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# The future of work in creativity and innovation: perspectives on on-site versus remote work policies and practices

Maria P. Roche<sup>a</sup>, Prithwiraj Choudhury<sup>b</sup>, Barbara Larson<sup>c</sup> and Anne L. J. Ter Wal<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Harvard Business School, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA; <sup>b</sup>London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK; <sup>c</sup>D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA; <sup>d</sup>Imperial Business School, Imperial College London, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

Do organisations need mandatory return-to-office policies to foster creativity and innovation? This article evaluates that question through a balance synthesis of arguments presented in a live debate at the 2025 DRUID conference. The argument in favour of office mandates highlights that sustained and predictable patterns of co-presence enable the knowledge spillovers, tacit knowledge exchange, serendipitous encounters, intimate co-creation, and cultural cohesion that are critical to creativity and innovation. The case against such mandates stresses their potential costs, including reduced autonomy, psychological reactance, weaker motivation, homophily, and the risk of mistaking presence for effective collaboration, especially given the growth of distributed innovation and given that remote work allows firms to tap into distant talent. Our collective assessment is that co-presence clearly matters for creative and innovative work. The evidence presented during the debate does not clearly support the stronger claim that the threshold must be a majority of working time, or that the policy instrument must be a mandate. We conclude that the key challenge is not simply where people work, but how organisations facilitate interaction and collaboration across modes of work.

## KEYWORDS

Creativity; innovation; remote work; office mandates; collaboration; organization

## JEL CLASSIFICATION

O31; O32; M54; D83; J81

## 1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of remote and hybrid work in recent years has made the question of where knowledge workers should spend their time one of the most consequential and contested issues in contemporary management. Organisations have responded in markedly different ways. Some have embraced flexibility as a strategic advantage in the competition for talent. Others have introduced sweeping return-to-office (RTO) mandates, arguing that collaboration, culture, and innovation depend on physical proximity in ways that remote work cannot fully support. Against this backdrop, the DRUID conference hosted a debate on 27 June 2025, on the motion: *'Let it be resolved that this conference believes that mandatory on-site work policies, which require employees to be physically present for the majority of the working week, are necessary to foster creativity and innovation in organizations'*. The debate featured Professors Maria Roche (Harvard Business School) and Anne Ter Wal (Imperial Business School) arguing in favour of the motion, and Professors Barbara Larson (Northeastern University) and Raj Choudhury (London School of Economics) arguing against it.

The motion is deliberately precise. It goes beyond the claim that offices can support creative work, or that face-to-face interaction may sometimes produce better outcomes than remote alternatives. Instead, it advances a stronger proposition that without mandated, majority in-person presence, organisations cannot reliably sustain the conditions required for creativity and innovation. This proposition is grounded in three interconnected arguments. First, physical co-presence generates knowledge spillovers, serendipitous encounters, and transfers of tacit knowledge that are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate digitally. Second, frequent and predictable face-to-face interaction is critical for sustaining these social processes, while current digital communication tools remain an imperfect substitute. Third, without a mandatory

**CONTACT** Anne L. J. Ter Wal  [a.terwal@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:a.terwal@imperial.ac.uk)  Imperial Business School, Imperial College London, South Kensington Campus, London SW7 2AZ, UK

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policy, the collective action problem inherent in hybrid arrangements will systematically reduce the density of co-presence on which these benefits depend.

At the same time, critics raise important concerns about mandatory on-site policies as a means for fostering creativity and innovation. One central critique is that such policies impose motivational costs by reducing autonomy and triggering psychological reactance, thereby undermining the discretionary effort and risk taking on which creative work depends. Critics also argue that office-centric arrangements reinforce homophily rather than the diversity of thought essential for innovation, and that the assumed benefits of in-person collaboration ignore well-documented problems with face-to-face ideation processes. More fundamentally, the debate may be better framed not around where work takes place, but around how organisations structure and support collaborative work across different modes of working.

This article first synthesises the arguments presented during the live debate and then offers a balanced perspective on the role of mandatory on-site policies in fostering creativity and innovation. We conclude that, although the evidence that face-to-face interaction and collaboration matter for knowledge spillovers and effective collaborative work is robust, our understanding of whether a majority-time mandate is the necessary and optimal instrument for securing those benefits is less advanced and presents ample material for future research.

