

Student Competition 2026

Writing Prompt

Association for Business Communication

The Return-to-Office Resistance at Irol Industries

Case written by

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Company Background

Irol Industries is a management consulting firm headquartered in Chicago with 600 employees across three offices (Chicago, Atlanta, and Denver). Founded in 1998, the firm built its reputation on intensive client service and a culture of in-person collaboration.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced remote work, Irol Industries adapted successfully. For nearly three years, employees worked primarily from home with positive results: 78% cited better work-life balance, 64% reported higher productivity, and client satisfaction remained strong.

However, executives grew concerned about declining mentorship opportunities, reduced innovation, and weakening company culture. Recently, leadership decided to require employees to work in-office four days per week beginning in approximately three months.

The Policy Announcement

Chester Anderson, the Managing Partner, sent a company-wide email explaining the new policy: "We believe our strength lies in collaboration, mentorship, and shared experiences. To sustain our culture and deliver the excellence our clients expect, we are implementing a return-to-office standard of four days per week."

Employee Backlash

The reaction was swift and negative. Within 48 hours:

Anonymous Petition: Over 250 signatures—representing more than 40% of the entire workforce—with the message: "We have proven we can deliver from anywhere. Mandating a four-day return is outdated and dismissive of our diverse needs." The petition circulated across all three offices within hours of the announcement.

HR Complaints: Dozens of emails including these employee concerns:

Gen Z Consultant (Age 25, Denver Office): "I moved to a more affordable neighborhood specifically because remote work made it possible. Now I'm looking at a 75-minute commute each way or moving closer and paying \$800 more in rent. I have student loans to pay—this policy is going to cost me

thousands of dollars a year. Meanwhile, my productivity metrics are excellent. It feels like we're being punished for something that's working."

Gen X Manager (Age 48, Atlanta Office): "For the past two years, I've been able to take my son to school every morning and see him at dinner every night. That time is irreplaceable. I don't understand how sitting in traffic for two hours a day makes me a better consultant. Our clients don't care where we work—they care about results, and we've been delivering."

Millennial Consultant with Disability (Age 39, Chicago Office): "Remote work has been transformative for managing my chronic condition. I can take breaks when I need them, control my environment, and still exceed my billable hours targets. Forcing me back four days a week isn't just inconvenient—it's discriminatory. I've already started looking at firms that understand that flexibility is an accessibility issue."

Gen Z Analyst (Age 23, Chicago Office): "I accepted this job over two other offers specifically because they said remote work was here to stay. Now they're changing the deal after I've structured my entire life around it. My partner and I share one car, and we coordinated our schedules based on both working from home. This mandate feels like a bait-and-switch, and honestly, it's killed my trust in leadership."

Millennial Parent (Age 36, Denver Office): "Childcare costs \$2,400 a month for two kids. When I work from home two days a week, I save \$960 monthly because my partner can adjust their schedule. Forcing us back four days means either paying more than our mortgage in childcare or one of us leaving our job. We've proven for three years that this works—why are we solving a problem that doesn't exist?"

Millennial Consultant (Age 32, Atlanta Office): "Remote work lets me actually live my life. Last month I worked from my parents' house in Oregon for a week when my dad had surgery. I was there for him during the day and logged on in the evenings to hit my deadlines. I've also been able to travel to three national parks this year while maintaining my billable hours. This policy says the company values my physical presence over my actual output and well-being."

Gen X Senior Consultant (Age 45, Chicago Office): "I got engaged last year, and my fiancé lives in Boston. We've been making it work because I can fly there for long weekends and work remotely on Fridays and Mondays without burning PTO. We were planning to get married next year, but now I'm either going to have to quit, ask them to move here, or maintain a long-distance marriage. Meanwhile, I just closed the biggest deal in my portfolio. Where I sit shouldn't matter more than what I deliver."

Gen Z Analyst (Age 24, Denver Office): "My mental health has never been better since going remote. I can go for a run at lunch, cook healthy meals, and actually have energy for my friends and hobbies after work. Last winter, I worked from Mexico for two weeks during the slow season—same hours, same productivity, but I got to experience a different culture and recharge. This mandate feels like going backward to a world where 'busy' matters more than 'effective.' I didn't go into consulting to be chained to a desk."

