



FROM ZOOMS TO ROOMS: REAL DATA ON THE RTO EXPERIENCE

APRIL 2025 RESEARCH REPORT



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There has been a steady stream of RTO headlines. How many companies are ditching remote work? What percentage of employees welcome a return vs. want to stay remote? But these numbers only scratch the surface.

This report examines what's actually happening *behind* the statistics: how RTO changes the way people actually behave at work and how that behavior impacts the physical workplace. Policies say one thing, office spaces say another.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Collaboration buzzes: In-office collaboration time explodes 40% in the first week after an RTO requirement.
- Meetings multiply: Time spent in meetings with 2+ people grows by 6 percentage points.
- Office-moons are real: Occupancy falls 13% the week before RTO as in-office becomes real.
- Some RTO may be performative. Occupancy spikes 28% the first week of RTO and then loses 12% of that gain over the following 10 weeks
- Companies see a ~\$3,000 annual efficiency increase per employee on real estate costs, thanks to smarter space utilization.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

We studied 21 buildings across major organizations in the Density network that implemented a new return-to-office policy in the past year. We looked at space usage for 10 weeks before and after the new policies kicked in.

For each company, RTO was somewhat different. Prior to a change in policy, time in office ranged from zero days in office to three days.



I. OFFICE ATTENDANCE DIPS THE WEEK BEFORE RTO TAKES EFFECT

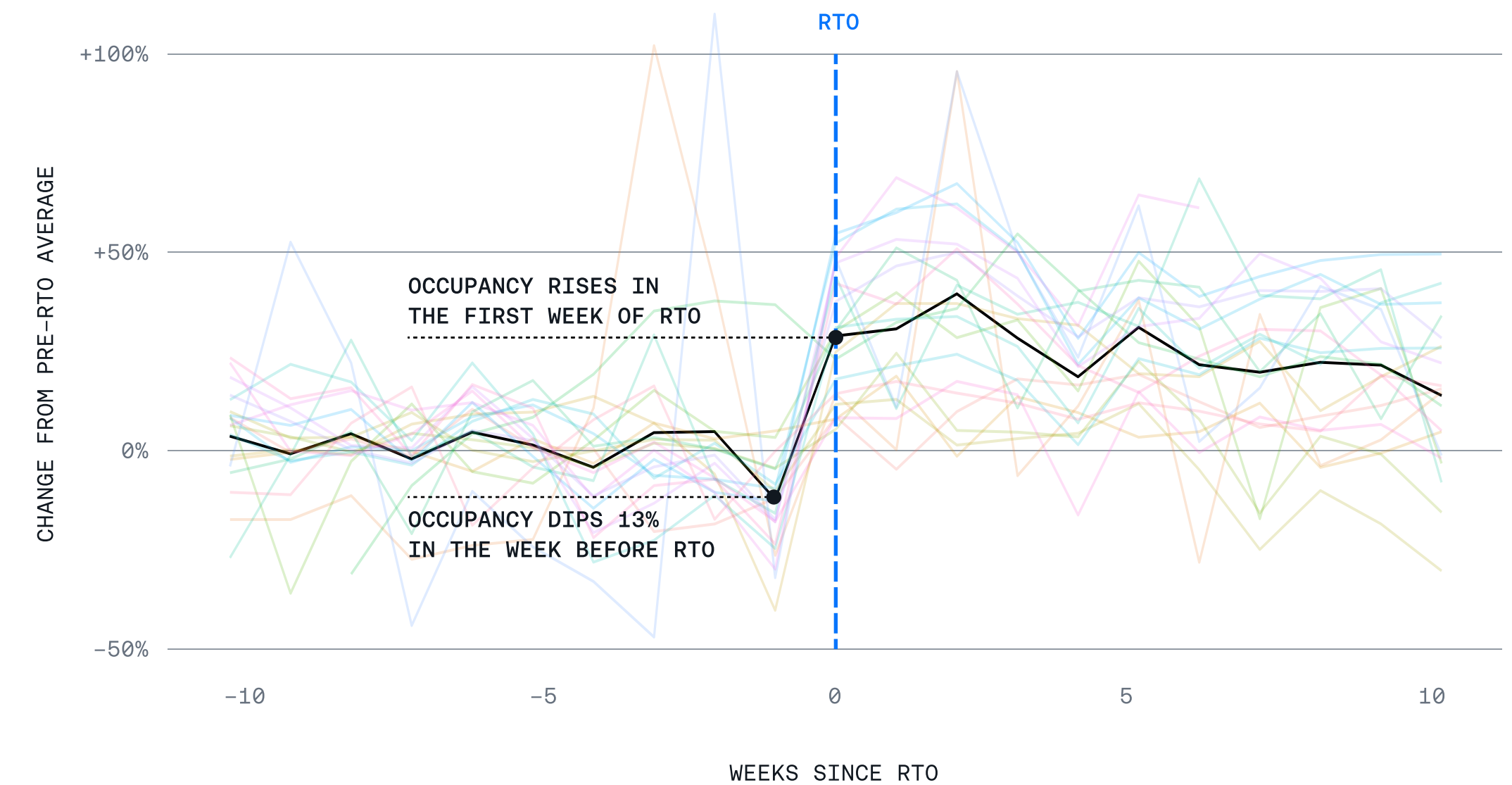
THE WEEK BEFORE EMPLOYEES ARE REQUIRED TO GO BACK TO THE OFFICE OCCUPANCY DROPS FROM TYPICAL PRE-RTO LEVELS.