## **2. Are mandatory on-site work policies necessary to foster creativity and innovation in organisations? Arguments and counterarguments**

The shift to remote and hybrid work models in recent years, such as work-from-home (WFH) or work-from-anywhere (WFA) arrangements, has ignited a global debate about the future of the workplace, often framing the physical office as a relic of a bygone era. Yet the effects of remote work on creativity and innovation are far from straightforward. Organisations have adopted markedly different approaches. Some have enthusiastically embraced remote work, while others have mandated a return to the office for most of the working week. This divergence reflects the complexity of weighing the benefits of flexibility against those of face-to-face interaction and collaboration. In what follows, we outline the key arguments for and against mandatory on-site work policies that require employees to be physically present for the majority of the working week as a means of fostering creativity and innovation.

### **2.1. Arguments**

The rapid expansion of flexible and remote working arrangements, especially since the coronavirus pandemic, has led many employees to view such arrangements as an acquired right that they are reluctant to relinquish. In this section, we (Roche and Ter Wal) argue that on-site office policies mandating a return to the workplace for the majority of the working week are essential for fostering creativity and innovation in organisations. We develop this argument in three steps. First, we explain why creativity and innovation are inherently social processes. Second, we show why frequent and predictable patterns of face-to-face interaction and collaboration are critical to sustaining these processes and why digital communication tools may be a poor substitute. Finally, we argue that the frequent and predictable patterns of face-to-face exchange necessary for creativity and innovation may not occur without a mandatory policy requiring employees to spend most of their working time on site.

#### **2.1.1. Creativity and innovation as a social process**

A central argument in favour of mandatory on-site work policies is that creativity and innovation are fundamentally social phenomena (Perry-Smith 2006). Ideas seldom emerge from solitary effort. Rather, they are sparked, shaped, and strengthened through interaction with others, and they gain traction through social influence (Battilana and Casciaro 2013; Burgelman 1983; Howell and Higgins 1990).

First, creative ideas are generated through both intentional and unintentional social interactions. A core tenet of creativity and innovation research, established decades ago by Schumpeter (1939), is that creativity and innovation arise through the recombination of prior knowledge (Fleming 2001; Katila and Ahuja 2002). Networks of interpersonal exchange and collaboration form the social fabric through which such recombination occurs (Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr 1996). These interactions enable knowledge spillovers from

one organisation to another (Audretsch and Feldman 1996) or from one of its units to another (Hansen 1999). Workplace interactions also facilitate the transfer of tacit knowledge, allowing ‘sticky’ problem-solving expertise to move across organisational boundaries (Von Hippel 1994), enabling solutions developed in one context to find analogous application in another (Hargadon and Sutton 1997), and supporting the informal mentoring and socialisation of newcomers (Kammeyer-Mueller et al. 2013). Meanwhile, serendipitous exchanges – the classic ‘corridor conversations’ and ‘watercooler chats’ – may provide unexpected inputs and inspiration for novel ideas (Busch and Barkema 2022). Taken together, these dynamics suggest that individuals whose day-to-day interactions span diverse networks and bridge disparate groups may be especially well positioned to spot opportunities for novel ideas (Burt 2004).

Second, creative ideas are typically further elaborated through social exchanges. While the initial spark of an idea may arise from the broader networks in which employees are embedded, ideas are often refined through close collaboration in pairs or small groups. Under favourable circumstances, working together on creative tasks can take the form of ‘intimate co-creation’ (Rouse 2020), in which a generative energy emerges between collaborators as the boundaries between individual contributions fade and psychological safety enables the free exchange of ideas without fear of judgement (Edmondson 1999). For example, managers and technologists in R&D may be most effective in integrating science and business insight when they productively challenge each other’s inputs in intense, sparring-partner-style collaborations (Ter Wal et al. 2020). Groups deeply engaged in creative work may even experience ‘group flow’, a collective state in which group members are fully present and contribute in synchrony to reach peak creative energy (Csikszentmihalyi 1997; Lavoie, Baer, and Rouse 2025). Even ideas pursued individually often depend heavily on input from others, whether through solicited or unsolicited feedback (De Stobbeleir, Ashford, and Buyens 2011; Ter Wal, Criscuolo, and Salter 2023).

Third, creative ideas gather momentum and ultimately become innovations through social processes of advocacy and influence (Allen 1977; Howell and Higgins 1990; Lechner and Floyd 2012). In most organisations, including those that explicitly pursue creativity and innovation, novel ideas are often met with scepticism (Mueller, Melwani, and Goncalo 2012). As a result, ideas that depart from the status quo typically require careful championing and influencing if they are to gain traction rather than be prematurely dismissed (Battilana and Casciaro 2013; McEvily and Ter Wal 2023).

Finally, a strong, cohesive organisational culture is often described as the ‘secret sauce’ that distinguishes successful firms and serves as a powerful antecedent of innovation. In this view, culture is not simply a set of rules or a mission statement. Rather, it is an emergent property of sustained shared experience and is built through in-person interactions, social bonds, and a shared sense of purpose (Scott and Bruce 1994).