Baby Boomer Senior Partner (Age 63, Chicago Office): "I've been with this firm for 28 years, and I thought I'd seen every management trend come and go. But remote work isn't a trend—it's been a revelation. For the first time in my career, I'm not exhausted by the commute. I can attend my grandkids' soccer games without taking half a day off. I was planning to work another three years before retirement, but if we're going back to the old way of doing things, I might just leave early. And I'm not the only senior consultant thinking this way. We proved we can mentor junior staff virtually—forcing us back feels like nostalgia, not strategy."

Public Criticism: A consultant posted on LinkedIn, garnering 400+ likes and 50+ comments: "Our clients see results. Forcing us back feels like a lack of trust in professionals who have proven themselves." The post has been shared internally and is creating external reputation concerns.

The Communication Crisis

Leadership now faces multiple urgent challenges:

- **Internal Division:** Senior partners are split between holding firm and fearing talent exodus
 - **Employee Relations:** 65% oppose the policy, with 24% considering leaving
 - **Client Concerns:** Two major clients worried about service disruption during transition
 - **Competitive Pressure:** Other management consulting firms offering more flexible policies
 - **Timeline Pressure:** Implementation date only 10 weeks away
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Your Challenge

You are a communication consultant hired by Irol Industries' Managing Partner Chester Anderson to navigate this crisis. Your task is to develop a strategic response that addresses stakeholder concerns while achieving business objectives.

Deliverable: Strategic Report with Cover Communication

Format: Two-part submission in a single document

1. **Cover Letter:** A brief, professional business letter that introduces your analysis and recommendations to Chester "Andy" Anderson, Managing Partner. The letter should establish credibility, preview key findings, and create a compelling case for why Chester Anderson should implement your recommendations.
2. **Strategic Report:** A concise memo report that analyzes the crisis and outlines your recommended approach

Submit both components in one document, with the cover letter appearing first, followed by the memo report.

Purpose: Analyze the current crisis, recommend a specific communication approach, and outline immediate next steps

Audience: Chester Anderson, Managing Partner (primary decision maker)

Length Requirement: Conciseness is critical. Your strategic report should be substantive yet concise—comprehensive enough to address the complexity of the situation while respecting executive time constraints. Every sentence should add value. Eliminate unnecessary elaboration and focus on actionable insights.

Requirements: Demonstrate sophisticated understanding of stakeholder dynamics while providing practical, implementable guidance

Research Expectations: Participants are encouraged to support their recommendations with relevant industry research, case studies, or best practices from credible sources. Strong submissions will demonstrate awareness of current trends in workplace flexibility, change management principles, and effective organizational communication strategies. Cite sources appropriately to strengthen your analysis.

Strategic Report Components

Your report should include the following elements:

1. **Situation Analysis:** Assess the current crisis, including the root causes of employee resistance and the implications for the organization
2. **Stakeholder Assessment:** Identify key stakeholder groups (employees, leadership, clients) and analyze their specific concerns and priorities
3. **Communication Strategy:** Propose a comprehensive approach to address the crisis, including messaging framework and tone considerations
4. **Recommended Actions:** Outline specific, actionable steps leadership should take in the immediate term and over the implementation period
5. **Implementation Roadmap:** Provide a timeline for executing your communication strategy, with clear milestones and accountability measures
6. **Success Metrics:** Define how leadership will measure whether the communication approach is achieving desired outcomes

Your Strategic Approach Should Demonstrate How It Will Achieve:

Immediate Crisis Management (Next 30 Days):

- Reduce employee intent to leave from 24% to manageable levels
- Establish clear, consistent messaging about policy rationale
- Maintain client confidence with proactive communication
- Create productive dialogue between leadership and employees

Strategic Communication Goals:

- Address key stakeholder concerns across all office locations

- Balance empathy with business necessity in messaging
 - Provide clear next steps for implementation
 - Demonstrate understanding of financial and competitive implications
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Success Criteria

Timeline: This case represents a real-world crisis requiring immediate strategic response. Your solutions should demonstrate sophisticated communication and change management skills essential for consulting roles.

Note: This case is based on actual workplace challenges facing organizations across industries. Your strategic communication approach could be implemented in similar real-world situations throughout your career.
