



THE IMPACT OF RETURN-TO-OFFICE TRANSITIONS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND ORGANISATIONAL TRUST: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACE RESEARCH

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Abstract

The shift from remote work to return-to-office and hybrid arrangements has become a major organisational challenge after the pandemic. These transitions influence how employees experience trust, autonomy, communication, and psychological safety at work. This article examines how moving from remote work to return-to-office or hybrid work arrangements affects employees' psychological safety and organisational trust. Using a systematic literature review approach, it synthesises peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 on remote work, hybrid work, return-to-office policies, leadership communication, flexibility, employee voice, psychological safety, and organisational trust. The review shows that rigid or poorly communicated return-to-office policies can weaken employee trust, particularly when such policies are viewed as signs of managerial control rather than organisational support. Psychological safety may also decline when employees face reduced autonomy, uncertainty, surveillance, loss of flexibility, or limited involvement in workplace decisions. However, the findings suggest that transparent communication, inclusive leadership, fair policy implementation, flexible work design, and employee participation can strengthen both trust and psychological safety. The article concludes that organisational trust and psychological safety are closely connected relational mechanisms that shape employee voice, collaboration, engagement, and adaptation during workplace transitions.

Keywords: Return-to-Office, Remote Work, Psychological Safety, Organisational Trust, Employee Voice, Human Resource Management

1. Introduction

The organisation of work in sectors, professional groups and organisations was greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it may have been a niche work practice before the pandemic, remote work has become a critical work practice that organisations were forced to implement to help them operate while keeping their employees safe. Changes in this mean a new understanding of participation at work, which is now defined as the ability to carry out work in the workplace (through electronic communication systems, virtual system and/or flexible work arrangements). In studies that have explored the impact of remote working throughout the pandemic, there has been a high correlation between work design factors like autonomy, quality of communication, workload management and employee support and effective remote working (Wang et al., 2021). Likewise, remote work also affected information workers' collaboration, information communication network, coordination mechanism and knowledge sharing (Yang et al., 2022).

Many employees had more flexibility, autonomy and work-life integration during the time of remote work. Furthermore, remote and hybrid working influenced the learning, job satisfaction, psychological need satisfaction and turnover intentions of knowledge workers (Puhakka et al., 2025). With the easing of pandemic restrictions, though, many organisations began to think about return to office (RTO) and hybrid work policies, as a way to resume in-person collaboration, encourage a sense of organisational culture, improve visibility for managers and ease concerns about productivity and coordination. Since then, hybrid working has been developed and proven to be a multifaceted and dynamic work model, which now includes different physical and virtual working forms in various organisations (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). However, it's not just about workplace-location when it comes to returning to the office. Impacts employee feelings, self, independence, trust and comfort with others. RTO policies can be seen as a coordinating mechanism which helps and can be a control mechanism for management.

The conversation around returning to the office is accompanied by a managerial challenge in balancing the conflicting needs of organisations and employees that have arisen with remote working (Gibson et al., 2023). However, more recent research indicates that compulsory RTO policies can lead to stress and resistance when they are seen as a lack of flexibility and/or lack of sensitivity to the needs and preferences of participants and their families (Pandita et al., 2024; Westover, 2024). In general, the problems that have arisen in organisations with respect to RTO have been related to productivity, collaboration, space utilisation, control and measurement of performance. There has been significant literature on hybrid working that has explored its impact on productivity and performance, both the positive and the negative, for instance, the new coordination and management requirements (Williams & Shaw, 2025).

There have been other studies on managing talent in hybrid work and the need for leaders to exercise good judgment to balance people's expectations with the results of the organisation (da Silva et al., 2022). But there has been less focus on issues of a relational and psychological nature relating to RTO transition. However, other factors like psychological safety, employee trust, voice and voice behaviours, perception of fairness, leadership credibility and emotions are not well researched compared to the productivity discussions. This is significant as workplace policies around transitions can flow through to where staff work and to how they see the leaders' intent, fairness in the workplace, and how they can share their concerns. The conditions for returning to the office can be particularly challenging for high-performing staff who might feel that they are going back to work and are unable to be flexible, unable to open up to others, and out of step with the "return to work" narrative for the post-pandemic world (Elliott, 2024). More recent post-pandemic studies have also indicated that the psychological safety of hybrid workspaces depends on employees' ability to raise concerns, express comfort in the presence of others and on the ability to feel welcome in both physical and virtual workspaces to share ideas and suggestions (Lee, 2024).

Trust and authenticity in an organisation can increase employee voice as they will trust that their voice can be used positively and that there is a fair process (Liu et al., 2022; Du, 2024).

