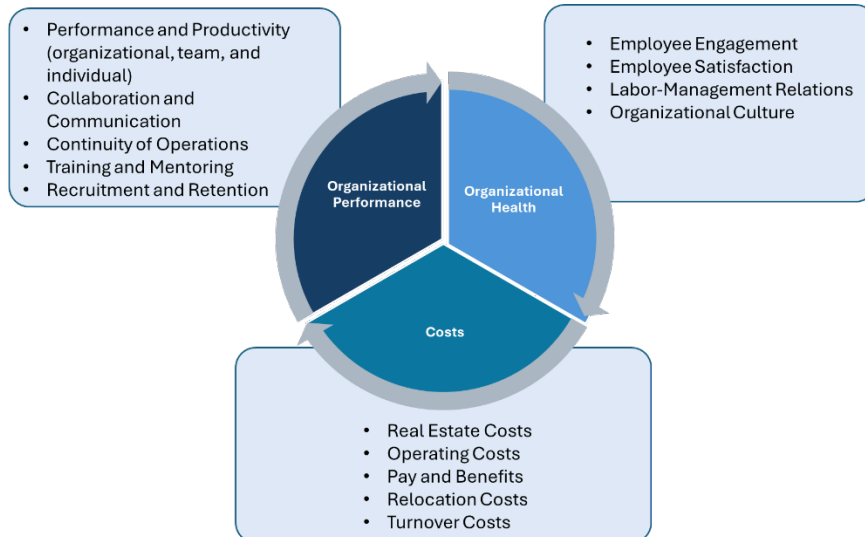
Agencies need tools and information to assess the effects of the RTO mandate and effectively navigate changes. Based on interviews with a range of stakeholders and a review of previous studies and policy documents, the Academy has developed an Assessment Framework to provide a structured approach to assessing the effects of the RTO mandate. It is important to establish effective mechanisms to collect and analyze data regularly to monitor the implementation of the mandate and make evidence-based policy adjustments.

This framework aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the effects of the RTO mandate on an agency's organizational performance, organizational health, and costs. The framework includes a list of key questions (Exhibit 2) for agency leaders to consider as they review the benefits and costs associated with the RTO mandate, as well as some key metrics and data sources (Exhibit 3) intended to help agencies collect information to make informed decisions. Appendix A provides a list of documents and studies that informed the development of the framework. Appendix B provides an analysis of the potential advantages and disadvantages of the RTO mandate, using the Assessment Framework.

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<sup>17</sup> Ding, Yuye and Jin, Zhao and Ma, Mark (Shuai) and Xing, Betty (Bin) and Yang, Yucheng, "Return to Office Mandates and Brain Drain," November 23, 2024

### Exhibit 1: Returning to the Office Mandate Impact Assessment Framework (Overview)



*Source: National Academy of Public Administration*

### Exhibit 2: Returning to the Office Mandate Impact Assessment Framework (Part I: Selected Key Questions to Assess the Implementation of RTO Mandate)

Categories for Key Questions	Subcategories	Key Questions
Organizational Performance: “an organization’s effectiveness in delivering mission-aligned results.” <sup>18</sup>	Performance and Productivity (organizational, team, and individual)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What metrics or methods does the agency use to track performance and productivity (organizational, team, and individual)?</li> <li>• How has the RTO mandate influenced organizational, team and individual performance and productivity?</li> </ul>
	Collaboration and Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What metrics or methods does the agency use to track collaboration and communication?</li> <li>• How has the RTO mandate fostered collaboration and teamwork among employees?</li> <li>• To what extent has the RTO mandate improved internal communication?</li> <li>• To what extent has the RTO mandate improved the working relationships among employees?</li> </ul>

<sup>18</sup> Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, MEMORANDUM FOR THE HEADS OF EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES, April 13, 2023