Density data shows a 13% drop in workplace occupancy the week before the official RTO kickoff.

That's right, employees are marking RTO with an "office-moon." It's the corporate version of the honeymoon. Only instead of lounging on a tropical beach, employees are getting in every last minute of remote work.

Workers may be scrambling to squeeze in errands, handle last-minute childcare logistics or shop for outfits beyond remote-work wear.

OCCUPANCY PRE- AND POST-RTO



II. FIRST-WEEK FRENZY FADES OVER TIME.

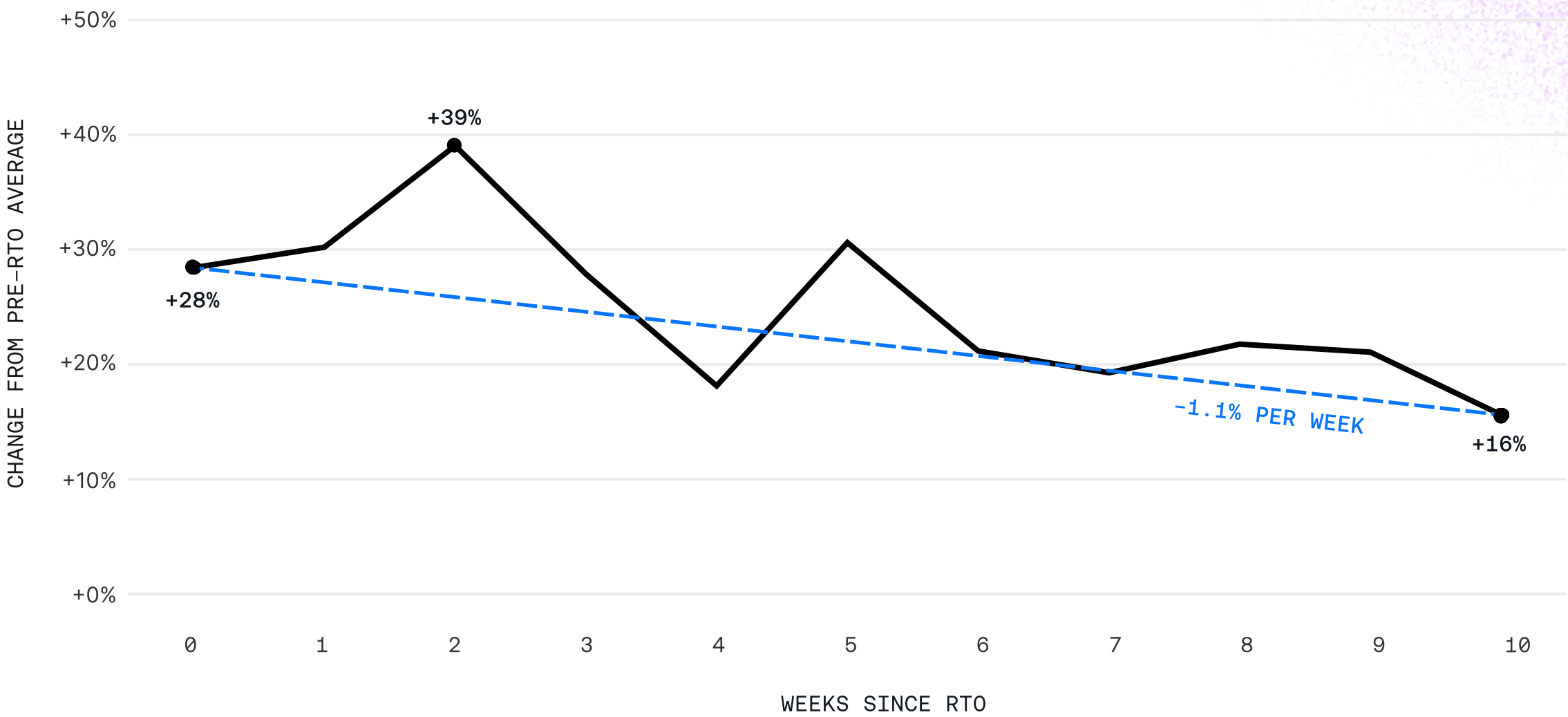
OCCUPANCY JUMPS IN THE FIRST WEEK OF RTO, BUT LOSES SOME OF ITS GAIN OVER THE FOLLOWING WEEKS.

Employees flood back to the office during the first week of return, showcasing their presence.

We saw occupancy spike 28% in the first week back, but occupancy gives back 12% of that gain over the following 10 weeks.

Many offices may be seeing the highest occupancy numbers recorded since before the pandemic. But as time progresses, attendance slows down again.

