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Industry leaders react to WPP's return to office mandate: 'You can't have your cake and eat it'

by **Alisha Buaya**
Posted on 28 January 2025



Mat Baxter: 'WPP has a responsibility to not just its people, but also shareholders and clients to produce the very best work possible.'

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WPP's global mandate to return to the office four days a week has sparked a **wave of debate among companies and workers.**

The new policy – announced by CEO Mark Read – will come into effect in April 2025, giving WPP staffers the time to make necessary arrangements and adjust to new routines.

"I believe that we do our best work when we are together in person," said Read. "It's easier to learn from each other, it's a better way to mentor colleagues starting out in the industry, and it helps us win pitches as a truly integrated team."

Despite backlash from the employees, **the holding company has remained firm in its decision** even after a **Change.org petition resulted in 19,000 signatures.**

Mediaweek spoke to industry experts **Darren Woolley** and **Mat Baxter**, who shared their thoughts on the controversial WPP office policy, and **what it means for the wider industry.**



Darren Woolley

Darren Woolley: 'Time will tell if WPP will lose an inordinate number of senior people'

Darren Woolley, CEO of TrinityP3, noted that WPP's return to office mandate has a conflicting set of pros and cons.

He believes WPP CEO Mark Read is correct in his stance that "creating an inclusive and engaging workplace is vital for more junior staff to receive mentoring and incidental learning."

"The fact that many of the major holding companies, and their agency networks, are over-represented by junior staff members requiring this type of training indicates either the ageism inherent in the advertising industry, or the failure of their business model to sustain a more balanced approach to long-term career development," he said.

But, interestingly, Woolley also noted that more experienced staff gain the benefit of remote working because they are proficient enough to do their job without being micromanaged.

They also avoid losing valuable time on the commute to and from the office, and are autonomous and flexible in their working day to enhance productivity.

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"But this is a numbers game," he noted.

"Time will tell if WPP will lose an inordinate number of senior people who are unhappy and will leave for greater flexibility.

"In contrast, those who like a more draconian approach to the workplace will be attracted to this approach," Woolley added.



Mat Baxter

Mat Baxter: 'You can't have your cake and eat it too'

Media industry veteran **Mat Baxter** told *MediaWeek* he was also a "convert" to returning to office after trying an entirely remote work model following Covid.

This was a move he called a "failed experiment" during his time as CEO of Hugel.

Baxter recalled staff surveys highlighting degradation in the company's culture and employees feeling disconnected from the organisation and colleagues as pitfalls of remote working.

However, he also noted that employees were resistant to returning to the office.

"You can't have your cake and eat it too," he said.

"If you want a sense of connection to the company and your colleagues, and you want to build a culture that is nourishing and rewarding, then you've got to be willing to create that community.

"You need to be in the same physical space to collaborate with your colleagues."

Baxter added: "Humans collaborate better when they're together, and ideation and innovation, all the things we laud in our industry as hyper-important to success, are best delivered in that environment.

"I learned that the hard way because when I removed that, the company's performance suffered.

"We moved back to a back-in-office posture pretty quickly after it became evident that it wasn't going to work in the way that we hoped."

'The results will speak for themselves'

Baxter backed the holding company's decision, saying WPP has the right to lay those conditions down for its success, while every employee has the right to leave the job and find one better suited for their lifestyle.

However, he cautioned that there will be fewer jobs with flexibility as companies realise the limitations and disadvantages to a remote workforce.

"It's no coincidence that all the biggest, smartest and most successful companies are all asking people back to the office," he said.

"They're doing it because they've seen a tangible and detrimental impact of not having people physically collaborating at work."

WPP is the only holding company enforcing a return to office mandate and Baxter predicted that it would only be a matter of time before others follow suit.

"They'll say that until they start losing and WPP starts winning as a result of the improved performance, then they will all jump back to a four-day in-office week.

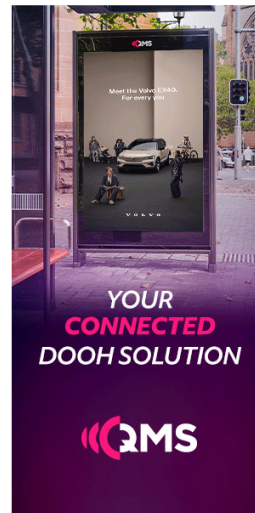
"The results will speak for themselves. If you think you can run a creatively orientated business with a whole bunch of people long-term talking to each other over video, good luck to you."



Mark Read

Baxter on Mark Read: 'WPP has a responsibility'

Baxter called the backlash inflicted on CEO **Mark Read** "unreasonable". He said: "Don't punish Mark Read for choosing to get into a service industry with clients that you provide



a service for.

"If those clients demand that you're physically available and present in person, you've either got to be willing to do it, or it's not the right job for you."

"It's like everyone wants all the good stuff in the industry, but nobody is willing to acknowledge that it comes with the realities of being a client service-driven business or industry. That's what we are," he said.

Baxter added: "Sometimes, the right decisions are not popular, and at the end of the day, WPP has a responsibility to not just its people, but also shareholders and clients to produce the very best work possible."

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