October 27, 2022

**RETURN TO OFFICE FEEDBACK**

Thank you to the members of the Return to Office committee for the opportunity to share this feedback from the members of the News Guild of Maine. You have worked so hard to navigate these unprecedented decisions for our workplace, and we are grateful for that ongoing effort. We gathered the feedback we presented today because we want to support this committee and this company.

This topic is top of mind for many Portland Press Herald employees, so we asked our members to share their experiences with the first weeks of mandatory return to the office. We received more than 40 responses from members across departments. We are sharing the comments anonymously, in part because some employees expressly worried about retaliation from their managers. We did not share every comment because some employees submitted identifying information, but we believe the accompanying document you have also received is reflective of the whole.

Before you dive into those comments, we want to emphasize that the Guild brings this feedback to the committee and the company in a spirit of shared values:

1. **Trusting employees.** When the pandemic hit in 2020, the company trusted many of us to do our jobs remotely, and we did. We produced impactful journalism, interfaced with customers and subscribers, moved events online, kept our business afloat amid incredible challenges. Before we negotiated our last contract, the return to the office was top of mind for our members. At the bargaining table, the leadership team said “trust us” on that topic. We chose to do that and did not move forward with new language on hybrid and remote work arrangements. Now, we are asking the leadership team to do the same. Please continue to trust us.
2. **Empowering employees.** One of our company values is to empower employees to do our best work. One takeaway we saw in these comments is a cultural shift in our relationship to work that is larger than just our company. Even when employees feel good about returning to the office, they see and understand why others would not be. Not every worker will have the same experience or the same needs, and the best approach is equitable in its flexibility.
3. **Retaining employees.** We want to keep employees! This means making sure new employees can actually meet their coworkers and build connections within the company. It also means recognizing the importance of hybrid work for some employees and the possibility of losing valued workers to fully remote jobs. We want to contribute to a real and respectful conversation about why some employees are unhappy with mandatory and company-wide RTO, and why there should be individual exceptions for the purposes of employee retention and morale.

Based on the feedback from members, the Guild would recommend that employees be required to work no more than one day in the office. We see the benefit and the reasonableness of that requirement, and we think some employees will certainly choose to spend more time in person. We would also advocate for flexibility for employees and individualized exceptions for those who feel unsafe or truly unproductive in the office.

We also want to take a moment to recognize that many of our employees do not have jobs that allow remote work, and they have been bearing the cost of commuting that came up in some comments. We also know that many of those employees are the lowest paid in our company and therefore bear a disproportionate burden from those costs, and we would be interested in a separate conversation about the incredible value of their hands-on work in the building. For this committee, however, we would suggest that the cost of commuting might be a lesser concern for employees who can work remotely if they saw the office as a net-positive experience rather than neutral or net-negative, and we want to work together to improve that perception.

Some questions to consider going forward: How can we prioritize quality over quantity when we think about time in the office? How can we take what is working and empower managers to expand on that growth? How can we bring the positive experiences we heard about to every worker and make the office an environment that meaningfully contributes to our work?

Again, we want to emphasize that the Guild is a partner in this work and fully supports this committee. We know the Portland Press Herald is a great place to work, and we want to contribute to a positive and productive environment. We want to trust, empower and keep our employees. And we hope sharing their words helps us work together toward those shared goals.

Thank you,

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