OCCUPANCY POST-RTO



III. IN-PERSON COLLABORATION OUTPACES OCCUPANCY POST-RTO.

COLLABORATION TIME SHOOTS UP IN THE FIRST WEEK IN OFFICE, OUTPACING INCREASED OCCUPANCY IN THE SAME WEEK.

The return appears to trigger a multiplier effect—more bodies in seats means more spontaneous meetings and team huddles. “*Oh, you're in the office? let's meet in person next time.*” Collaboration time explodes 40% in the first week in the office, outstripping the 28% increase in occupancy.

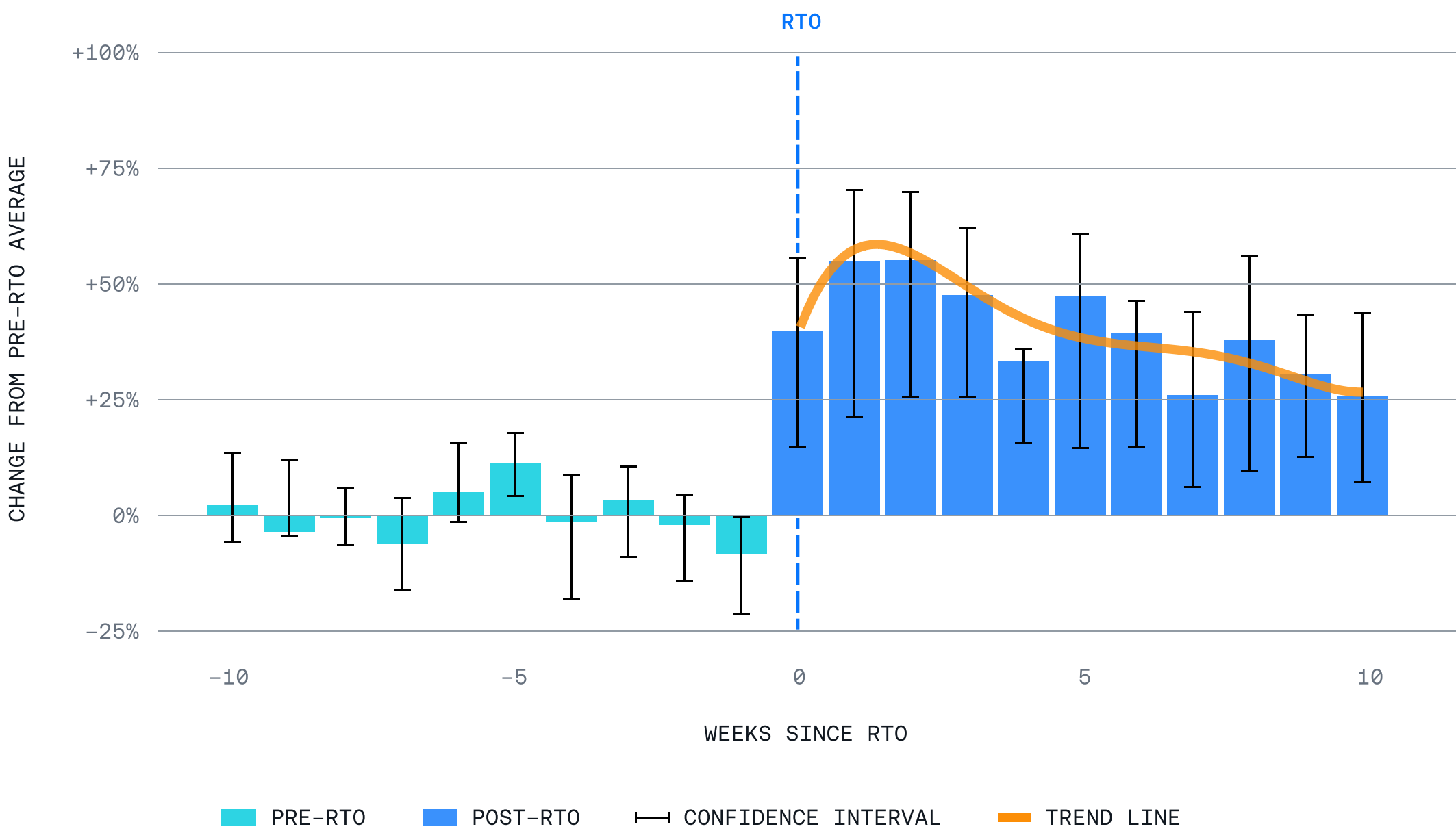
After about six weeks, teams settle into a new normal that still sees significantly more collaboration—the time employees spend working with one or more colleagues.

COLLABORATION STABILIZES AT A RATE HIGHER THAN PRE-RTO.

As people spend more time in the office and start to recognize the benefits, collaboration time settles at about 32% higher than it was before the comeback in the final five weeks of the sample period.

On a per person basis, people are collaborating 50 minutes per day on average post RTO.