Categories for Key Questions	Subcategories	Key Questions
	Continuity of Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How has the RTO mandate influenced the agency's ability to ensure continuity of operations?</li> </ul>
	Training and Mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What metrics or methods does the agency use to track the outcomes of training and mentoring?</li> <li>How has the RTO mandate influenced the agency's ability to provide training and mentoring (formal and informal)?</li> </ul>
	Recruitment and Retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What metrics or methods does the agency use to track recruitment and retention?</li> <li>How has the RTO mandate affected the agency's ability to recruit and retain top talent? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has the agency tracked historical turnover rates, and how has it been impacted by RTO?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Has the agency reviewed and updated its workforce plan to ensure the agency has sufficient human capital capacity to deliver its mission?</li> </ul>
Organizational Health: "an organization's effectiveness in delivering mission aligned results." <sup>19</sup>	Employee Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What metrics or methods does the agency use to track employee engagement?</li> <li>How has the RTO mandate influenced employee engagement?</li> <li>How has the RTO mandate influenced the agency's ability to engage with new employees?</li> <li>What actions has the agency taken to strengthen employee engagement after returning to the office?</li> </ul>
	Employee Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What metrics or methods does the agency use to track employee satisfaction?</li> <li>How has the RTO mandate influenced employee and job satisfaction?</li> <li>To what extent has the RTO mandate caused additional costs and burdens to employees?</li> <li>Do employees have a means to/know how to comfortably provide feedback, ask questions, or voice concerns regarding their satisfaction with the agency's RTO policies and the implementation of the RTO mandate?</li> </ul>
	Labor-Management Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How has the agency engaged unions in implementing the RTO mandate?</li> </ul>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Categories for Key Questions	Subcategories	Key Questions
	Organizational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What metrics or methods does the agency use to track organizational culture?</li> <li>To what extent has the RTO mandate helped strengthen the connection between employees and the organizational culture?</li> <li>To what extent has the RTO mandate influenced the agency's ability to foster camaraderie and community?</li> </ul>
Costs	Real Estate Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent has the agency tracked the cost impacts of the RTO mandate?</li> </ul>
	Operating Costs	
	Pay and Benefits	
	Relocation Costs	
	Turnover costs (including recruiting, onboarding, training, offboarding, employee overlap, payouts, etc.)	

Source: National Academy of Public Administration

### Exhibit 3: Returning to the Office Mandate Impact Assessment Framework (Part II: Selected Key Metrics and Data Sources)

Categories for Key Questions	Subcategories	Key Metrics and Data Sources
Organizational Performance	Performance and Productivity (organizational, team, and individual)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agencies' existing performance metrics and indicators (agencies' strategic plans, measures in annual performance plans and reports; statutorily required data and deadlines)</li> <li>Customer Satisfaction Survey/pulse checks</li> <li>Absenteeism—the use of sick leave and annual leave</li> <li>Supervisors provide input by tracking task completion, quality of work, and deadlines.</li> </ul>
	Collaboration and Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employee Pulse Survey</li> <li>Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS)</li> <li>Qualitative feedback from supervisors and employees</li> </ul>
	Continuity of Operations (COOP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of days of interrupted/uninterrupted government services during emergencies (e.g., snow days, a pandemic health crisis)</li> </ul>

Categories for Key Questions	Subcategories	Key Metrics and Data Sources
	Training and Mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training/Mentoring experience satisfaction (employee survey or qualitative feedback from employees)</li> </ul>
	Recruitment and Retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turnover rates</li> <li>• Attrition rates</li> <li>• Time to hire</li> <li>• Fill rate for Mission Critical Occupations</li> <li>• Quality of Hire (feedback from hiring managers; performance rates and retention after 60 days, 1 year, etc.)</li> <li>• Retention after 1 year</li> <li>• Mission Support Customer Satisfaction Survey</li> </ul>
Organizational Health	Employee Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FEVS results, Employee Engagement Index; Employee Experience Index</li> <li>• Employee pulse survey</li> </ul>
	Employee Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FEVS results, Global Satisfaction Index</li> <li>• The number of internal complaints</li> <li>• Exit Interviews/Surveys</li> <li>• Employee pulse survey</li> </ul>
	Labor-Management Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback from unions</li> </ul>
	Organizational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FEVS results</li> <li>• Employee pulse survey</li> <li>• Feedback from employees</li> </ul>
Costs	Real Estate Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Costs for rent (has space grown or been reduced?)</li> <li>• Costs for additional parking</li> </ul>
	Operating Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Costs for maintenance, utilities, equipment (new technology/systems required to support the RTO mandate), office supplies, etc.</li> </ul>
	Pay and Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locality pay differentials</li> <li>• Commuting subsidies</li> </ul>
	Relocation Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expenses of relocating remote employees</li> </ul>
	Turnover costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Costs of replacement</li> <li>• Cost per hire</li> <li>• Onboarding and offboarding costs</li> <li>• Investment in training per employee</li> <li>• Knowledge transfer/costs of losing institutional knowledge</li> </ul>

*Source: National Academy of Public Administration*

Exhibit 3 provides a list of example metrics and data sources for monitoring organizational performance, organizational health, and costs. These metrics should be tracked quarterly or annually and ideally date back to 2020. These are generic and largely available data that can be used to assess issues and outcomes across agencies and sometimes divisions that vary in their RTO implementation.

Agencies could consider running pilots to relax RTO in certain segments of certain agencies, measure the outcomes of the pilots periodically, assess the effects of the RTO mandate, and determine whether to expand the pilot projects more broadly. OPM could organize a pilot across agencies for a particular job series or classification (e.g., cybersecurity professionals) and compare results across agencies.