### ***2.1.2. The benefits of face-to-face interaction and the limits of remote work***

Canonical work suggests that physical co-presence is critical for organisations seeking to unlock the full creative potential of their employees (Marshall 1920). The idea of the ‘death of distance’ resurfaces with each wave of new communication technology (Cairncross 1997), as optimists predict that such tools will render physical proximity irrelevant. Yet this perspective overlooks a fundamental and enduring truth about human enterprise.

Face-to-face exchanges are critical in fuelling the social processes through which promising creative ideas emerge. Innovation thrives on knowledge spillovers, the transfer of tacit knowledge, and serendipitous exchanges. The causal importance of these chance encounters has been demonstrated rigorously. For example, Atkin, Chen, and Popov (2022), using smartphone geolocation data to track face-to-face meetings between workers at different establishments in Silicon Valley, find that face-to-face interactions substantially increase knowledge flows, as measured by patent citations. They estimate that eliminating one quarter of face-to-face meetings in Silicon Valley would reduce citations by approximately 8 percent. Their back-of-the-envelope calculation further suggests that if 25 percent of office workers were to work permanently from home, face-to-face meetings would fall by 17 percent and citations by 5 percent. Critically, Atkin, Chen, and Popov (2022) provide evidence that these effects are driven specifically by serendipitous rather than planned meetings, which are precisely the kinds of spontaneous encounters that office environments facilitate, and remote work forecloses.

Although digital technologies allow work to continue across distance, they are poor substitutes for in-person interaction when it comes to the generative dimensions of innovation. Online meetings are

more structured, more agenda-driven, and narrower in scope. This pattern is supported in a large-scale study by Yang et al. (2022). Using data from 61,182 Microsoft employees during the pandemic-induced shift to firm-wide remote work, the authors find that remote work led collaboration networks to become more siloed and static, with fewer bridging ties between disparate groups, fewer new connections formed each month, and a shift from synchronous to asynchronous communication. These changes are precisely the kinds of changes that impede the knowledge recombination process at the heart of innovation.

Physical co-presence is also central to the elaboration of ideas through intimate co-creation and feedback provision (De Stobbeleir, Ashford, and Buyens 2011; Rouse 2020). Proximity does not merely make interaction more convenient; it changes its character by creating rhythms of informal exchange that are essential to creativity. A well-known example comes from a 1940s laboratory in Philadelphia, where Kay McNulty, Betty Holberton, Jean Bartik, and their colleagues programmed the world's first supercomputer, the ENIAC, by working shoulder to shoulder for hours, solving problems on the fly, and effectively inventing programming itself in the process (Kleiman 2022). While the organisational context differs from today's knowledge firms, this example illustrates something durable, namely that in such moments of intimate co-creation, collaborators may experience a state of shared flow that is difficult to replicate through scheduled video calls. By contrast, remote participation often fragments attention, as individuals are tempted to multitask and become distracted, thereby undermining the immersive states of concentration that are so crucial for advancing novel ideas. Moreover, the richness of face-to-face communication, such as its nonverbal cues, emotional energy, and subtle signals of enthusiasm or hesitation, cannot be fully replicated online.

Quantitative evidence reinforces this picture. The classic Allen Curve (Allen 1977) demonstrates that the probability of communication falls sharply with physical distance, even within a single building (see also Nowinska and Pedersen 2023). More recent empirical work extends this insight by examining realised technology adoption choices. Roche, Oettl, and Catalini (2024), for example, find that knowledge spillovers between startups in a co-working hub were strongest within a 20-metre radius and decayed so rapidly that technology adoption from peer firms beyond that distance was indistinguishable from those of startups located on different floors entirely. Informal corridor conversations, unplanned encounters with decision-makers, and visibility in everyday interactions all provide critical opportunities to cultivate support for creativity and innovation (Kanter 2000). In a face-to-face office environment, opportunities to build buy-in arise continually. Over lunch, a creative worker may casually mention a project to gauge reactions and begin building support. An innovator may seize an unexpected opportunity to speak with a decision-maker between meetings, even though the same person would have been reluctant to schedule a formal online meeting for that purpose. These political interactions matter especially for junior or newly hired employees, who lack established networks and depend on impromptu exchanges to build influence, understand organisational dynamics, and gain tacit knowledge from senior colleagues (Sandvik et al. 2020). In a remote-first environment, idea generators may remain less visible to decision-makers, and their ability to build influence through everyday presence is severely hampered.

