

# The Visibility Trap

Which roles need a desk, what the office really costs, and what a board should ask for instead

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A companion to *The Visibility Trap: A Leader's Guide to Return-to-Office, Hybrid Work, and Deciding Which Roles Need a Desk*

by John S. Muir

*For the chief executive, the board and the chief financial officer: the book's argument, numbers and tools in about twenty minutes of reading.*

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Meridian Dynamics International (MDI), the company the book follows, is a composite drawn from many organizations; no real company or person is depicted, and every MDI figure in this brief is illustrative. The studies, surveys and figures cited are real and are listed under Sources at the end. Nothing here is legal advice.

# 1 The decision in one page

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## THE QUESTION

### **Does this role need a desk, or does it need the right leader?**

That is the question the book puts in place of the one most boards are arguing about, how many days.

## **The argument most boards are having**

It is usually about attendance: how many days people should be in the building, as if the number of days determined whether the work got done well. The board wants five, employees want two or none, and the compromise lands on three. The book calls this the visibility trap: presence is easy to see, so it is easy to measure, so it becomes the thing organizations manage. A badge swipe is a clean number; a finished piece of work sitting in a queue is not.

## **Why one rule for everyone is the wrong unit**

A single attendance rule is designed for an average role that exists nowhere. Each kind of work pays a different price for the same rule:

- **Five days** charges the service agent and the analyst for a commute that adds nothing to their work.
- **Fully remote** sends the bill to the new hire, who loses the everyday correction that comes from sitting near the team.
- **Three days** makes every group pay part of the other's price: the agent still commutes for nothing three days a week, and the new hire still learns alone on the other two.

The variation that matters runs between roles on the same floor, sometimes under the same manager. So the book treats the role, and the team it works within, as the unit of decision. The company still sets the principles, the guardrails and the written criteria every team must use; what it should stop doing is choosing the schedule. Identical schedules imposed on very different work are uniform, “which is not the same as fair.”

## **What the board should ask for instead**

1. **The cost per occupied desk** for each site, on the average, busiest and quietest day (Section 2).
2. **The lease and contract dates:** when real estate decisions can actually be made (Section 5).
3. **Every major role family placed on the Role Placement Map** by the people who lead the work (Section 4).
4. **A both-columns business case**, every assumption stated, the sensitivities shown, and the employee's side on the page even though it is outside the total (Section 5).
5. **Five outcome measures with baselines** in place of badge counts, and a named review date (Section 6).
6. **Counsel's answers** to the questions in the book's Appendix C before anything is announced (Section 7).

## 2 What the office really costs

*The desk has two costs. The organization pays one, and it shows up on an invoice. The employee pays the other, and it appears on no invoice anywhere in the company.*

### The organization's side: cost per occupied desk

Divide the fully loaded annual cost of a site by the number of people who actually use it on an average day, not by headcount or workstations. Any finance team can produce it in an afternoon from data most organizations already collect, and it turns an occupancy percentage, which sounds like a facilities problem, into a dollar figure per person.

1. **Build the fully loaded seat.** Rent, plus utilities, cleaning, security, maintenance, insurance, furniture, network and equipment, and a share of facilities staff. Rent alone, at CBRE's national average asking rent of about \$37.58 a square foot (mid-2026) and the book's planning figure of about 150 square feet a person, runs roughly \$5,500 to \$6,000 per employee per year. The author's working estimate for the fully loaded seat is \$500 to \$1,200 per employee per month; it is not a published benchmark, and your finance team's own figure should replace it.
2. **Divide by the people present** on an average day: that is the cost per occupied desk.
3. **Repeat for the busiest day**, which tells you how much space you need, **and the quietest**, which tells you what you pay for that nobody uses.

#### WORKED EXAMPLE — ILLUSTRATIVE (MDI is a composite company)

| MDI Phoenix headquarters, four floors                                                             | Figure                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Workstations                                                                                      | about 1,200                             |
| Fully loaded annual cost (rent, utilities, cleaning, security, maintenance, furniture, equipment) | about \$14.4 million                    |
| Cost per desk                                                                                     | \$12,000 a year (about \$1,000 a month) |
| Average daily occupancy, last twelve months (badge data)                                          | 46% — about 550 people                  |
| Cost per occupied desk, average day                                                               | just over \$26,000 a year               |
| Busiest day (Tuesday) / quietest day (Friday)                                                     | about 720 people / roughly 240          |
| Friday cost per occupied seat compared with Tuesday                                               | three times as much                     |

Two cautions travel with the number. **The average hides the peak:** cut MDI's floors to 550 desks and Tuesday would be short by more than a hundred; space has to be provisioned for the busiest day. And **an empty desk saves nothing:** the savings credited to flexible work are real only if the organization changes its real estate footprint. Global Workplace Analytics' widely quoted estimate of about \$11,000 a year saved per half-time remote employee describes a saving that is available, not one that arrives on its own. MDI is not unusual: Kastle Systems' badge data put US office occupancy at about 55 percent of pre-pandemic levels in late September 2026.