In addition to cross-sectional comparisons, agency leaders can establish a baseline of key outcomes (i.e., baseline assessment) and compare baseline and post-implementation data to identify patterns that suggest the effects of the RTO mandate. The Academy recommends that agencies conduct an assessment of the implementation of the RTO mandate by the end of the calendar year. Agencies should start to plan for the metrics they can reasonably collect now. An agency's performance, organizational health, and costs can be affected by a range of factors, and it is difficult to disentangle the impacts of the RTO mandate from those of other events/policies, such as RIF, relocation, reorganization, etc. All analysis has limitations, but also helps to advance insight and consensus.

## **Recommendation 2**

**Agencies should leverage all available workplace flexibility, such as alternative work schedule (AWS) and situational telework, as a strategic tool to improve organizational performance and increase productivity.**

In the short term, regular telework is not available to federal employees, and interviewees emphasized the value of using other types of workplace flexibility to improve job performance and increase productivity. According to the OPM guidance, agencies have the authority to offer some workplace flexibilities to employees. For example, agencies can “approve the use of alternative work schedules if they are able to ensure delivery of uninterrupted full-time services/mission delivery for all days during the work week.”<sup>20</sup> Some agencies are still developing or updating their telework/workplace flexibility policies, and in some cases, without formal written policies in place, decisions were conveyed to employees verbally. Academy staff's research reveals agencies' varying interpretations of the intention of the RTO mandate. Thus, certain agencies are very restrictive in their policies and have canceled all workplace flexibilities, including AWS,<sup>21</sup> while others still offer some flexibilities to employees. Situational telework is still available to federal employees. The OPM's guidance specifies that situational telework should only be authorized

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<sup>20</sup> Office of Personnel Management, “FAQs on Return to In-Person Work Implementation Questions,” 2025

<sup>21</sup> Heckman, Jory. “IRS Axes Flexible Work Schedules, Rejects Many ‘deferred Resignation’ Applications.” Federal News Network - Helping feds meet their mission., April 18, 2025.  
Doubleday, Justin. “DHS abruptly ends flexible work agreements.” Federal News Network, April 28, 2025

when there is a “compelling agency need, such as a weather-related emergency.”<sup>22</sup> Many agencies have set limits on the number of days for situational telework.<sup>23</sup> Some interviewees noted that the expectation is that situational telework is to be “rarely used,” and this requirement has been strictly enforced.

As discussed earlier, providing workplace flexibility significantly improves employee satisfaction, enhances productivity, and attracts and retains high-quality employees. Agencies are encouraged to explore opportunities to take full advantage of all available flexibilities to mitigate the challenges in implementing the RTO mandate.

### **Recommendation 3**

**Agencies should devote resources to fostering meaningful in-person collaboration and coordination.**

It is important to emphasize that the benefits of returning to the office will not materialize automatically once an agency makes a full return to the office. The experiences of private sector companies also suggest that structured in-person gatherings have a more significant impact on workplace engagement than random office encounters.<sup>24</sup> It requires intentional efforts to promote in-person collaboration and engagement. This can be achieved by organizing events, providing training, and facilitating collaboration among employees. By implementing these strategies, agencies can ensure that the advantages of returning to the office in a deliberate way are impactful and sustained.

## **Exploring opportunities to address logistical challenges and create a better staff experience**

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Interviewees highlighted a range of logistical challenges associated with the implementation of the RTO mandate. For example, insufficient office space is a key concern raised by multiple agency officials. The federal government has spent the last 15 years shrinking its footprint and is experiencing significant challenges in providing adequate desk space for returning employees. Interviewees noted that some employees have to work in non-traditional spaces, such as conference rooms. The shortage of physical space can substantially impact productivity and employee performance, and reconfiguring office space presents a significant unfunded cost to agencies. Other logistical challenges discussed by interviewees include limited access to parking, insufficient desk availability, unstable internet access, and a shortage of essential office supplies

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<sup>22</sup> Office of Personnel Management, “FAQs on Return to In-Person Work Implementation Questions,” 2025.






<sup>23</sup> Department of Treasury, “MEMORANDUM FOR BUREAU DEPUTIES AND HR OFFICERS,” February 28, 2025

<sup>24</sup> Brian Elliott, “Flexibility at Work: Latest Data and Research,” April 22, 2025.

(e.g., computer monitors). Interviewees noted that federal agencies faced a tight deadline and didn't have sufficient time to prepare for the transition back to in-person work.

Some agencies have begun the discussion to address these logistical challenges. Exhibit 4 below provides some examples of agencies' implementation strategies and practices shared by interviewees.

