



## ECONOMIC COMMENTARY

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### RETHINKING COMMUTING: THE ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC CASE FOR FLEXIBLE WORK IN SA

As traffic congestion once again grips South Africa's (SA's) metros, it is worth re-evaluating the assumptions underpinning our approach to knowledge work. For businesses that rely on employees in finance, technology, legal services, administration, or other knowledge-based functions, the daily commute increasingly appears to be an inefficient and costly legacy of a pre-digital economy. The question is not whether employees can return to the office but whether requiring them to do so is truly in the best interest of business performance and the broader economy.

#### **The cost of commuting: Time, money, and productivity**

According to recent urban mobility data, commuters in Pretoria spend an average of 145 hours annually in traffic congestion. Johannesburg and Cape Town follow closely with 123 and 132 hours, respectively. This equates to nearly three full work weeks lost per year, per employee, in non-productive transit time. Beyond time, the financial costs are significant. Johannesburg-based commuters spend more than R16 000 annually on fuel, with approximately R2 800 wasted in traffic. Carbon emissions add further economic and environmental burdens, with the average motorist contributing approximately 1.8 tonnes of carbon dioxide per annum, including roughly 319 kg owing to idling in congestion. For organisations with sustainability targets, mandatory daily commuting undermines progress. These figures underscore a critical inefficiency: Time and money are being spent without corresponding returns in output. For many knowledge workers, the productive value gained by being physically present at a central office does not justify the personal and societal costs incurred through daily commuting.

#### **Infrastructure constraints and the fallacy of "just move closer"**

It is sometimes suggested that employees who object to long commutes should relocate closer to their place of work. However, this assumption overlooks several structural realities unique to SA. High property prices in central business districts, combined with inadequate and unsafe public transport in many urban areas, render relocation impractical for most middle-income earners. SA's urban design and infrastructure limitations constrain mobility and accessibility. Consequently, the burden of commuting should not be treated as a personal problem but rather as a systemic issue with direct implications for talent retention, productivity, and business continuity.

#### **Revisiting assumptions: Does office presence enhance output?**

While there is merit in the argument that in-person interaction enhances collaboration, culture, and mentorship, there is growing global evidence that these benefits do not require five-days-a-week office attendance. A widely cited study involving 1 600 knowledge workers found that employees on a structured hybrid schedule (three days in the office, two days remote) performed on par with fully in-office staff in terms of productivity and promotion rates. Other international studies show that hybrid arrangements can reduce employee attrition by up to 33%. In a South African context, where both transport infrastructure and employee wellness are under pressure, rigid return-to-office mandates may, ultimately, prove counterproductive.

#### **Towards an outcome-based model**

The debate should not centre around remote versus office work but on the strategic alignment between work location and output. An outcome-based model (where the focus is on deliverables rather than physical presence) enables businesses to tailor working arrangements to the nature of the task at hand. Such a model allows for in-office collaboration when high-impact engagement is necessary; remote work for tasks requiring deep focus or where presence adds little marginal value; and flexibility to optimise productivity, reduce operating costs, and improve employee well-being. This approach is neither disruptive nor radical: It is increasingly the global norm among competitive, high-performing organisations.

#### **Conclusion: A strategic imperative for South African businesses**

In an economy facing persistent productivity challenges, rising living costs, and high-skilled talent attrition, businesses must think critically about how value is created. Requiring daily commuting in high-traffic regions for roles that could be effectively executed remotely or through a hybrid model does not reflect optimal resource allocation. Flexible work is no longer a convenience; it is a strategic imperative. Businesses that embrace outcome-based flexibility are better positioned to attract and retain talent, reduce operational inefficiencies, and contribute to a more resilient and inclusive economy.

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