Such employee voice may also be shaped by leader behaviour, power differential perceptions, and psychological safety (Liu et al., 2023). Psychological safety is the freedom for an employee to voice their opinions, their ideas, their questions, to be their true self, to make mistakes, without the fear of embarrassment, punishment or any negative consequences. As a key for learning behaviour, employee voice, innovation and team effectiveness, it is well known. Psychological safety is particularly pertinent when it comes to RTO transition, as there is a potential risk for employees to not share their discomfort with commuting, health, caring responsibilities, flexibility or expectations of managers. Employees' desire to take interpersonal risks can be undermined by a loss of autonomy and a change in the level of certainty.

An environment that is not psychologically safe can cause everyone to be silent, hiding, and reduce co-operation and sharing of knowledge. Intervention research has indicated that when it comes to voice behaviours, psychological safety and the lack of fear of negative repercussions (FNR) are likely to increase engagement among employees in their job roles (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). Psychological safety has also been shown to be related to innovative behaviours, inclusive leadership and affective climate in the context of hybrid workforces (Vallabh et al., 2024). Other studies have indicated that there is a link between psychological safety and positive working experiences and the opportunity to “be yourself” at work in relation to hybrid working (Plester & Lloyd, 2023).

In addition, prior systematic review studies have shown that the well-being of teleworkers is linked to a number of psychological and socio-demographic factors, such as isolation, autonomy, work-life balance and organisational support (Charalampous et al., 2019). Organisational trust is Trust in the leadership, policy, intent, ability and fairness of the organisation. Cooperation and trust work hand in hand, for employees can tell if the leaders are reliable, capable and care about the well-being of employees. McAllister (1995) distinguishes between two types of trust in the basic trust study literature – cognition-based trust (reliability/competence) and affect-based trust (caring/emotional ties). Both forms of trust will come into play in RTO transition: will the leaders of the RTO make equitable decisions, and will the organisation meet workers' needs? Employees' acceptance of change is related to trust.

Trust in the RTO leadership can be developed through clearly communicated and fairly applied RTO policies. But there are strict rules that you will need to follow, which will lead to a reduction of leadership integrity and greater scepticism. Supervisors' trust is found to positively influence employee voice, particularly when the leader climates and systems in place are conducive to employee voice (Badru et al., 2024). Likewise, trust plays a crucial role in the area of occupational safety and employees' approval of organisational systems (Ordysinski, 2024). However, with the changing workplace and the new opportunities and challenges for trust-based relationships in a post-pandemic world, where flexible and collaborative work is taking the place of the old ways of working (Muir et al., 2023), it is time to rethink how to build trust-based relationships in the new environment.

Leadership communication is particularly vital in times of disruptions, where it helps to create trust. Clear and honest communication can help to minimise uncertainty, while employees can learn how decisions are made in organisations (Kim et al., 2023). In the context of integrated leadership communication models in crisis or disruptive change situations, the openness, consistency, authenticity and responsiveness to the situation of the employees are also highlighted (Men et al., 2026). There is a link between good leader communication of understanding and clarity, and employees' acceptance of workplace transition policies. Previous studies have examined the psychological safety and organisational trust impacts of remote working, hybrid working, leadership, employee voice and well-being separately, but few have been combined in a review and understanding of the impact of changing from remote to in-office working.

Previous research has explored remote work design, hybrid work productivity, flexible work, leadership communication, and employee voice; however, most of these studies have focused

on these areas individually (Yang et al., 2023; Willett et al., 2024). Furthermore, more studies on telework and wellbeing are focused on health and prevention, and do not necessarily make links between trust and psychological safety of RTO transitions and health and wellbeing outcomes (Shaholli et al., 2024). This study, thus, makes a contribution to the literature by combining it from HRM, organisational behaviour, leadership, communication and workplace psychology.

The purpose of this study is to: Identify key organizing factors and leadership factors that affect psychological safety in remote-to-work transitions Identify key organizing factors and leadership factors that affect the psychological safety in work-to-work transitions (hybrid) Examine the psychological safety and organizational trust in remote-to-work transitions Examine the psychological safety and organizational trust in work-to-work transitions (hybrid) Develop implications for HR managers, organizational leaders, and policymakers when designing RTO policies. The theoretical insights being offered by this study in the literature of human resource management and organisational management are to develop a correlation between the workplace design in the post-pandemic era and the relational outcomes of employees. It views RTO as a psychological/relational transition and not as a policy on physical attendance.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The design used was a systematic literature review to analyse the effect of remote work, return-to-office, and hybrid work on psychological safety and organisational trust of employees. Since the return-to-office transition is a new and emerging field of research in HRM and OB, a systematic review was chosen. The review design enabled the study to combine the existing academic literature, identify patterns in the articles, and structure the content into a coherent review of the literature to gain a sense of how workplace transition policies impact employee perceptions, relationships and behavioural outcomes. The study was purely secondary in nature and used published academic literature. This is appropriate, as since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a lot of work on remote work, hybrid work, leadership communication, psychological safety and trust, but they have been somewhat disconnected in regards to return to office. A lot of work design topics, such as autonomy, coordination and communication, and employee experience (Wang et al., 2021) have been discussed in relation to remote and hybrid working. Keeping these factors in mind, the goal of this current review was to collect these related fields and explore their links concerning psychological safety and organisational trust in the context of a transition to the workplace after the pandemic.