**Exhibit 4: Examples of Agencies' Strategies and Practices to Address Logistical Challenges**

	<b>Share Space</b>	Explore opportunities to share space with other agencies or lease office space in a federal facility that is within the commuting area of where employees live.
	<b>Data-driven Decisions</b>	Have access to proper data to assess where employees are, where federal facilities are, and what kind of office space is available.
	<b>On-demand access to office space</b>	Leverage companies that provide on-demand access to office space. GSA has contracted with Liquid Space, a flexible office space provider, to lead a pilot aimed at transforming how agencies book, share, and manage workspace. GSA should make the results of the pilot public.
	<b>Co-working Space</b>	Leverage the co-working space provided by GSA. GSA's Federal Coworking project offers <a href="#">hubs of co-working space</a> throughout the country, allowing federal employees to share space, amenities, and services in government buildings. GSA should survey employees to see how sharing these spaces affects their performance, productivity, and engagement.
	<b>Optimize Workplace</b>	Optimize workplace to keep up with federal workforce's changing needs. In 2023, GSA launched the <a href="#">Workplace Innovation Lab</a> , where agency leaders were able to test out recent innovations in workplace furnishings and technology

*Source: National Academy of Public Administration*

In addition to logistical challenges, interviewees stressed that the RTO mandate presents a significant shift to federal employees who have established their routines when they work remotely during the past few years. Some employees must rearrange or find new care for their children or elderly parents, incur greater travel time and costs arising from fuel, parking, and public transportation, and have less energy for other activities after work, including professional development and continuing education.

To create a better staff experience, it is imperative that agencies help staff adapt to the new environment and normalize the in-person work environment. Several interviewees emphasize the importance of promoting effective communication in the implementation of the RTO mandate. Agency leaders must maintain regular communications with employees during the transition, even when the leaders don't have all the answers. Transparency and honesty are key. It is important to provide a reliable mechanism for employees to ask questions and share concerns. The lack of communication would lead to more confusion and distrust.

#### **Recommendation 4**

##### **Agencies should create a space for learning, feedback, discussion, and exchanging best practices.**

It is important for the federal government to host regular events (e.g., lunch-time learning events, after work social activities, virtual or in-person) to create a safe, welcoming, and productive environment to encourage agency leaders to share information, promising practices, and lessons learned with each other as they implement the RTO mandate. In the right setting, having direct conversations would allow agency leaders to exchange specific and actionable information more effectively and efficiently. Discussion topics are not limited to the RTO mandate. Interviewees discussed the value of inviting guest speakers, such as experts in managing distributed teams, to join the events and strengthen the discussion.

Engaging inter-agency groups, such as the Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) Council and the Federal Real Property Council, in the conversations is another effective way to promote cross-functional information sharing and facilitate the collaboration and coordination among agencies in implementing the RTO mandate. This white paper can serve as a starting point for further discussion on navigating challenges as agencies respond to various executive orders and other directives.

## Appendix A: Bibliography

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## Appendix B: Analysis of the Potential Advantages and Disadvantages of the RTO Mandate

	Organizational Performance	Organizational Health	Costs
<b>Potential Advantages of Mandatory RTO</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhanced collaboration, communication, and cross-silo encounters, and brainstorming</li> <li>More opportunities for spontaneous discussions to speed up decisions and can enrich input and ideas,</li> <li>More effective training (formal or on-the-job) or mentoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Camaraderie, more and deeper interpersonal relationships, fostering community</li> <li>Easier to sustain a culture or change it if desired</li> <li>Improved employee engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced “wasted” costs due to underutilized offices</li> </ul>
<b>Potential Disadvantages of Mandatory RTO</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lower productivity on focused tasks (due to office distractions)</li> <li>Lower non-mandatory effort (commuting drains discretionary energy)</li> <li>Increased absenteeism and sick leave</li> <li>Increased number of days of interrupted government services due to emergencies</li> <li>High turnover and attrition rates</li> <li>Longer time to hire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lower job satisfaction</li> <li>More interpersonal conflict (More frequent interaction may trigger disputes)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Higher costs for rent</li> <li>Higher costs for maintenance, utilities, equipment, office supplies, technology, etc.</li> <li>Increased recruitment costs due to employee turnover</li> <li>Increased payment for talent (e.g., locality pay differentials)</li> <li>Greater personnel costs (e.g., commuting subsidies)</li> <li>Relocation costs</li> </ul>

Note: This table was developed by Academy Staff to conceptualize the potential advantages and disadvantages of the RTO Mandate. Most of the analysis focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of full-time, mandatory RTO over full-time telework. The Study Team recognizes that the advantages and disadvantages of the RTO mandate are less significant when compared with a hybrid work model.

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