The cost nobody books: departures

Gallup puts the cost of replacing an employee at one-half to two times annual salary: \$50,000 to \$200,000 for a professional earning \$100,000. In Owl Labs' 2026 survey, if hybrid or remote work were taken away, 6 percent said they would quit and another 41 percent would start looking. Turnover is reported in one meeting and real estate decided in another, so no one books a mandate's departures against the decision that caused them.

The employee's side: the commute and the office tax

**Twelve hours or nine.** The author's own working day runs 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern, because its two ends are the only hours that overlap with Asia and with the US West Coast. A commute of an hour and a half each way does not take three hours from the middle of that day; it takes them from both ends, the hours shared with the parts of the organization farthest from the office. The day shrinks from twelve hours to nine at most.

| The commute arithmetic (Chapter 3)                 | Figure                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Hours lost per office day (90 minutes each way)    | 3 of a 12-hour working window — a quarter |
| Working days a year on a full-time office schedule | roughly 230                               |
| Hours a year in transit                            | about 690                                 |
| In eight-hour working days                         | about 86 — close to four months           |

**The average worker's office tax.** A September 2026 Resume.io survey of 1,000 full-time office workers in the 36 largest US metro areas found that going to the office costs the average worker about **\$6,736 a year**, about \$2,598 of it on food and coffee; about **184 hours a year commuting** (roughly 23 working days); and about 43 minutes of preparation each office day (about 137 more hours a year). Fifty-three percent said those costs had risen in the past year.

**THE COUNTERPOINT, AT FULL WEIGHT**

Not every recovered hour goes back to the job. Across 27 countries, Aksoy, Barrero, Bloom, Davis and colleagues found working from home saved about 72 minutes a day of commuting, and people reported spending about 40 percent of it on their primary or secondary jobs. For most roles, 40 percent is the defensible planning assumption; for global roles like the author's, the hours flow back almost entirely.

### 3 What the evidence says, both directions

*The research does not settle the argument cleanly for either camp. Both sets of findings are real; they describe different kinds of work, done by different people under different management.*

| Study                                                                      | What it found                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Points toward                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Trip.com / Ctrip</b><br>Bloom et al. 2015; Bloom, Han & Liang 2024      | Call center: home workers about 13% more productive, attrition roughly halved, yet about half chose to return to the office, many citing loneliness. Randomized hybrid trial (1,612 graduates, two fixed home days): quits fell by about a third, with no difference in performance reviews or promotions over two years. | <i>Distance, for focused, measurable work and for retention</i>                     |
| <b>US Patent and Trademark Office</b><br>Choudhury, Foroughi & Larson 2021 | Examiners already working from home who were allowed to live anywhere raised output about 4.4% with no loss of quality.                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <i>Distance, for deep, solitary work against clear standards</i>                    |
| <b>Gibbs, Mengel &amp; Siemroth 2023</b>                                   | 10,000+ IT professionals sent home in the pandemic: hours rose, output dipped slightly, productivity per hour fell about 8–19%; more meetings, less coaching.                                                                                                                                                             | <i>The room, when work is not redesigned for distance</i>                           |
| <b>Atkin, Schoar &amp; Shinde</b>                                          | Data-entry workers randomly assigned: home about 18% less productive. Those who preferred home lost more (27% vs 13%).                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <i>The room; and preference is a poor forecast of who thrives where</i>             |
| <b>Emanuel, Harrington &amp; Pallais</b>                                   | Engineers on co-located teams got roughly a fifth more feedback on their code, most of all juniors and women; seniors near teammates wrote less code of their own.                                                                                                                                                        | <i>The room, for learning — paid for in the senior's output</i>                     |
| <b>Microsoft network study</b><br>Yang et al. 2022                         | 61,000+ employees in firm-wide remote work: collaboration networks became more static and siloed, with fewer connections across groups.                                                                                                                                                                                   | <i>The room, for work across groups</i>                                             |
| <b>Ding &amp; Ma (University of Pittsburgh)</b>                            | S&P 500 mandates: employee satisfaction fell, financial performance did not improve. Follow-up: turnover up about 14%, heaviest among women, senior staff and the most skilled; vacancies about 23% longer to fill.                                                                                                       | <i>Against blanket mandates (compares companies, not the reasoning inside each)</i> |