2.2 Data Sources

Important academic databases and journals repositories were searched for academic publications related to business, management, human resource management, workplace psychology, organisational behaviour and organisational communication, which were examined and peer-reviewed. The databases/ academic sources searched include Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Science Direct, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis, Springer, Wiley and Sage Journals. These have been chosen as sources that will give access to cross-disciplinary research in remote work, hybrid work, return to the office policies, employee voice, leadership communication, employee wellbeing, as well as psychological safety and organisational trust. Return to work was a cross-cutting topic, so a variety of databases were accessed, which enabled a more detailed search of the literature.

2.3 Search Strategy

A systematic search for relevant studies was performed, and the keywords were used. The literature search was mostly conducted within the last five years (2020-2025), which are pivotal years with regard to the changes in workplace design in and after COVID-19. The

keywords that were used are: return to office, remote work, hybrid work, psychological safety, organisational trust, trust in leadership, employee voice, workplace transition, post-pandemic workplace, flexible working arrangements, and leadership communication.

The search term to recognise the articles was a Boolean string that consisted of the concepts return to office, OR hybrid work OR remote work OR workplace transition AND psychological safety OR employee voice OR interpersonal risk and organisational trust OR trust in leadership OR employee trust. The other significant word combinations were also identified to pinpoint studies similar to issues of employee silence, knowledge sharing, autonomy, flexibility, managerial control, surveillance, inclusive leadership and organisational communication. Relevant studies were also identified, and the reference lists of these publications were searched to ascertain if other publications may have met the inclusion criteria.

2.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied to the studies. Studies were selected that were published within the last 5 years (2020-2025), English and focused on remote work, hybrid work, return to work, psychological safety, organisational trust, employee voice, leadership, communication and workplace changes. Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, systematic reviews and conceptual papers were included if they directly contributed to the objectives of the review. Non-academic sources like blogs, opinion articles, newspaper reports and unpublished commentaries were excluded from the studies. Studies that didn't focus on workplace transition, psychological safety, trust, employee behaviours, leadership or organisational change were also excluded. In general, only studies pre-dating the pandemic that contained foundational theoretical concepts and/or measures were included – in this case, measures of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) and organisational trust (McAllister, 1995). Records/ studies which have been duplicated in other disciplines such as business, management, organisational behaviour in the workplace, etc., have been deleted.

2.5 Study Selection Procedure

The choice of studies complied with a PRISMA-like logic as a way to achieve transparency and methodological consistency. Selected academic databases and journals were searched to find the relevant records. Secondly, the duplicate records have been removed. Thirdly, screening was done to screen the quality of the title and abstract of the research objectives. Studies that did not reference remote or hybrid working, return to the workplace, psychological safety, trust and/or employee voice or workplace related construct was excluded from this point.

In the second phase, the full texts of possibly pertinent studies were then thoroughly reviewed. Evaluation of all studies was done according to the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they added to the understanding of the relationship between workplace transition and psychological safety, employee trust, leadership relationships or employee behaviour from an empirical, theoretical or conceptual perspective. The last group of studies were then included in thematic synthesis.