COLLABORATION TIME PRE- AND POST-RTO



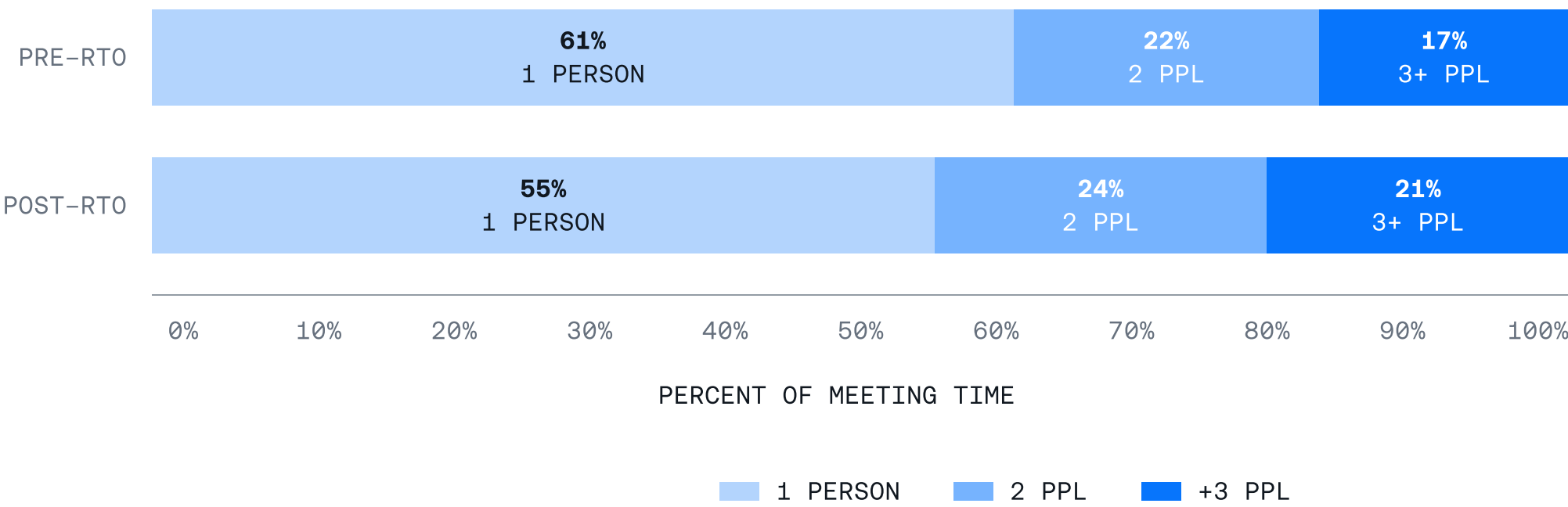
IV. MEETING ROOMS BUZZ POST-RT0: MORE PEOPLE, LESS SOLO TIME.

SOLO MEETINGS DROP AFTER RT0.

As in-person collaboration picks up after the office comeback, companies see less meeting room squatting—solo use of a room decreases to 55% from 61% of all meetings.

- Two-person meetings tick up 2 percentage points to 24% of meetings
- Three-person or more meetings jump 4 percentage points to 21% of meetings

MEETING ROOM OCCUPANCY PRE- AND POST-RT0



V. DESKS FILL UP MORE POST-RTO, JUST NOT ALL DAY

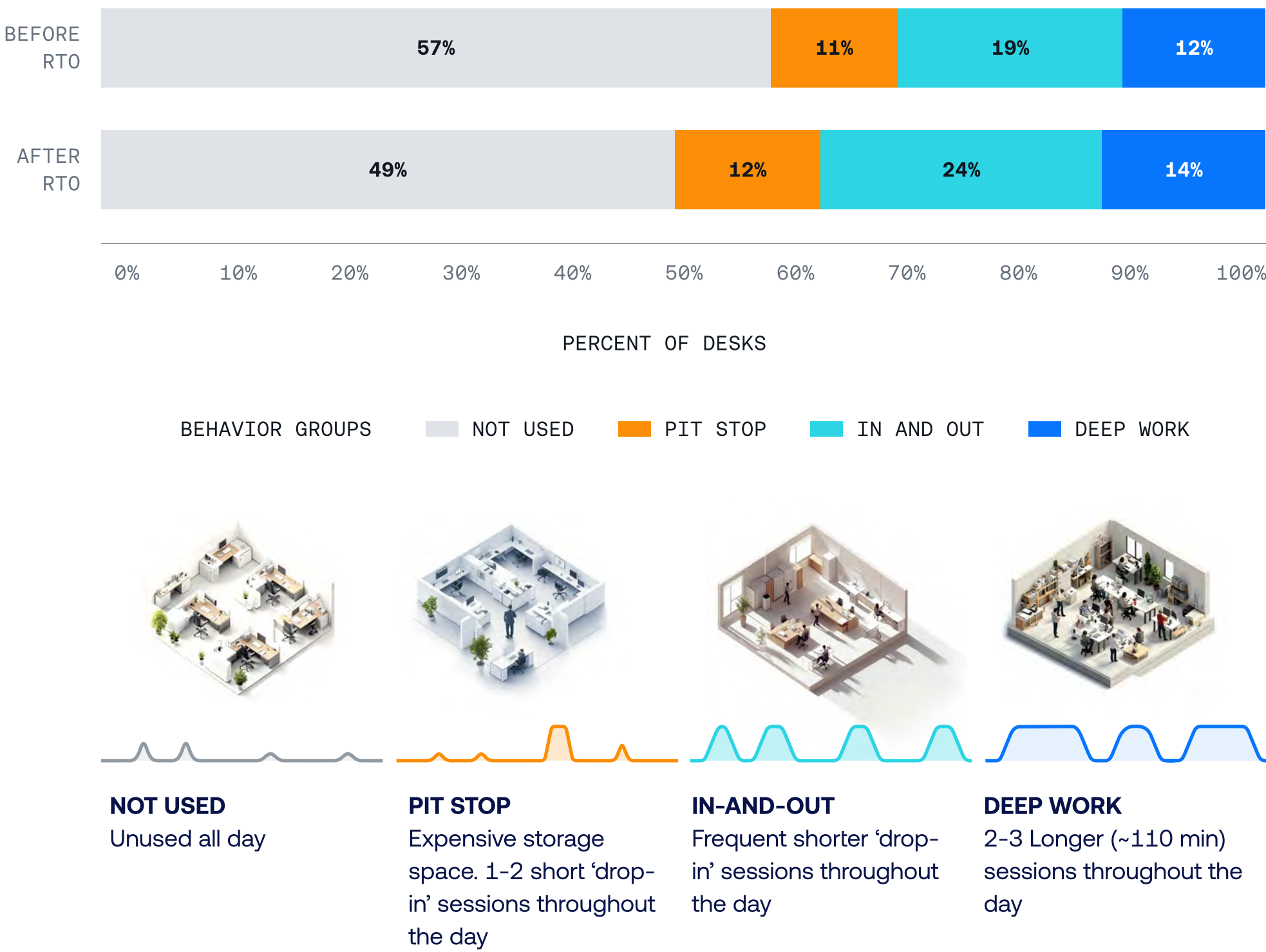
DESK “WASTE” DECREASES BY 8%.