Finally, face-to-face interaction is critical to building and sustaining an organisation's culture of innovation. In-person exchange helps generate the cohesion and psychological safety that support creative energy and collaborative work (Edmondson 1999). Culture cannot be simply uploaded to the cloud. Platforms such as Slack or Zoom may facilitate coordination but are less well suited to generating the emotional resonance that binds teams together. The empirical evidence on this is striking. Emanuel and Harrington (2024), studying a Fortune 500 firm, find that when offices closed and workers shifted to remote work, training time fell by 26 percent and manager one-on-one time by 34 percent, while promotion rates declined sharply. These effects were especially pronounced for junior employees who rely most heavily on in-person mentorship and informal learning. This is not merely an operational concern. As Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella has noted, 'space is the ultimate collaboration tool that was refined in a 200-year period' (Nadella, cited in Grant 2022).

### **2.1.3. The need for mandatory on-site policies and majority worktime on site**

The intuitive appeal of remote and flexible working arrangements for both employees and employers is clear. Employees have come to cherish the autonomy they have gained in deciding where and when to work,

while employers are drawn to the prospect of reducing the costs associated with providing physical workspaces and accessing talent. Against this backdrop, the case for mandatory on-site policies must answer two distinct questions: why impose a mandate, and why require on-site presence for a majority of working time?

On the first question, a mandatory policy is a classic solution to a collective action problem. In the absence of such a policy, each employee, acting in their own rational self-interest, may opt to work remotely to avoid the inconvenience of commuting, even if they would prefer a more vibrant office environment in which their colleagues are also present. When everyone makes this choice, however, the collective benefit of a rich in-person environment is lost. The resulting stochastic pattern of attendance can produce fragmented team schedules and coordination failures, frustrating the employees who do come in the office only to find their colleagues absent. A mandatory policy can, therefore, serve as a strategic tool for aligning individual behaviour with the organisation's collective goal of innovation, while allowing the organisation to internalise benefits that may already be priced into workers' salaries. By contrast, these benefits may dissipate when attendance is left entirely to employees' discretion. Furthermore, without a critical mass of co-located individuals, the innovative potential of offices and workspaces intentionally designed to promote creative collisions cannot be fully realised. Investment in physical infrastructure is only justified when people are reliably present to use it.

On the second question, majority time on-site may be the minimum level of co-location required for these benefits to materialise. When attendance is left to individual discretion, the result is a patchwork of schedules in which employees frequently miss one another. The density of co-presence that supports serendipity and creative flow is thereby weakened. Creativity and innovation depend not only on bilateral exchanges, but also on collective energy and momentum that build over time and cannot be scheduled in advance. Good ideas do not arrive on cue, and breakthroughs often emerge from the sustained, repeated proximity that makes chance encounters frequent enough to matter (Gagliardi and Roche 2026). Occasional on-site presence may allow employees to 'touch base,' but it does not create the rhythm required for collaborative creativity. An innovative culture is built through sustained immersion in shared experience, enabled by the everyday interplay of informal exchanges, serendipitous encounters, and deep collaboration – processes that develop over weeks and months, not through occasional on-site days alone.

## 2.2. Counterarguments

While proponents of mandatory on-site work policies emphasise the social nature of creativity and innovation, this view overlooks substantial evidence that such policies may undermine the very outcomes they seek to promote. Our counterarguments (Larson and Choudhury) against the motion rest on four key observations. First, mandatory policies fundamentally alter employee motivation in ways that reduce discretionary effort and creative engagement. Second, office-centric work arrangements reinforce homophily rather than the diversity of thought essential for innovation. Third, the assumed benefits of in-person collaboration ignore well-documented problems with face-to-face ideation processes that privilege certain voices over others and promote homogenous thinking. Finally, the debate itself is mis-framed: the critical factor is not physical location but rather how organisations structure and support collaborative work across work modalities, especially given the rise in distributed work and distributed teams in the context of innovation.

### 2.2.1. Mandatory policies undermine intrinsic motivation

First, the mandatory nature of on-site work policies creates motivational dynamics that work against creativity and innovation. When organisations impose forced proximity requirements, they reduce employee autonomy and increase perceptions of monitoring, both of which decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci, Olafsen, and Ryan 2017). And yet, intrinsic motivation is one of the main drivers of discretionary effort, experimentation, and persistence that characterise creative work (Amabile 1988).

Mandates trigger psychological reactance, particularly when employees perceive them as removing previously available freedoms (Brehm 1966; Deci and Ryan 2000). This reactance can manifest as reduced effort and even counterproductive work behaviours (Thiel et al. 2023). The effects are not merely transient:

when organisations break the psychological contract by revoking flexible work arrangements, the damage to trust and commitment persists over time (Robinson 1996).