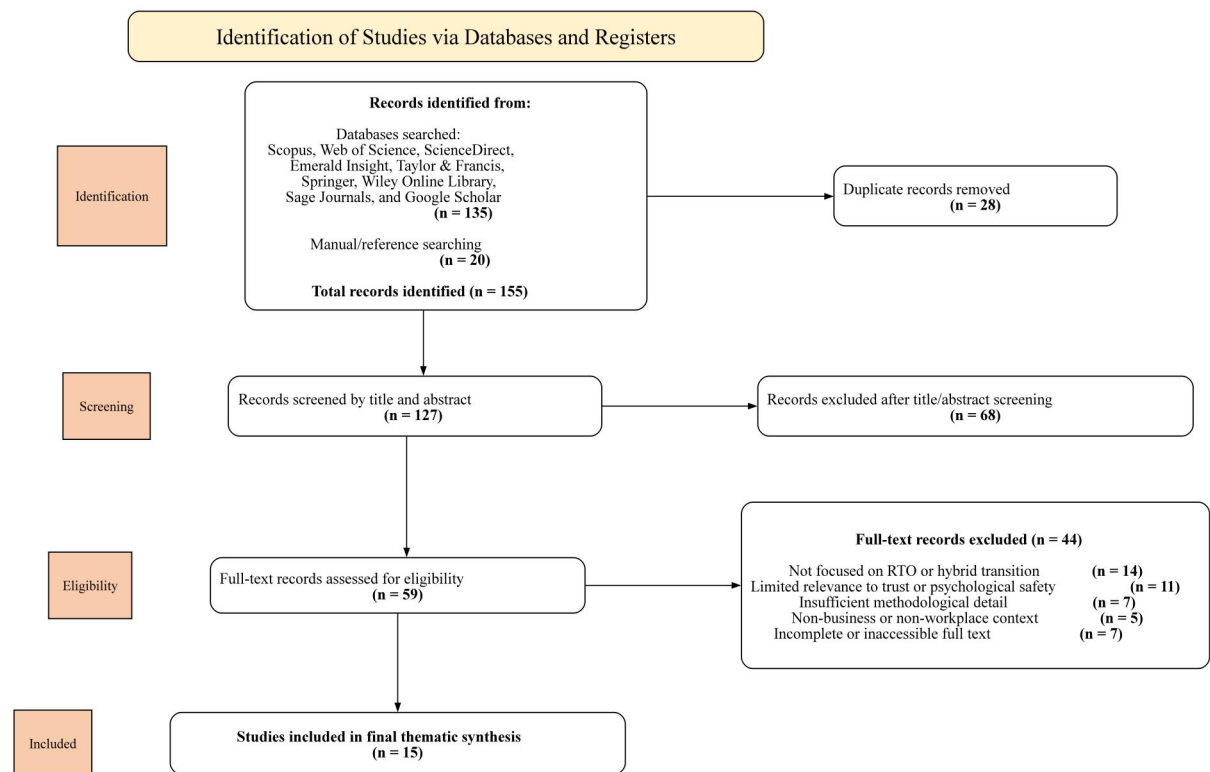


Figure 1: Thematic Findings on RTO Transition, Trust, and Psychological Safety

2.6 Data Extraction

Selected studies' information was framed in a data extraction framework. For each study, details about the author(s) and year of publication, country and/or study setting, study design, sample/setting, study variables and key findings, relevance to PS, relevance to OT and implications for RTW and hybrid working were recorded. Throughout the process, the studies were systematically quantitatively and qualitatively compared. Specific focus was on evidence about autonomy, flexibility, leadership communication, fairness, workers' participation, management control and the expectations in the workplace. The notion of hybrid work is slightly different across the organisations, and had to be carefully teased out to differentiate remote, hybrid and formal return to office policies.

2.7 Data Analysis

Thematic synthesis was used to analyse the data that had been extracted. This mode of operation was appropriate as the aim of the review was to look for patterns, relationships and conceptual themes rather than to mathematically summarise the results. The themes that emerged in the analysis were: designs for return to office policies; perceived fairness; leadership communication and transparency; autonomy and flexibility; psychological safety and employee voice; surveillance and interpersonal risk; trust as a mediator and/or buffer in the transition; and inclusive leadership and supportive HR practices. Each of the themes was the focus of all the findings and discussion sections of the study. Through the theming synthesis, it was possible to explain how the transition to the office impacts the employees' perception of their work environment, trust, safety, voice, collaboration and adapting to the post-pandemic workplace.

3. Results

3.1 Overview of Reviewed Studies

Literature reviewed was from the years 2020-2025, and included a subset of foundational literature that clearly defined it as psychological safety, and/or organisational trust. The

studies included in the review included remote working, hybrid working, return to the office, voice, leadership communication, flexibility, psychological safety and trust. Overall, the evidence suggested that the move from telework to back in the office/hybrid is not only about location but a relational and psychological process regarding perceptions of organisational intentions, leadership credibility, fairness and employee autonomy.

The following five general themes were used to categorise the literature reviewed. The studies related to the topic of remote working primarily discussed the issues of autonomy, digital collaboration, working design, learning, isolation and employee wellbeing. Secondly, collaboration, inclusion, performance, leadership and flexible work design are research areas of hybrid working. Thirdly, the psychological safety research is the research of speaking up and interpersonal risk taking, knowledge sharing and employee voice. As fourth components of trust studies, trust in leaders, trust in supervisors, organisational trust and fairness in decision-making were included. Finally, research conducted on the RTO included employee stress, policy requirements, resistance, productivity and an assumption of forced return to the office. The last set of studies to be used for focused synthesis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Final Studies Included in the Focused Review