#### How to read it

- **Distance wins** on work that is focused, measurable and independent, done by people who already know how. It is often spending capital accumulated somewhere else, often in a building, by watching someone more experienced.
- **The room wins** where judgment is still being learned, where problems have not yet been defined, and where coordination that used to happen in passing has to be scheduled instead.
- **The design matters.** The strongest hybrid evidence, the Trip.com trial, tested fixed shared days, not chosen ones. Adopting the “hybrid” half of that design while discarding the “together” half borrows the conclusion without the method.
- **Mentoring is not free.** The senior person pays for it in their own output. Measure only individual output and distance looks like a gain for senior people, while what junior people stopped receiving stays invisible.

## 4 The Role Placement Map

*A simple tool for placing roles, not people, so that each placement can be defended to the people who hold it.*

**First, settle what is physically located.** If any part of the work is at a piece of equipment, a site or a customer's premises, the work decides where the person is, and the map covers only what remains. Then place each role on two axes, low or high:

- **Real-time interdependence:** how far the work depends on others working on the same problem at the same time. *Test: if this person were unreachable for an afternoon, whose work would stop?*
- **Tacit learning, in both directions:** how far the role must learn judgment that is never written down, or is the source others learn it from. *Tests: could a capable newcomer learn this from what is written down? If this person left tomorrow, what would the people around them stop learning?*

|                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| HIGH<br>tacit<br>learning     | <b>APPRENTICE</b><br><i>Low interdependence · high tacit learning</i><br>Presence scheduled around learning: learners and the seniors they learn from on site the same days; the senior is there whenever the junior is.       | <b>ALONGSIDE</b><br><i>High interdependence · high tacit learning</i><br>On site most days, with the people the work depends on. Usually the rarest zone.                              |
|                               | <b>ANYWHERE</b><br><i>Low interdependence · low tacit learning</i><br>Work can be done well from any location. Gather on purpose for relationship-forming moments: onboarding, conflict, crisis. Usually the most common zone. | <b>ANCHOR</b><br><i>High interdependence · low tacit learning</i><br>Coordinated anchor days, set by the team for the work that needs everyone at once; flexible the rest of the week. |
| LOW real-time interdependence |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | HIGH real-time interdependence                                                                                                                                                         |

### Rules for using it

- **Place roles as they are held today, not job titles.** A first-year and a fifth-year analyst can share a title and belong in different zones. Plot a role at its ordinary working level, not its peak.
- **Ask who needs to overhear this person** before placing any experienced role in Anywhere. In the book's Berlin account, a senior architect placed in Anywhere stopped being overheard, and the junior engineers stopped learning architecture.
- **The map places roles, not people.** Whether a particular person is ready to do a remote-eligible role at a distance is a separate, written, outcome-based judgment by the manager, with HR. Accommodation requests go to HR's process, person by person; a role's zone is never the answer to one.

### Anchor days, not attendance quotas

People do not come to the office to be in the building; they come to be with particular other people. "Three days a week, your choice of days" guarantees that on any given day many of those people will not be there. An **anchor day** is set by a team, for that team, with a stated purpose, on which everyone whose work depends on everyone else is present at the same time. A quota counts days in the building per person; an anchor day counts whether the people who needed to be together were, and whether the work that needed the room got done in it. Before calling any day a collaboration day, name who will collaborate with whom.

## 5 The business case, both columns

*Both sides of the presence question on one page, in one currency, with every assumption stated (Chapter 31).*

The book's worked case compares a hybrid design of two home days a week with a five-day office requirement, at an average salary of \$100,000 (a round number, not MDI's). Several inputs are the author's own stated assumptions; replace them with your organization's figures.

| Line (per year)                                 | Per employee   | 10 people       | 100 people       | 1,000 people       |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Recovered working time (40% of 72 min, 92 days) | \$2,123        | \$21,230        | \$212,300        | \$2,123,000        |
| Space (25% fewer seats at \$10,200)             | \$2,550        | \$25,500        | \$255,000        | \$2,550,000        |
| Turnover (12% to 8%, at \$50,000)               | \$2,000        | \$20,000        | \$200,000        | \$2,000,000        |
| Absence (one day, author's assumption)          | \$385          | \$3,850         | \$38,500         | \$385,000          |
| <b>Total favoring distance</b>                  | <b>\$7,058</b> | <b>\$70,580</b> | <b>\$705,800</b> | <b>\$7,058,000</b> |
| Collaboration allowance (2.6%)                  | \$2,600        | \$26,000        | \$260,000        | \$2,600,000        |
| New-hire ramp and mentoring                     | \$620          | \$6,200         | \$62,000         | \$620,000          |
| In-person weeks and travel                      | \$2,000        | \$20,000        | \$200,000        | \$2,000,000        |
| <b>Total favoring the room</b>                  | <b>\$5,220</b> | <b>\$52,200</b> | <b>\$522,000</b> | <b>\$5,220,000</b> |
| <b>Net in favor of the hybrid design</b>        | <b>\$1,838</b> | <b>\$18,380</b> | <b>\$183,800</b> | <b>\$1,838,000</b> |