These dynamics appear particularly pronounced in the context of return-to-office (RTO) mandates, where employees who are experienced in remote work are later given mandates to give up that flexibility (e.g. Ding and Ma 2023). However, the fundamental insight applies even outside the context of RTO mandates. Any mandatory work location policy constrains autonomy, and this constraint can have a negative effect on the intrinsic motivation that fuels creative work. Organisations requiring in-office presence risk losing not only current employee engagement but also their ability to attract and retain top talent, as workers increasingly prioritise flexibility in employment decisions (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2023).

Conversely, two recent randomised controlled trials conducted within firms suggest that hybrid work requiring less than a majority of time in the office can actually result in employee outcomes that enhance motivation and performance. Choudhury et al. (2024) show that around 23–40% in-person days was optimal for a range of outcomes including work-life-balance, employee satisfaction and mentorship, all relevant for positive innovation outcomes. Research on a work-from-anywhere (WFA) arrangement also showed increased productivity due in part to increased employee effort (Choudhury, Foroughi, and Larson 2021). Bloom, Han, and Liang (2024) conducted an RCT in context of a Chinese technology company, documenting positive effects of hybrid work on increased employee satisfaction and lower attrition rates, especially for women.

### **2.2.2. Office work reinforces homophily over diversity**

Physical co-location tends to reinforce interactions among similar individuals rather than fostering the diverse perspectives essential for innovation. When given the choice of informal interaction partners, co-located employees are more likely to choose demographically similar others, with particularly strong preferences for same-gender interactions (Kleinbaum, Stuart, and Tushman 2013).

In fact, the very evidence that the argument cites in favour of on-site mandates undermines the case for broad attendance policies. The steep decay of knowledge spillovers documented by Roche, Oettl, and Catalini (2024) – with spillovers between collaborators beyond 20 metres apart indistinguishable from those on different floors extending to 30 metres only where walking paths cross a common space – implies that simply being in the same building delivers little proximity benefit unless collaborators are seated in close quarters. Collaborators working within 20–30 metres of each other on a regular basis is an unlikely scenario in most large organisations, especially for the cross-functional interactions in which novel recombination is most likely to occur. Thus, a blanket in-office mandate may get employees through the door but does not necessarily place the right people next to each other, making it a poorly calibrated policy instrument for achieving the needed micro-geographic proximity.

In contrast, remote and hybrid work arrangements can enable greater diversity along multiple dimensions. Remote job postings attract more diverse and more experienced applicant pools (Hsu and Tambe 2025), expanding the range of perspectives organisations can access. Neurodiverse employees often benefit from the ability to contribute in remote settings that accommodate different working styles and communication preferences (Brooks et al. 2024).

### **2.2.3. In-person ideation does not guarantee quality**

Even if employees are required to be in-office only part of the week (e.g. the ‘majority’ cited in the motion), there is no guarantee that in-person ideation and collaboration will yield more creative innovative solutions, for several reasons. First, face-to-face ideation is constrained by the need for turn-taking, resulting in ‘production blocking’ (Diehl and Stroebe 1987, 1991). Second, dominant personalities tend to prevail in face-to-face settings, in part through ‘signaling competence’ (Anderson and Kilduff 2009), which can leave ideas of less dominant members unaired or discounted. Third, groups ideating synchronously typically anchor on initial ideas, with subsequent ideation becoming more incremental and less novel (Kohn and Smith 2011). And finally, the immediacy and transparency of in-person interaction that proponents celebrate can lead to increased fears of social evaluation and performance pressure, which then inhibits the experimentation and risk-taking essential for breakthrough thinking (Bernstein 2012).

In fact, methods like the Delphi technique and nominal group processes were originally developed to mitigate the adverse effects of face-to-face interaction (Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson 1975). More

recently, electronic brainstorming (Gallupe, Bastianutti, and Cooper 1991) and brainwriting (Paulus and Yang 2000) techniques have been developed, again specifically to overcome these face-to-face deficits. It seems plausible that if in-person ideation naturally fostered the best creative outcomes, developing these corrective techniques would have been unnecessary. While this evidence derives primarily from structured ideation tasks, the underlying mechanisms – evaluation apprehension, conformity pressure, and status-driven deference – are general features of face-to-face social interaction (Asch 1956; Zajonc 1965) and can be expected to operate similarly in the unstructured informal exchanges that on-site mandates are designed to promote.