No.	Author(s)	Year	Study Focus	Relevance to the Present Study
1	Wang et al.	2021	Remote working from a work design perspective	Explains autonomy, work design, and remote work effectiveness
2	Lauring & Jonasson	2025	Conceptual clarity of hybrid work	Supports classification of hybrid work arrangements
3	Yang et al.	2022	Remote work and collaboration among information workers	Shows how remote work affects communication and collaboration
4	Williams & Shaw	2025	Hybrid work, productivity, and performance	Highlights the benefits and challenges of hybrid work
5	Cascio	2026	Dynamics and complexities of RTO policies	Directly supports RTO policy discussion
6	Pandita et al.	2024	Employee stress during the return-to-office transition	Explains psychological strain linked with RTO
7	Gibson et al.	2023	Whether employees should be required to return to the office	Addresses compulsory RTO and organisational implications
8	Edmondson	1999	Psychological safety and learning behaviour	Foundational definition of psychological safety
9	O' Donovan & McAuliffe	2020	Psychological safety, speaking up, and voice behaviour	Supports employee voice and safety outcomes
10	McAllister	1995	Affect- and cognition-based trust	Foundational trust framework
11	Badru et al.	2024	Supervisor trust and employee voice	Links trust in supervisors with voice behaviour

12	Men et al.	2026	Leadership communication and employee trust	Supports communication transparency and trust
13	Kim et al.	2023	Internal crisis communication and employee response	Supports dialogic communication during uncertainty
14	Willett et al.	2024	Flexible work, leader support, engagement, and well-being	Links flexibility and supportive communication
15	Hincapie & Costa	2024	Inclusive leadership in hybrid teams	Supports leadership practices for hybrid/RTO transitions

3.2 RTO Policy Design and Employee Trust

An overview of the literature reviewed points to the fact that policies that encourage employees to go back to work are seen as an expression of the intentions of the company. Flexible policies that are well understood and put into practice will be more successful at gaining trust and showing respect for employee autonomy and realities. Conversely, any anti-union attitude could result in workers' cynicism if they feel the question on the table is: Do they have to take the risk for their health to guarantee management control? There's been some research on return to work policies recently and the results show that there can be tension with return to the office requirements, if there is a lack of understanding about why people are returning to work, if there is conflict with the policy, and if there is a mismatch between the policy and the demands of the job (Cascio 2026; Gibson et al., 2023).

Results also suggest that the fairness of the employee has an impact on trust. If there is a lack of integrity in the leadership, the application of the RTO policies is inconsistent, or the enforcement is inconsistent between departments, roles or employees, then employees may feel there is an inconsistent application of the RTO policies or inconsistent enforcement across the departments, roles or employees. Policy fairness is an important question, therefore, because of how RTO will be felt as an acceptable alternative for redesigning the organisation, or as an imposed control mandate. Studies on RTO stress further show that without providing flexibility, there will be an increase in employee stress levels, particularly in cases where there is a forced change, and employees are not part of the decision-making process (Pandita et al., 2024).

3.3 Leadership Communication and Transparency

The Communication for Leadership theme was explored in the literature examined. Providing transparency in communication can help alleviate the uncertainty as employees receive information about why the changes need to take place, how decisions are being made and how the employee's concerns will be addressed. Expressing RTO/hybrid arrangements clearly, with empathy and a sense of trust, by a leader will ease the acceptance process by the employees. However, messages that are not clear or easily understood can lead to reduced perceptions of trust and credibility of the leader, as well as increase employee resistance.

Results also reveal that dialogic communication contributes to increased employee voice. Staff can more readily share concerns with a leader who is willing to listen and allows for a two-way exchange of information on issues of commuting, caring responsibilities, productivity, workload and psychological concerns. Crisis communication studies reveal that apart from the information, other aspects impact employee attitudes: The openness, responsiveness and dialogicity of communication with the leaders. In the same fashion, when it comes to disruptive changes, leadership communication is identified as one of the most crucial factors that affect employee trust (Men et al., 2026).

3.4 Autonomy, Flexibility, and Psychological Safety

Overall, the studies showed positive impacts in terms of autonomy and flexibility/control of working time when working in a remote or hybrid environment. This may result in psychological discomfort when making the switch to RTOs. A lack of flexibility may be seen by staff as a loss of trust and confidence that they are able to work effectively without the physical presence of their supervisor. This impression can lead to a lack of psychological security and trust in the organisation. There's a close connection between autonomy and psychological safety: When employees feel like they're being monitored or controlled, they are less likely to put forward their ideas.

The five characteristics, as described by Wang et al. (2021), to consider when designing a working environment for remote work are: Autonomous, Clear, Reasonable, Communicative, and Work-centred on employees. Likewise, flexible working options have been shown to have a beneficial impact on employee engagement and wellbeing when they are shared with staff by leaders and backed by the organisation (Willett et al., 2024). Thus, for the employees, the lack of autonomy in RTO transition may cause psychological distress, particularly if they believe that their performance in the remote work is not recognised.

3.5 Psychological Safety and Employee Voice

Psychological safety was identified as a prerequisite for employee voice, learning, sharing of knowledge and collaboration amongst employees. They feel more comfortable doing so if they know that they won't be embarrassed, punished or face a negative consequence for their job. In its simplest terms, psychological safety is a team being safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999). With RTO transitions, this can be critical as staff may not be willing to raise any concerns about returning to work for fear of being viewed as “not a team player”, “not as productive” or “resistant to return”.

