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Seed: How long must in-person collaboration last to produce durable organizational effects?

The Question

The ongoing RTO debate speaks of co-presence as a binary choice. However, organizations face at least two independent choices as they think about where and how their people work. One is whether presence is mandatory or optional, and the other how long this presence must last. Crossing these generates four conditions that may imply different organizational designs and distinct research strategies. The core question is whether there are learning, coordination, or authority processes that may require mandatory co-presence, and if so, what minimum duration is needed for those effects to persist once the mandate ends.

Why this is tricky

- Mandatory and extended was the default, so there is almost no counterfactual. Firms that mandated a full return post-2022 did so endogenously usually because something was not working.
- Optional and extended is likely dominated by self-selection. People who voluntarily come in for extended periods are more motivated, in roles where presence matters, less constrained by caregiving, don't need to commute, etc. Any naive estimate is likely upward-biased.
- Optional and short is less a condition than a distribution spanning people who never come in to those who come in several days a week. Treating them as a group could obscure any variation of interest.
- Mandatory and short includes anchor days, onboarding sprints, and off-sites, which are newer instruments. There may be useful staggered adoption across firms and departments, which can give us credible variation. But, again, mandating firms are not random and compliance not consistent.

More complications

Ide and Talamàs (2025) have an interesting theoretical model that suggests that AI reorganizes knowledge hierarchies differently depending on whether AI is used as a copilot or a coworker. The model predict opposite directions of the effect. This matters here because it implies that the value of physical co-presence may also be becoming more heterogeneous. It could be lower for interactions AI can substitute, and potentially higher for the ones it cannot. The question then is not just mandate and duration, but which rationale for co-presence AI renders obsolete first.

References

Ide, E., & Talamàs, E. (2025). Artificial intelligence in the knowledge economy. *Journal of Political Economy*, 133(12), 3762–3800.