#### ***2.2.4. Distributed innovation is not new and can yield enhanced quality and novelty***

Remote work is only the latest iteration of distributed innovation, a phenomenon which has been studied for more than two decades (e.g. Choudhury 2017; Hinds and Kiesler 2002; W. R. Kerr 2008; Singh and Marx 2013). Recent evidence shows increased importance of global collaborative patents (e.g. S. P. Kerr and Kerr 2018) and global mobile inventors (e.g. Bahar et al. 2024), indicating that innovation is increasingly being performed by distributed teams. By virtue of their organisational structures, many global and multinational organisations conduct de facto distributed innovation work, with members of innovation teams based in different geographic locations (Gassmann and Von Zedtwitz 1999).

Furthermore, distributed teams are often not helped by individual members being present in their respective offices for a majority of days. Research shows that members of such teams engage in ‘time shifting,’ moving work-related communication outside regular business hours to bridge temporal distance (Chauvin, Choudhury, and Fang 2024). Meanwhile, the interactions that do build collaborative capacity tend to occur not through routine co-presence but through temporary colocation events such as conferences (Chai and Freeman 2019), research symposia (Lane et al. 2021), and company offsites (Sevcenko et al. 2024).

Finally, geographic distribution gives teams access to diverse local knowledge pools, increasing recombinatorial potential for novel ideas (Cummings 2004; Vestal and Danneels 2022), though realising this potential depends on effective cross-location knowledge integration (Singh 2008). Recent evidence points to the fact that remote work arrangements allow firms to tap into distant talent pools (e.g. Hsu and Tambe 2025) and leads to skill upgradation in the labour market (e.g. Wang, Zhang, and Liao 2026).

#### ***2.2.5. Infrastructure and management practices matter more than location***

Research increasingly suggests that the quality of remote and hybrid work arrangements depends more on their implementation than on a mandated majority of workdays in the office. Two factors emerge as particularly important: technology affordances and management practices.

Technology has evolved substantially since early studies of virtual teams. Easier access to rich communication media, particularly video, has reduced problems associated with the sharing of situational knowledge (Cramton 2001) and the tendency to form abstract, stereotyped impressions of remote collaborators (Wilson, Crisp, and Mortensen 2013). Remote workers increasingly find ways to build trust and social connection through technology (Hardin et al. 2025), and organisations that provide multichannel communication tools see improvements in both collaboration and productivity (Camp et al. 2024).

Management practices play an equally critical role. Effective managers of hybrid teams structure the work environment in ways that create productive rhythms of interaction. Research on global virtual teams found that outcomes depend on ‘appropriate interaction incidents and the structuring of those incidents into a temporal rhythm’ (Maznevski and Chudoba 2000, 489). This means establishing regular cadences that provide opportunities for both task-focused collaboration and relationship building (Schinoff, Ashforth, and Corley 2020) and being deliberate about when teams come together in person versus work asynchronously. Such structured approaches avoid both the isolation of poorly managed remote work and the ‘negative effects of working in a depopulated onsite office’ that can occur when hybrid arrangements leave employees uncertain about when colleagues will be present (Rockmann and Pratt 2015, 150).

Supervisors serve as critical proxies for the organisation (Eisenberger et al. 2002), and in remote contexts, the quality of supervisory support shapes employees’ sense of connectedness and their willingness to invest discretionary effort (Eisenberger, Fasolo, and Davis-LaMastro 1990). When managers actively foster connection and provide appropriate support, remote and hybrid workers remain engaged and productive.

### 3. Finding common ground

Thus far, we have highlighted opposing perspectives about the role of mandatory physical presence in fostering creativity and innovation. We now, instead of focusing on differences, redirect the debate towards identifying shared principles that could guide organisational decision-making. Specifically, we suggest treating work location policy as a context-dependent design decision that ought to be shaped by the nature of the work, the workforce, the maturity of hybrid infrastructure, and the strategic goals of the organisation. This reframing reflects a fundamental insight that emerges from both sides of the debate, namely, that there is no single work arrangement that simultaneously optimises for all of the conditions that forms of creativity and innovation may require.

#### 3.1. *Creativity and innovation are social processes*

Neither side of the debate disputes that creative work depends on social interaction. The counterargument pushes back not on the importance of social processes but on whether mandated office presence is the best instrument for enabling them. This shared foundation matters, because it means the debate is not about whether interaction drives innovation but about what configuration of in-person and remote work best enables the right kinds of interaction for a given organisation, team, task type, and individual.

#### 3.2. *In-person interaction is valuable*

The experimental evidence available to date points towards a middle ground. Bloom, Han, and Liang (2024) find that hybrid work, approximately three days in the office (60% of the work week), and two at home, maintained performance while reducing employee attrition by roughly a third. Choudhury et al. (2024) found optimal outcomes with regards to work-life-balance, employee satisfaction and mentorship at around 23–40% in-person time. Neither study supports fully remote work nor full in-person work, nor do they specifically examine innovation and creativity outcomes.