One of the biggest concerns for businesses shifting to RTO is whether employees have enough desks. Turns out, the great desk scarcity hasn’t come to pass.

RTO puts a dent in wasted space though: post-RTO, offices see an 8% drop in “wasted” desks, spaces that go entirely unused throughout the day. This suggests more workers are indeed showing up.

In line with the increase in collaboration time, more desks are used for quick stops (24%) than for deep work (14%) after the comeback. People prefer quick “in and out” sessions over deep-work marathons.

TYPES OF DESK USE PRE- AND POST-RTO



Want to learn more about the patterns of workspace use? Visit the appendix.

VI. MIDWEEK IS THE NEW SWEET SPOT

MONDAY AND FRIDAYS REMAIN WORK FROM HOME DAYS, DESPITE RTO EFFORTS TO BRING PEOPLE BACK.

Nobody’s racing to the office on Mondays. Or Fridays.

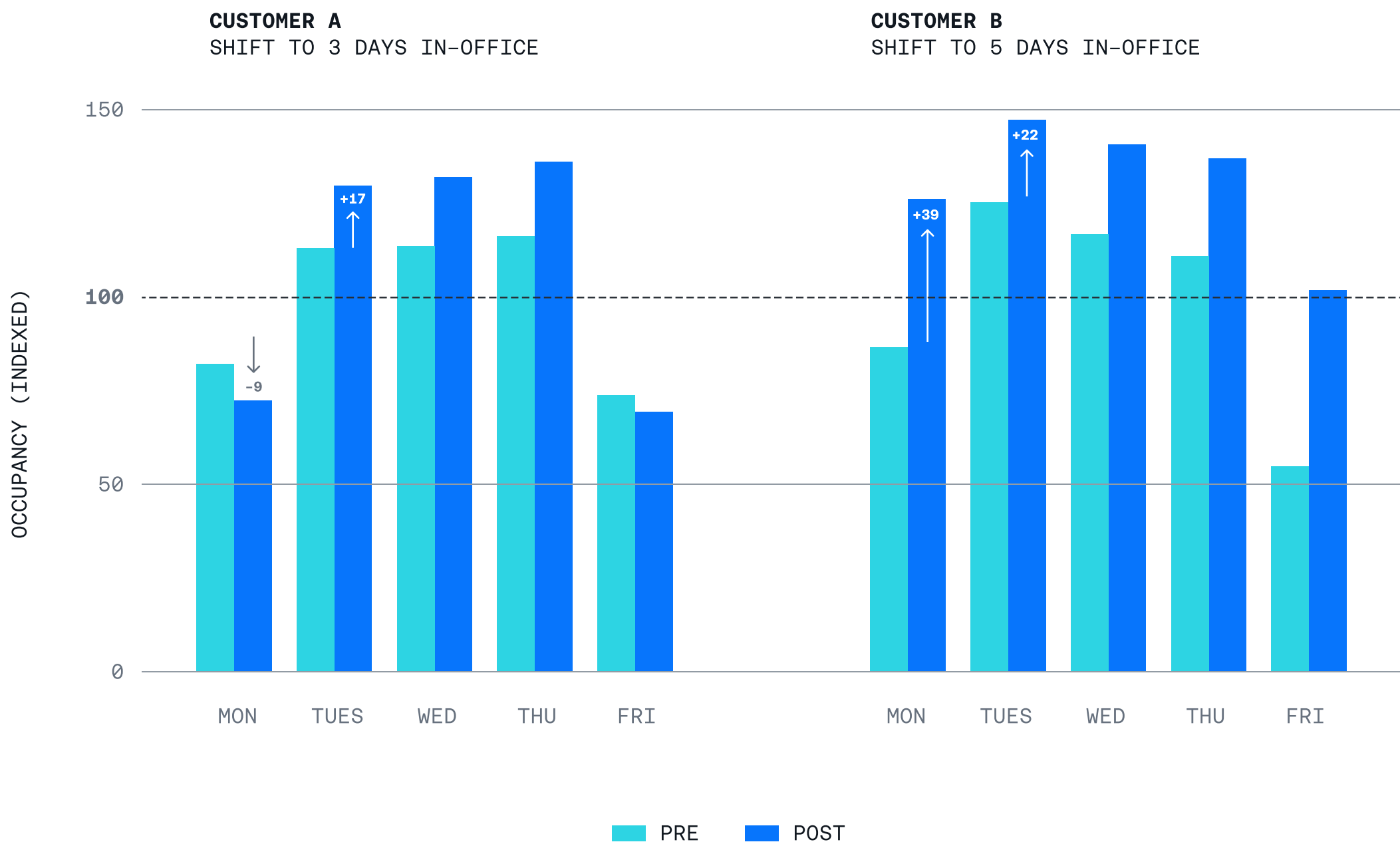
When we double-clicked on individual companies, the pattern is clear: Tuesday through Thursday is prime time for office attendance for employees being asked to spend more time in the office.