### Where the inputs come from

- **Recovered time:** the 27-country average of 72 minutes saved a day, 40% returned to work (Aksoy et al.), valued at salary as a conservative proxy for output.
- **Space:** the midpoint of the author's \$500–\$1,200 seat estimate (\$850 a month); coordinated anchor days assumed to let the organization carry seats for 75% of its people.
- **Turnover:** baseline attrition of 12% is the author's assumption; the Trip.com trial's cut of about a third takes it to 8%; each departure priced at the bottom of Gallup's range, 50% of salary.
- **Collaboration:** a deliberately unfavorable charge equal to the 2.6% productivity loss Trip.com's own managers predicted before the trial. **Ramp and mentoring** and **in-person weeks** are the author's stated, illustrative figures.

## The sensitivities that decide it

| Change one assumption                                                       | Net per employee                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Base case                                                                   | \$1,838                                   |
| Strike both soft lines (recovered time and collaboration allowance)         | \$2,315                                   |
| Use the American round trip of about 54 minutes instead of 72               | \$1,307                                   |
| Price a departure at a full year's salary                                   | \$3,838 — roughly doubles                 |
| The space cannot be released (lease runs on, or too few seats to hand back) | minus \$712                               |
| An Alongside-zone role, charged the low end of Gibbs et al.'s 8–19% fall    | minus \$3,562                             |
| An Anywhere-zone role                                                       | collaboration charge may be close to zero |

### THE KEY INSIGHT (CHAPTER 31)

“The largest driver of the whole case is not productivity but whether the organization is at a moment when it can change its real estate.”

A net of \$1,838 is less than 2 percent of salary: neither column wins by much. At ten people, four points of attrition is 0.4 of a departure, better read as a risk than a saving. And the blended average hides the zones, so the arithmetic argues for deciding role by role.

## The third column the board should see

Off the employer's ledger: ninety-two days at home spare each person about 110 hours of commuting a year, and the 60 percent not returned to work is theirs. Priced at the Resume.io survey's \$34.73 per office day, those days are worth about **\$3,195 per person a year**. No company books that line, and every employee pays it. Keep it outside the total, but put it in front of the board.

## 6 How to tell whether it worked

*A turnstile records that a person entered a building, not whether they learned anything, taught anything or solved a problem. Replace the badge count with five measures, read together (Chapter 33).*

| Measure                          | What it shows                                                                                                                                                                                                     | When it moves                    |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Regretted attrition           | Departures of people the organization would rehire tomorrow, not total turnover. Where a hybrid design's retention benefit shows up, and where a mandate's cost among senior and skilled people would show first. | A year or more                   |
| 2. New-hire time to productivity | Defined in writing for each role before the first new hire under the new arrangement starts, so it cannot become an impression of who was seen working. Where the apprentice problem surfaces first.              | After a full cohort of new hires |
| 3. Engagement, team by team      | Read by team, not company-wide: the manager is the biggest variable, and the company average hides almost everything that matters.                                                                                | Within a quarter                 |
| 4. Output per team               | Whatever the team's own work already produces: resolved incidents, shipped changes, closed cases, cycle times.                                                                                                    | Within a quarter                 |
| 5. Promotion parity              | Ratings and promotion rates compared between headquarters and elsewhere, and between people often and rarely in the building. The most direct test of whether the visibility trap has been designed out.          | A year or more                   |

### Rules for the dashboard

- **Take baselines before the policy changes**, or the organization will be comparing the new arrangement with a memory.
- **Give occupancy data to facilities.** It sizes space and feeds the cost per occupied desk; it is a real estate measure and should never appear on a dashboard used to judge people.
- **Be patient.** A leader who expects a verdict within a quarter will declare victory too early or abandon a working design too soon. In a small organization, one departure swings a percentage.
- **Name a review date**, typically twelve months out, and commit to how employees' experience will be heard before then.

