

Gov. DeWine: Bringing workers back to the office will boost creativity, collaboration

By **Donovan Hunt**
Columbus Dispatch

Gov. Mike DeWine said private companies in Ohio influenced his decision to bring some state workers back to the office.

DeWine signed an executive order on Feb. 4 that ended remote work, a practice that developed during the COVID pandemic, for state employees with some exceptions. During a Wednesday interview with our statehouse bureau, he said private companies making similar decisions made him realize it is time state workers do the same.

"As we are seeing the private sector now move more and more people back, it made sense to me to have a general rule that people would move back with exceptions," he said."

His order gives state departments some room to accommodate workers who cannot come in and is intended instead to set a norm that work should be done in-person.

DeWine said there is a synergistic quality that workplaces lose when people work remotely and bringing people back will increase creativity.

The order states that government offices must be in-person by March 17.

According to the Ohio Department of Administrative Services, 65% of workers never left the office because of the nature of their duties. These include state workers at places like state prisons and hospitals that did not have the option to telework.

The order applies to some 44,000 employees. DAS said 25% of state workers have hybrid schedules and 10% are fully remote, the bulk of those are in customer service or call center jobs.

President Donald Trump signed an executive order requiring federal remote workers to return to office on Jan. 20.

Downtown Columbus business leaders including the Ohio Chamber of Commerce applauded the order saying increased foot traffic would spur economic activity.

What exceptions are in the return-to-office order?

The state has saved \$15 million on facilities because of remote work, according to a statement from DAS Director Kathleen Madden.

DAS has the ability to create an appointing authority to grant exceptions it deems necessary.

The order details two cases including when in-office employment is not possible for field workers or agency employees. The other is if agencies have eliminated a portion or all of its office space and it would have to get more office space or remodel existing real estate to allow workers to be in-office.

Other exceptions can be created by DAS and would have to be approved by its director.

Private companies in central Ohio return to office

Some of central Ohio's biggest employers issued return to office orders before DeWine. Here are some of the largest:

- JPMorgan Chase ordered all of its employees back to office starting in March.
- Wendy's corporate workers must return to the office for at least four days a week.
- AEP employees must return to five days a week in-office beginning in June.

"It's time for us to say, 'Let's everybody that can get back, unless there's some reason that person should work remotely or needs to work remotely, let's get everybody back,'" DeWine said.