Evidence reviewed also shows issues which relate to low psychological safety, such as lack of voice, quiet, disengagement, hoarding of information, and fear of bad judgment. This can result in a loss of collaboration and impact organisational learning in the event of transition at the RTO. The last piece of evidence from a systematic review on speaking up and voice behaviour suggests that it is about ‘psychological safety’ (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020), which is the freedom to voice and raise concerns. The employee voice can be either increased or reduced depending on the level of employee psychological safety, leader behaviours, and perception of the power distance.

3.6 Linkage Between Trust and Psychological Safety

Results suggest that there is a strong relationship between organisational trust and psychological safety. Trust enables team members to take interpersonal risks, and psychological safety enables team members to talk openly and feel free to speak up. As long as their leaders are trustworthy, they will think that they have been listened to fairly and will not turn against their leaders. Similarly, when psychological safety is there, more employees will be inclined to communicate in an honest manner that can help them build trust over time. Low trust can impact psychological safety as well, making it less likely that employees will raise concerns if they don't know what their leaders think, the review reveals.

When psychological safety is not present, however, trust can be broken when employee issues are ignored, discounted or punished. According to trust theory, the practice of interpersonal cooperation is determined by two types of trust, cognition-based (Reliability, Competence) and affect-based (Care, Emotional bonds) (McAllister, 1995). Leaders who are trusted can foster an environment where employees feel safe, which can result in them voicing their ideas, concerns, and suggestions for improvement. Both types of trust are relevant in the RTO context: Workers' assessment of leaders' competence in developing equitable policies and their caring about the workers.

3.7 Leadership and HR Practices for Successful RTO Transition

The studies that were reviewed identified some HR/leadership practices that make a successful RTO transition. They encompass inclusive leadership, participative decision making, flexible working, anonymous feedback systems, supportive communication, employee-oriented HRM and fair training and implementation of hybrid teams of managers. Inclusive leadership is especially important when transitioning to the hybrid or RTO environment, as it can lead to intergenerational gaps in the workplace between office-based, remote and hybrid workers. Make sure all employees have access to: equal access to information, participation, recognition and development opportunities. A hybrid team performance study reveals that inclusive leadership is effective for teams to collaborate and even feel physically and virtually good (Hincapie & Costa, 2024).

Shared leadership can be used to coordinate virtual and hybrid teams, engage employees and include them in the change of the work arrangements. Similarly, HRM and responsible leadership can be used to build up a positive sense of safety, fairness and support in the workplace when facing organisational change. Leadership style and psychological safety are closely related because the leadership style will affect the psychological safety of the employees, where it is evident that if the employees are free, supported and safe from interpersonal problems, then the leadership style is good, and vice versa. The responses indicated that, in addition to the employee's place of work, the RTO transition is associated with the type of communication utilised, the employee's engagement, and the extent of psychological safety experienced by a leader during RTO transition.

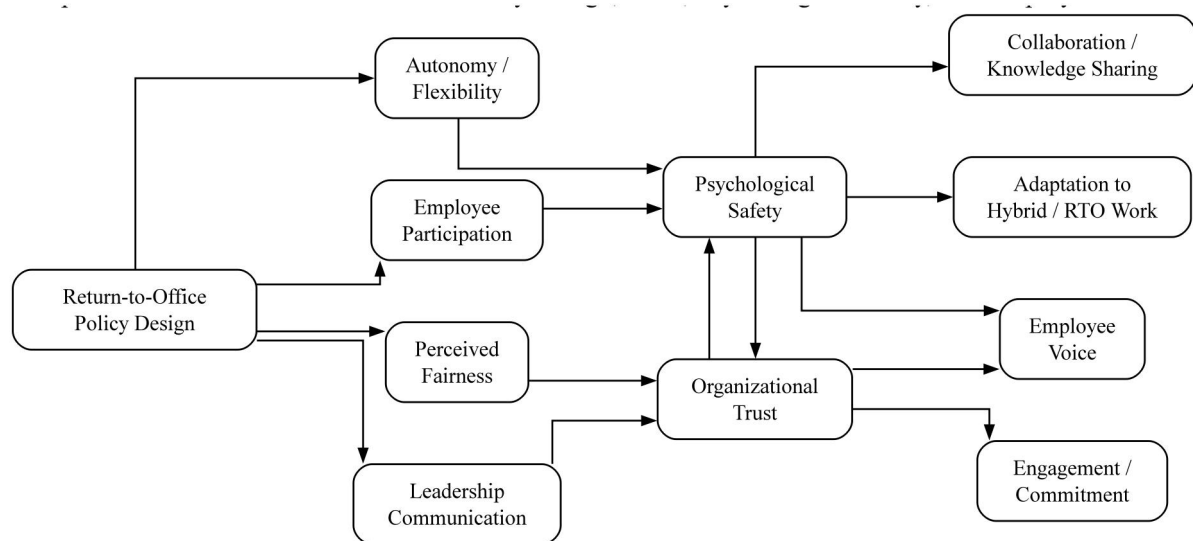


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework Linking RTO Policy Design, Trust, Psychological Safety, and Employee Outcomes