### How the measures mislead

Output per team can be gamed by redefining what counts. Engagement can rise because a policy was relaxed for people who were already thriving, while the apprentices it was meant to serve fall behind unnoticed. Regretted attrition can fall because people with no options stayed. The answer is not a return to badge counts but a habit of reading the five measures together and asking, whenever one moves, **which people inside the average moved it.**

## 7 The board's decision checklist

Before approving a presence decision, a board should be able to tick every line, and ask of any proposed rule: “Three days for whom?”

### The facts

- ☐ Cost per occupied desk for each site, on the average, busiest and quietest day.
- ☐ Lease and contract dates: when real estate decisions can actually be made, and which seats could be released.
- ☐ A confidential survey of the employee side: commute times, the costs of attending, caregiving and accessibility needs.
- ☐ Baselines for the five measures, and a proximity audit of the last two cycles of ratings and promotions by location.

### The design

- ☐ Every role placed on the Role Placement Map with the leader of the work, after physically located work is settled.
- ☐ For every role placed in Anywhere, the question asked: who needs to overhear this person?
- ☐ Every first-year employee paired with the people they learn from, in the same place on the same days.
- ☐ Anchor days set per team, each with a written purpose, coordinated across teams that depend on each other.
- ☐ Both columns run with our own numbers and sensitivities, and shown to someone whose job is to doubt them.

### The decision and the announcement

- ☐ Decision rights written down: the organization sets principles and budget; teams set anchor days within them.
- ☐ The announcement tested for the second reading, managers briefed first, and the principle behind every exception publishable.
- ☐ The badge slide retired from leadership dashboards; the five measures in its place.
- ☐ A public review date, typically twelve months out.

### Questions to take to counsel

The book's Appendix C, “HR and Legal Guardrails: Questions to Take to Counsel,” sets out the questions an HR leader should put to employment counsel before a presence policy is announced, not after the first complaint. A selection:

|                             |                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Accommodation</b>        | Does the announcement tell employees how to request an accommodation, and route requests to HR rather than the manager who placed the role? |
| <b>Readiness</b>            | What written, job-related criteria define readiness for each role, and who reviews a “not ready” decision?                                  |
| <b>Hourly staff</b>         | How do non-exempt employees record time worked at home, including early and late messages?                                                  |
| <b>Locations</b>            | Who maintains the approved-locations list, and are we registered in every state where someone works?                                        |
| <b>Unions and councils</b>  | Does the policy require bargaining, or informing and consulting works councils, and in what order?                                          |
| <b>Data and bias audits</b> | Which notice laws apply to badge and attendance data, and should promotion-parity analysis run under privilege?                             |

*This brief and the book are not legal advice. Rules vary by jurisdiction and change often.*

## 8 The full book and the free tools

*The Visibility Trap: A Leader's Guide to Return-to-Office, Hybrid Work, and Deciding Which Roles Need a Desk* follows one company's leaders through the decision this brief summarizes, weighs the research at full strength in both directions, and gives every tool here in full. Executives short of time can read the Preface and Chapters 1, 3, 5, 11, 13, 31 to 33 and 36.

|                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>The Role Placement Worksheet</b>     | Appendix B as a printable PDF and an editable Word file, for placing roles, not people, with the people who lead the work.                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>The Individual Arrangement Guide</b> | A short guide for HR to the person-by-person conversation the map leaves open: readiness on written, job-related criteria, consistent documentation, a review route, and the right process for accommodation, caregiving and leave. Not legal advice.                                                            |
| <b>The Both-Columns Cost Model</b>      | A spreadsheet version of Chapter 31 with your own salaries, attrition and seat costs, the sensitivities, a Desk Cost sheet that calculates cost per occupied desk by weekday, the seats your busiest day needs and the months to your lease renewal, and a Scenarios sheet comparing five policies side by side. |

Download all three free at [www.invisibleleadershipseries.com/visibility-trap](http://www.invisibleleadershipseries.com/visibility-trap).

**For leadership teams:** team copies and a facilitated working session are available through NINETEEN64 Consulting at [www.nineteen64.net](http://www.nineteen64.net). *The Visibility Trap* is a companion to the Invisible Leadership Series ([www.invisibleleadershipseries.com](http://www.invisibleleadershipseries.com)).

**About the author.** John S. Muir has spent more than forty years in leadership: more than a decade in hospitality and thirty years in information technology, including senior leadership of global service delivery and large distributed teams at Dolby Laboratories, TK Elevator, NCR Corporation, Randstad and JPMorgan Chase. He lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia.

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*Short citations; full references and URLs are in the book's Notes. Web sources accessed October 2026.*

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