#### 3.3. *Management is a binding constraint*

Uncoordinated hybrid attendance, where employees decide individually whether and when to come in with no firm-level structure, produces the worst of both arrangements. The negative effects of a ‘depopulated on-site office’ (Rockmann and Pratt 2015, 150) and collective action problems are real. Managerial quality determines whether any work arrangement delivers its potential benefits. Both sides agree that, regardless of the location policy chosen, organisations need to invest in developing managers who can lead creative teams effectively and that poor management (Lazear, Shaw, and Stanton 2015) undermines creativity regardless of whether teams are co-located or distributed.

#### 3.4. *Micro-geography matters more than building-level presence*

The spatial evidence from both sides converges on the evidence that proximity effects operate at very short distances. Getting employees into the building is necessary but not sufficient. It matters who sits near whom, how shared spaces are designed, and whether the physical environment is engineered to generate the serendipitous encounters that both sides agree matter. These are the managerial and organisational levers that the evidence most clearly supports, and they receive far less attention in the return-to-office debate than the question of how many days employees are required to be present.

### 4. Implications: rethinking work location policies in the context of creativity and innovation

Taken together, this debate can be summarised with some practical implications for organisational decision-makers, managers, and policymakers. We organise these implications around three audiences: organisational leaders and HR practitioners; managers of creative and innovative teams; and policymakers and labour market regulators.

#### **4.1. Implications for organisational leaders and hr practitioners**

Organisations should resist the temptation to treat the design of work location policies as a binary choice between fully remote and fully on-site. The emerging evidence supports structured hybrid arrangements that are calibrated to the specific creative and collaborative demands of the work undertaken. Several principles follow from this. First, it is critical to understand what the unit of policy design is. Is this a firm-, team-, or task type level decision? The appropriate level of in-person presence may depend significantly on task type, such as work requiring intensive knowledge recombination across disciplines versus frequent routine individual work. One-size-fits-all mandates are ill-suited to deal with this heterogeneity. Second, when mandates are implemented, one core purpose should be coordination, to ensure moments of co-presence can work their benefits and collective action problems are avoided. Third, organisations should consider investing in the physical environment as much as they invest in attendance policy. Office environments in which individuals *want* to spend time – either regularly or occasionally – are a powerful tool in light of the downsides of mandated policies on employee autonomy, job satisfaction, and wellbeing.

#### **4.2. Implications for managers of creative and innovative teams**

Managers bear the operational responsibility for translating work location policy into practice.

Effective managers are deliberate about the purpose of in-person time. Managers who think carefully about when and why their teams come together rather than simply how often are more likely to generate the creative collisions that both sides of the debate value. Effective managers also invest in the informal social infrastructure that co-location naturally provides but remote work must actively create. The evidence on psychological safety, trust, and group flow all points to the importance of relational quality, not just physical proximity (Edmondson 1999; Lavoie, Baer, and Rouse 2025). For junior and early-career employees, managers will need to be aware of the evidence on promotion penalties and reduced training access associated with remote work (Bloom et al. 2015; Emanuel and Harrington 2024). Overcoming this may entail actively making mentorship and visibility accessible to remote and hybrid workers.

#### **4.3. Implications for policymakers and labour market regulators**

The return-to-office debate has labour market implications that extend beyond individual organisations. Policymakers considering whether and how to regulate flexible work arrangements should recognise several tensions that the evidence highlights. One such tension concerns the prisoner's dilemma dynamic identified by Emanuel and Harrington (2024): all firms might benefit collectively from normalising remote work, but each individual firm rationally fears attracting less productive workers if it moves first. This coordination failure can result in a systematic under-provision of remote work relative to the social optimum, which represents precisely the kind of market failure that may justify policy intervention. At the same time, policymakers need to be aware that the market failure runs in both directions. There is an equally important collective action problem on the other side: left to their own devices, individual employees will likely systematically underinvest in the face-to-face interactions that generate knowledge spillovers, because the benefits of those interactions accrue largely to others – colleagues, teams, and the organisation as a whole – rather than to the individual bearing the cost of the commute. This is a classic positive externality problem. The social return to in-person interaction exceeds the private return, which means that voluntary attendance, however well-intentioned, will fall short of the socially optimal level (and the level an organisation could benefit from).

The distributional implications of hybrid work deserve particular policy attention. Remote work can expand access to skilled employment for workers in smaller cities, for caregivers, and for neurodiverse employees whose productivity benefits from greater environmental control. Yet it simultaneously imposes career penalties – in visibility, mentorship, and promotion – that fall hardest on workers without strong pre-existing professional networks. Junior employees, recent hires, and those from less advantaged backgrounds are most vulnerable to these penalties. Policies that focus exclusively on protecting the right to work remotely without also addressing the career consequences of doing so risk entrenching rather than reducing labour market inequality.