The results suggest that policy design, quality of communication, flexibility, leadership behavior and perceived fairness are the factors that mediate the RTO policies to psychological safety and trust. Transparency, flexibility, inclusive leadership and employee involvement help build trust and promote psychological safety, but rigidity can result in loss of trust and openness.

Table 2: Summary of Key Findings

Key Factor	Impact on Trust	Impact on Psychological Safety
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Rigid RTO mandates	Reduces trust in leadership intentions (Gibson et al., 2023; Pandita et al., 2024; Cascio, 2026)	Reduces voice and openness (Edmondson, 1999; O' Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020)
Transparent communication	Strengthens leadership trust (Kim et al., 2023; Men et al., 2026)	Reduces uncertainty (Kim et al., 2023)
Flexibility	Enhances trust and perceived support (Wang et al., 2021; Willett et al., 2024)	Supports autonomy and safety (Wang et al., 2021; Edmondson, 1999)
Surveillance and monitoring	Weakens trust (McAllister, 1995; Badru et al., 2024)	Increases fear and silence (Edmondson, 1999; O' Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020)
Inclusive leadership	Builds relational trust (Badru et al., 2024; Hincapie & Costa, 2024)	Encourages participation (Hincapie & Costa, 2024; O' Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020)
Employee involvement	Improves policy acceptance (Gibson et al., 2023; Willett et al., 2024)	Enhances interpersonal comfort (Edmondson, 1999; O' Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020)

Based on all these findings, the conclusions that can be drawn is the process of return to work is a workplace change process, which will affect workplace relationships/psychological experiences. Trust and psychological safety are not only the result of RTO, but a way of understanding, embracing, challenging and adjusting to the post-pandemic workplace.

4. Discussion

4.1 RTO as a Psychological and Relational Transition

Based on the results of this review, it is recommended that the decision to return work (RTO) should not be an operational and/or logistical one. Instead, it's a change of mind, relationship, culture, management and communication. RTO policies are not just being interpreted as a way to communicate to employees where and when they should be, but as a way to communicate organisational intentions, trust, and fairness and respect for employee autonomy. Along with the emergence of remote and hybrid working styles, employees' flexible working expectations have also changed, such as those of autonomy, collaboration, and work-life balance (Wang et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). Organisations can therefore introduce an 'office-return' policy as a requirement, and such a policy could be seen as supportive coordination or as managerial intervention, perceived as controlling.

The review notes that a lack of flexibility in the policies of RTOs can lead to a lack of trust by the staff, as they feel they are giving up flexibility without a reason. However, in addition to convenience, hybrid work and RTOs demonstrate that flexibility is recognised as a valuable indicator of employees' trust and confidence in their working responsibly (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025; Williams & Shaw, 2025). An RTO that is not transparent, involves employees, and is sensitive to employee experiences can result in increased psychological discomfort, stress, and resistance (Cascio, 2026; Pandita et al., 2024). As such, RTO needs to be perceived as a relationship workplace change, impacting employees' feelings of trust, belongingness, voice, and psychological safety.

4.2 Theoretical Implications

The results provide input to a number of human resource management and organisational behaviour theories. According to Social Exchange Theory, workers will be more willing to accept a change in the organisation if there is a sense of fairness and a feeling of support and trust. Providing flexibility, open communication and including staff can help to get them to return the favour and be cooperative, engaged and accepting of the change (Spurk & Straub,

2020; Willett et al., 2024). The results are also consistent with Signalling Theory as RTO policies serve as signals of intention to act and the values of the organisation. A well-thought-out, well-justified RTO policy can help establish a sense of caring, fairness and trust, while a rigid policy can help to create a sense of control, lack of trust and convenience of the manager (Gibson et al., 2023; Elliott, 2024). To mention, in accordance with Edmondson's (1999) Psychological Security Principle, staff are more inclined to share their concepts and opinions when they don't really feel like they may be punished or negatively evaluated by others. Lastly, Organisational Change Theory can be applied since the transition to the workplace must be informed, engaged, treated and believing the credibility of the leadership for the transition to be successful (Kim et al., 2023; Men et al., 2026).