One company (Density Customer A in the chart on the right) shifted from fully remote to three days in-office. Their employees favor the midweek (Tuesdays-Thursdays) in-office sprint. Occupancy on Mondays and Fridays actually has declined below pre-RTO levels. Now that going into the office is a thing, employees prefer bookending the weekend with their WFH days. And they’re not going to the office more than what’s expected.

Another company (Density Customer B) has increased in-office expectations to every day of the week. Even then, Mondays and Fridays lag behind. Yes, attendance has risen across all five days. But Fridays remain the underachiever of the bunch, despite the policy change. Bottom line, people are more likely to go in when they think their colleagues will be there, too.

OCCUPANCY BY DAY OF THE WEEK

PRE-RTO AVERAGE FOR EACH CUSTOMER INDEXED TO 100



VII. REAL ESTATE COSTS PER EMPLOYEE SHRINK POST-RTO

MORE PEOPLE, MORE EFFICIENCY: COMPANIES SPEND ~\$3,000 LESS ON RENT PER IN-OFFICE EMPLOYEE PER YEAR POST-RTO

Increased space efficiency from RTO can be significant when calculating higher real estate utilization through higher occupancy.

After RTO, companies spend an estimated \$10,600 every year on rent per in-office employee versus \$13,500 before RTO, for an increased efficiency of \$2,900.*

This doesn't factor in potential rises in the cost of food and other in-office perks, which could offset some of the efficiencies.

RENT COSTS PER EMPLOYEE IN OFFICE PER YEAR

BEFORE RTO, EMPLOYERS ARE SPENDING \$13.5K/YEAR PER EMPLOYEE WHO SHOWS UP



*Based on CoStar data for US sub-market rents per square foot as of March 2025. The estimated efficiency is based on North America data only.

RTO BEST PRACTICES

HERE ARE SOME LOW-EFFORT, HIGH-IMPACT STRATEGIES TO MAKE RTO GO SMOOTHER IN THE EARLY DAYS:

- ✓ Try to kick off RTO the week after a long weekend or holiday. People need a minute to line up childcare, shake off WFH brain and maybe even locate their “hard pants.”
- ✓ Clearly communicate space usage expectations (virtual meetings from phone booths, IRL collaboration in meeting rooms). If you set up meeting space etiquette early on, you’re more likely to see more efficient space use as RTO becomes the new normal.
- ✓ Use data to determine the right balance of assigned and unassigned desks to promote buzzing neighborhoods.
- ✓ Add acoustic panels around desks for additional privacy for employees struggling with open plans. Open-plan isn’t for everyone, especially for employees who need minimal distraction for deep-focus work.
- ✓ Limit room bookings on “non-meeting days” for informal collaboration. You want to encourage “casual collisions” that can lead to big ideas.
- ✓ Set meeting rooms to auto-release if people no-show. That way, groups of two or more can hop into a meeting room if they’re ready to go.
- ✓ Implement live wayfinding to help everyone find their way back into office life. With wayfinding, you can bread-crumble the way to open meeting rooms and the best place to get a cup of coffee.
- ✓ Use plug and play sensors—have you met Density’s Waffle?—to get quick insights, so the decisions you make are data-backed. You can easily move Waffle around to measure new spaces as they come online.

Dive deeper into office comeback strategies with Density’s [RTO Playbook](#).



GUIDE TO SHORT-TERM MEASUREMENT IN YOUR SPACE

Every insight in this report came from measurement studies. Whether ongoing or short-term studies, measurement can help you understand how new workplace policies or design changes impact behavior and space utilization—actionable insights that may inform your long-term strategy.