## 5. Conclusion

The motion asks not merely whether in-person work supports creativity and innovation, but whether a mandatory policy requiring a majority of working time on-site is necessary to achieve it. The evidence reviewed here establishes, beyond reasonable doubt, that physical proximity matters. Face-to-face encounters generate measurable knowledge spillovers (Atkin, Chen, and Popov 2022). Remote work siloes collaboration networks and reduces the bridging ties through which novel ideas travel (Yang et al. 2022). Tacit knowledge, mentorship, and the social processes through which creative ideas gain organisational momentum all depend, to a meaningful degree, on co-presence.

What the evidence does not clearly establish is that the threshold must be a majority of working time, or that the policy instrument must be a mandate. The randomised controlled trial evidence on related outcomes points to better performance at hybrid arrangements around the 2-to-3-day mark of in-person time (Bloom, Han, and Liang 2024; Choudhury et al. 2024), but further empirical work is needed to establish the optimal threshold across industries, tasks and labour markets. The talent market evidence suggests that mandatory policies impose real costs (in autonomy, psychological contract, and workforce diversity) that could erode the very conditions that creativity requires but at the same time can lead to negative selection. Work on micro-geography reveals that within-building decisions may be further critical managerial levers.

Mandatory majority presence remains unresolved empirically to date. For some organisations, in some industries, at some stages of the innovation process, it may well be the right policy. For others, the costs may outweigh the benefits. The motion, in demanding a universal answer to a question that admits only a conditional one, overstates what the evidence can say and what any single policy can achieve. There remains much space for impactful work in this regard, which we summarise in Table 1. The question is not whether people should be together – it is when, for whom, and to what end. Answering that rigorously is among the more consequential tasks facing management research today.

**Table 1.** Avenues for future research.

| Theme                                             | Key questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Methodological opportunities                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Causal effects on innovation outcomes             | Do the effects of co-location on creativity differ from its effects on the commercialisation and diffusion stages of innovation?                                                                                                                                              | <i>Randomised controlled trials exploiting staggered return-to-office mandates; patent and new product data linked to work location records.</i>                                                                           |
| Optimal dosage and timing                         | How much in-person time is necessary, and for which tasks? Are the benefits of co-location concentrated in particular moments rather than distributed evenly across the working week?                                                                                         | <i>Experience sampling designs tracking creative output against daily work location; field experiments with varying hybrid schedules.</i>                                                                                  |
| Micro-geography and workspace design              | Does workspace design substitute for or complement attendance mandates in generating knowledge spillovers?                                                                                                                                                                    | <i>Geolocation and sensor data linked to team-level innovation outcomes; natural experiments from office relocations and redesigns.</i>                                                                                    |
| Heterogeneity by worker and role type             | For whom does remote work impose the greatest benefits and/or career penalties? Are those benefits and penalties a function of remote work itself, or of complementary management practices and organisational biases that could be corrected?                                | <i>Longitudinal panel data tracking career trajectories across work arrangements; audit studies of promotion decisions.</i>                                                                                                |
| Selection and sorting                             | To what extent do observed productivity differences between remote and on-site workers reflect treatment effects versus selection of different worker types into different arrangements? Does the firm talent pool become more or less diverse with remote work arrangements? | <i>Difference-in-differences designs exploiting involuntary switches; structural models of worker sorting.</i>                                                                                                             |
| Collective action and organisational coordination | What governance mechanisms produce the benefits of co-location without its costs?                                                                                                                                                                                             | <i>Comparative case studies of hybrid policy design; survey experiments with HR decision-makers.</i>                                                                                                                       |
| Distributed and global innovation                 | What can substitute for proximity in sustaining innovation across distance?                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <i>Multi-site studies of global R&amp;D teams; analysis of temporary co-location events such as conferences and offsites.</i>                                                                                              |
| Long-run organisational consequences              | What are the long-run effects of sustained remote work on organisational culture, tacit knowledge stocks, and innovative capacity?                                                                                                                                            | <i>Longitudinal firm-level studies linking work location policies to patent output, new product introductions, and R&amp;D productivity over five to ten-year horizons.</i>                                                |
| Policy and market design                          | Should governments subsidise commuting costs or office attendance the way they subsidise R&D, given that face-to-face interaction generates positive externalities for innovation?                                                                                            | <i>Quasi-experimental evaluation of existing commuting tax relief schemes and their effects on office attendance rates and regional innovation output (or exploiting variation in national commuting subsidy regimes).</i> |

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