4.3 Practical Implications for HR Managers

There are important implications for HR managers in the review. Not all employees will be performing one role, and the work requirements, productivity and responsibilities will be different for different roles and not all will have the same RTO. Second, HR managers should make clear the reason why they need to be in the office, and should make clear the reason for the office-based work, such as the requirement to work together, learn, innovate or for organisational reasons. Thirdly, staff need to have a role in the transition planning through surveys, feedback forums, and participative decision-making. This engagement can help to ease opposition and enhance policy acceptance.

HR managers need to be flexible as well, to the extent possible. Together with flexible working arrangements, forward-thinking leadership communication can have a positive impact on well-being, engagement and trust (Willett et al., 2024). In addition, managers should know psychologically safe feedback practices, hybrid team management and empathetic communication skills. Feedback channels that do not have repercussions, like anonymous feedback channels, should be offered to communicate concerns in a safe environment (Meluch, 2022; Moon & Kang, 2025). HR staff should be diligently monitoring employees' well-being as they make the transition to RTO, particularly if there are potential stressors related to loss of autonomy and/or unfairness.

4.4 Implications for Leadership

Trust and psychological safety are significant aspects in relation to leadership behaviours and the transition of the RTO. Leaders should be open, honest and not be fearful of dominating; be caring and sensitive and understand that there might be some concerns to address when moving from home to work. The review shows that consistency and openness, caring for the welfare of employees generates trust with their leaders (Badru et al., 2024; McAllister, 1995). Employees should be asked for their input, and leaders should protect employees from retribution should they have concerns. Also very important is inclusive leadership, as hybrid and RTO can lead to different experiences for the three groups of office, hybrid and remote workers (Mohase et al., 2025; Hincapie & Costa, 2024). Leaders should also not be engaging in fear-based behaviours, which can cause employees to lose trust in the leader, lose the ability to speak freely about, and hinder the desired changes in the workplace (Hubbart, 2024; Han & Hazard, 2022). Ethical leadership can foster a psychologically safe environment and thereby boost voice behaviour, amplify the sense of belonging and reduce fear of voicing a concern (Aboud et al., 2023; Forte et al., 2024).

4.5 Implications for Organisations and Policymakers

Organisations should adopt an approach to RTO which is a balance between business and employee. The test of fairness of a policy should be an ongoing process to ensure the policy at the Departmental / Employee Group level. The hybrid working model isn't something that you can just do on the fly; it must be planned for. The results suggest that in the Post Covid-19 period, there is a need to incorporate workplace flexibility in labour regulations, which will also consider employee well-being and fair work design. As flexibility and hybrid

working have increased, there may be an increased need for more equitable criteria to be applied when introducing flexibility and safeguarding staff.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This review has a number of limitations. It is based on secondary data, and empirical studies on transitions to/from RTOs are still scarce. Many of the studies are not RTO, but in a remote/hybrid context. Sectors, cultural and occupational differences can also influence the generalizability. Also, the timeframe of the review was mainly limited to 2020-2025. More research is required to gain an appreciation of and analyse the effects RTO policies have in other areas (IT, education, finance, healthcare or consulting) on trust and psychological safety. Longitudinal research should be done to investigate whether there is any possibility of winning back trust after unpopular mandates by the RTOs (Bashir et al., 2025). Future studies should also take into account the importance of middle management, as well as gender and care responsibilities, and inclusion and contrast between voluntary and return to office (Cowden & Zaar, 2024; Vallabh et al., 2024).

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to review the literature and see the impact of RTO or hybrid working on psychological safety and organisational trust. The results show that RTO is more than a work location shift; it is a psychological, relational, communicative and organisational transition. It affects employee perceptions of leadership intentions, perceptions of fairness, autonomy, participation and opportunities to raise concerns when there are changes in the workplace. The review demonstrates that a "one size fits all" or "rigid" approach to RTO may have adverse effects on employee perceptions of autonomy and resistance to change in the organisation. RTO requests that are felt to be controlling, insensitive or poorly communicated can lead to reduced willingness to put up concerns related to flexibility, workload, commute, well-being and work-life balance. This can lead to a breakdown in psychological safety and diminish collaboration, sharing of knowledge, engagement, and adaptation to new workplace norms. Transparent communication, inclusive leadership, fairness, flexibility, and employee involvement, on the other hand, can help build organisational trust and psychological safety during transitions to the workplace. It is easier to get employees to agree to the RTO policies if they know the purpose behind the policy and that their concerns and their personal situation have been taken into account. Trust and psychological safety also facilitate other important employee behaviours: voice, cooperation, participation, learning and commitment. This study offers a valuable addition to HRM and Organisational Behaviour as RTO is not just about attendance but a trust-based and employee-sensitive change process. It makes employee experience a key determinant of successful RTO implementation and workforce planning. RTO can be done fairly, flexibly, transparently and with staff buy-in, which can help organisations continue to foster a sense of psychological safety, trust within the organisation and employee engagement in the post-pandemic workplace.

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