

Public Sector Network (Insights, October 2026)

Hybrid, Innovation & Inclusion:

Why Return to Office Mandates Weaken the Public Service

Prodded notably by the Ottawa Mayor and the Ontario Premier, Prime Minister Carney is delivering on his 'sharper view' of return to office mandates for federal public servants. Beginning this past summer, a four-day office minimum became the norm for most, a shift that is now constraining people and performance at a time when governments face unprecedented policy and operational challenges.

What's the logic at play? It would seem that various elected leaders, mainly middle-aged white men, feel quite strongly that in order to maximize loyalty and effort, public servants should be clamoured into aging and crowded offices (traffic congestion, housing crisis, and the 'greener government' strategy be damned). Apparently, such a push will harness degrees of ingenuity that can only come about face-to-face.

As the Prime Minister surely knows, this is hogwash. Drawing from her own time in government, former Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg frames such containment as the underlying basis for a ['busy bastards'](#) hierarchical culture where only being seen gets recognized and rewarded. If the Government instead seeks a public service that is innovative and inclusive, a hybrid workspace strategy is an essential enabler.

Take innovation. Leading technology and service organizations thrive in hybrid settings, as do many consultancy, non-profit, and research-based entities. Despite notable private sector pushback to hybrid as well, Canadian research conducted by a leading Human Resource Consultancy, Robert Half found that in 2026, ['employers continue to see retention value in offering flexible work options'](#) while in the fourth quarter of 2025, nearly one-third of new job postings in Canada were explicitly hybrid.

Indeed, just nine percent of workers prefer to be in the office full-time according to a separate 2026 survey by pollster, [Angus Reid](#). Perhaps not so surprising given that back in technologically archaic 2012, a BC Government survey found that fewer than one-half of employees selected the office cubicle as their most productive workspace. Recent research led by Stanford's [Nicholas Bloom](#) further validates hybrid's value proposition for employers and employees alike.

Hybrid is not staying home: most professionals prefer to mix in-person and virtual, seeking flexibility and balance. In a knowledge-driven public service, managers must creatively align human talent and physiology with individual and collaborative outcomes. Standardization hinders such efforts, and since Covid's peak the federal public service has embraced variation across departments reasonably well.

The Prime Minister had also conveyed a willingness to consult with unions, a promise that now seems largely compromised, with the potential for job action on the horizon. It's also been widely reported in media outlets that departments and agencies are spending millions of dollars to refurbish limited office space to accommodate everyone onsite most all the time (while many federal entities have yet to report on such costs...).

The return to office logic is all the more unhelpful in the context of Artificial Intelligence, which the Government is racing to embrace. Doing so requires diverse talent and specialized skills (across a widely distributed talent eco-system). Competing for such talent – and sharing it across the public sector, necessitates more workspace flexibility, not less. If success is the goal, does anyone seriously think that Carney's flagship reform agency, Digital Transformation Canada, can be anything other than hybrid-based?

Hybrid policies, however, should not be reserved for the digital elite. Across the labour force, women are bearing the largest burden from hybrid's regression at a time when economic and social pressures are rising. To quote the UN Secretary General: gender equality is ['vanishing before our eyes'](#). Moreover, while research from experts such as Wendy Cukier shows how innovation and inclusion are intertwined, the Government of Canada's 'EX' cadre remains predominantly Caucasian, limiting any such virtuous cycle from taking hold.

When leveraged effectively, hybrid strategies lessen engrained barriers and biases that often stymie advancement. In our own graduate programs, many racialized public servants have spoken of greater protection and progress from hybrid-driven freedoms. Parents feel more empowered to balance family and professional responsibilities. Universities and colleges are also becoming more hybrid - and more inclusive.

Rather than trusting and empowering public servants with a modern mindset to improve wellness and performance, office mandates look to the past (underscored by the expectation that executives spend five days in the office). Lessened innovation and further weakness in recruitment and retention processes (that the Public Service Commission openly admits are in chronic disrepair) are inevitable.

As memories of the pandemic fade, bureaucratic traditionalism is returning with a stark message for those aspiring to lead: conform or go elsewhere. Good luck keeping the best and brightest.

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