COMPANIES USE SHORT-TERM STUDIES TO:

- Monitor the impact of a new (RTO) policy
- Test new space layouts or furniture
- Pilot new space types such as phone booths and quiet zones
- Evaluate how spaces are actually used (vs. how you think they're used)
- Identify which areas or behaviors need more support

MINIMUM MEASUREMENT TERM

We recommend measuring spaces you want to learn about **for at least four weeks before and after** you make the change. Depending on the relative scale of the change you're measuring, you may even want to plan for a bit longer.

Be sure that you have ample observations to establish a baseline beforehand and enough time afterwards for behaviors to stabilize. And get the timing right – you'll want to consider seasonality like holidays when selecting your observation period.

MEASUREMENT TECHNIQUES

It's important to **balance quantitative data with qualitative insights**. Short-term studies were traditionally done by people walking through space. The power of human observation is unparalleled. It can give you insight into human behavior and interaction that a sensor can only dream of.

But humans are also imprecise, expensive and have limited time. That makes them a poor fit for quantitative metrics like occupancy or consistent measurement across weeks and months.

Density's self-installable **Waffle sensor** can deliver occupancy and space insights in minutes. Other quantitative sources that are worth looking into are **badge swipes** and **room booking data**.

From there, you'll want to create channels for qualitative feedback via **surveys, focus groups** and, yes, **human observations**.

NEED HELP?

Not sure which spaces to measure and what to report on? The **Density Advisory team** can help design a study to monitor the impact of a change on your workplace and report on the metrics that matter the most.

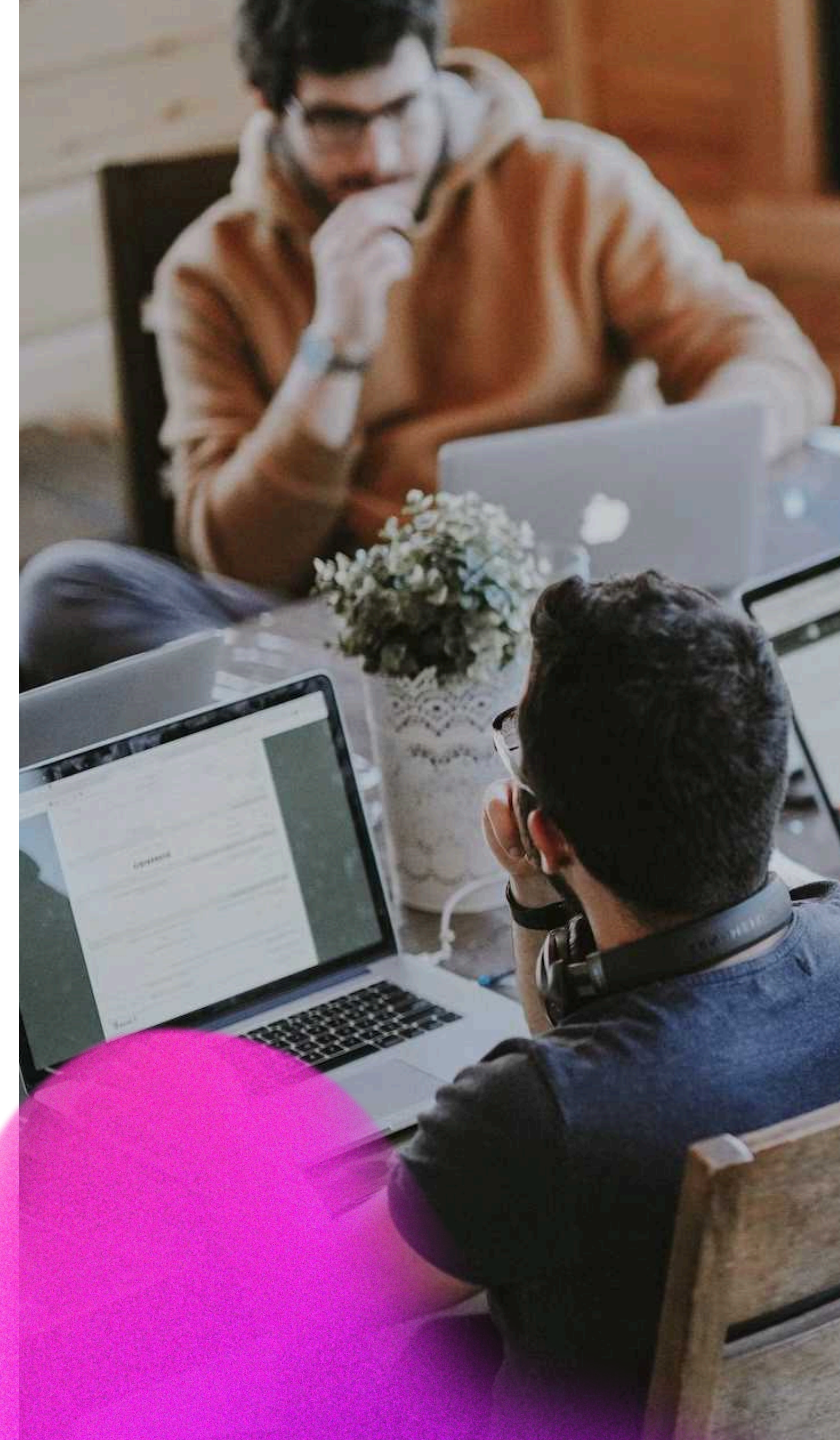
METHODOLOGY

PERIOD

20 week study period for each organization around their RTO policy change. All periods occurred between April 1, 2024 and April 1, 2025. Holiday weeks were removed for companies that saw a change around the year end.

SAMPLE

21 buildings, 115 floors, 19,215 spaces for companies across retail, finance, media, tech and telecom, located in cities including New York, San Francisco, Seattle, London, Barcelona and Melbourne.



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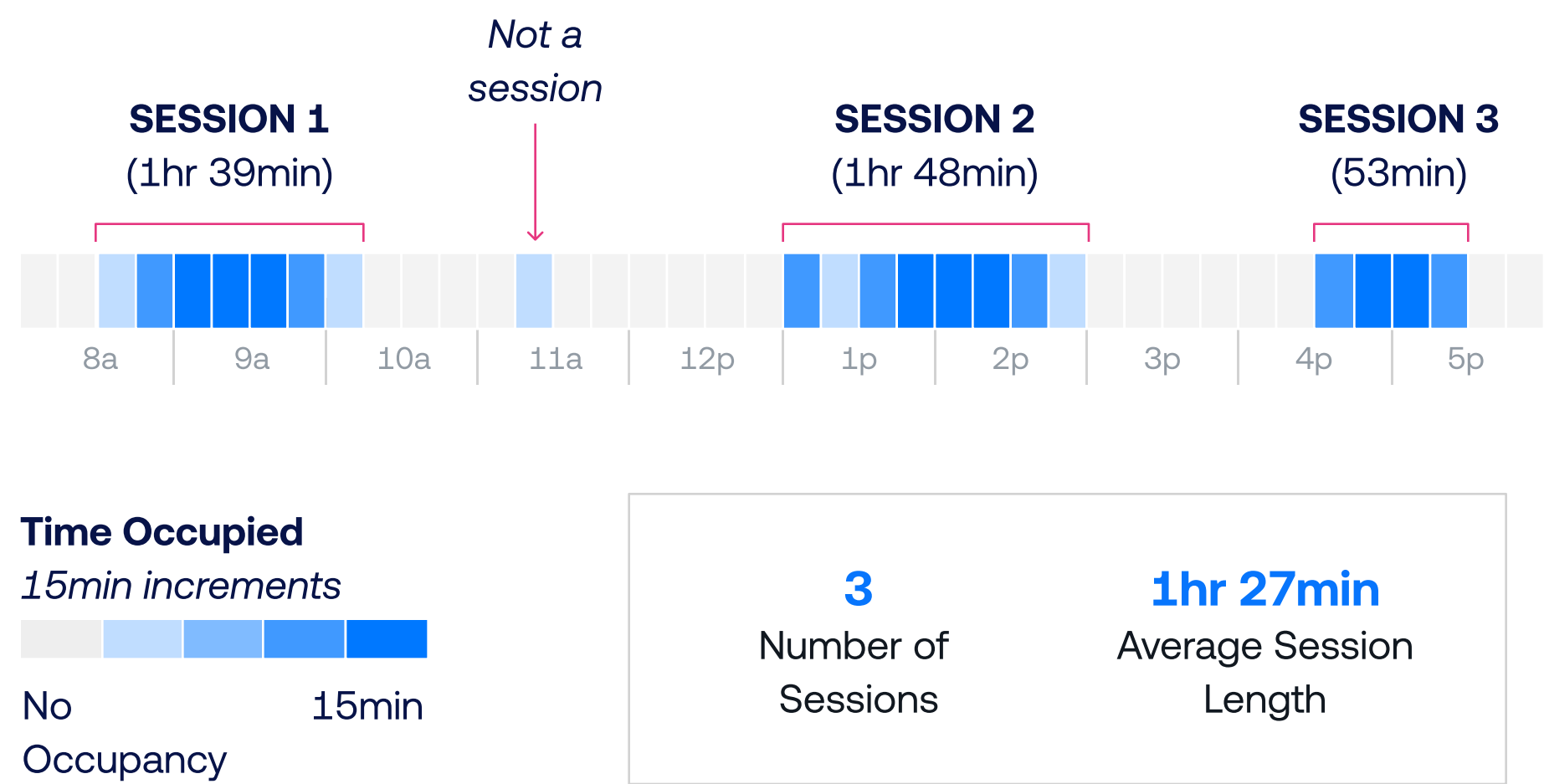
DARSHAN SHAH



APPENDIX

IDENTIFYING SESSIONS

To characterize patterns of workspace use—when, how often, and for how long people engage with a space—we analyze sessions: discrete periods of active use.



COMMON DESK USAGE BEHAVIORS

Analysis of the key session metrics revealed four consistent desk usage patterns across the Density portfolio.

