

Coffee Badging: What It Really Means for Your Workplace, Why It Happens, and How HR Can Respond



The last few years have been filled with new workplace terms that try to capture the tension and transition between traditional office culture and the new world of hybrid work. Quiet quitting got its moment. Productivity paranoia had a strong run. Now a new phrase is showing up in surveys, TikTok videos, and boardroom conversations. It is called coffee badging.

At first glance it sounds lighthearted, almost funny. Someone comes into the office, grabs a coffee, swipes their badge, chats with a few colleagues, then heads home to do the rest of their work. It feels like one of those cheeky Gen Z workplace behaviours that gets turned into a headline. But coffee badging is not a joke to HR leaders, CEOs, or managers who are trying to bring clarity, consistency, and trust back into the post pandemic workplace. It is a visible signal that something is not working in the employee experience. It is also a sign that engagement has shifted from a relationship built on transparency to one built on optics.

Coffee badging has become a widespread response to return to office requirements that feel rigid to employees yet are loosely enforced by organizations. Some people treat it as a rebellion against rules that do not make sense to them. Others treat it as a strategy to balance personal productivity with mandatory onsite expectations. Underneath the surface, it reveals something deeper. It exposes a gap between how leaders believe work gets done and how employees actually do their best work. It points to a workplace culture that has not fully evolved from pre pandemic norms and has not fully embraced the new expectations of a hybrid workforce.

HR teams across Canada are already dealing with this trend. They see the badge data that does not match the time that employees say they are onsite. They hear the hallway chatter. They hear the complaints from managers about empty offices on days that should be staffed. They see teams trying to work together while members drift in and out of the office without clear purpose. All of these operational headache's stem from the same root issue. The organization is struggling to define the value of in person work and is relying on presence instead of outcomes.

This article takes a deep dive into what coffee badging really is, why it has taken hold so quickly, how pervasive it has become, what it signals about culture and trust, and what HR can do to manage it without resorting to heavy handed policies.

The goal is to provide a roadmap that helps HR leaders shift the conversation from attendance to alignment and from presence to purpose.

What Coffee Badging Actually Means in 2025

Coffee badging is not a fringe behaviour. It does not belong to one age group or job type. It is something employees do when they feel pressure to follow a rule that does not match the reality of their day.

The basic idea is simple. An employee goes into the office long enough to be seen. They swipe their badge, grab a coffee, chat with a few colleagues, make a visible appearance in the office, and then return home or elsewhere to continue their work. Sometimes this visit lasts an hour. Sometimes thirty minutes. In some places it lasts only as long as it takes to greet a coworker and pour a cup of coffee into a travel mug.

Employees do it because they want to be perceived as compliant with a return to office guideline but still maintain the flexibility and autonomy that they have grown accustomed to. Many employees say they feel more productive at home. Others are balancing commute times, caregiving duties, or health considerations. Some simply feel the work they have planned for that day does not benefit from being physically in the office. Despite this, they still want to avoid conflict or scrutiny, so they show up briefly.

For many of these workers, this behaviour does not feel dishonest. It feels like a compromise. They believe they are meeting the intent of the policy and meeting their productivity goals at the same time. They are checking a box without sacrificing the control they feel they need to do their job well.

Managers often view this differently. Many see it as bending the rules or avoiding responsibility. Some feel disrespected by it because it undermines what they believe is a necessary structure for team cohesion. Others do not care at all, as long as the employee is productive and reachable. This tension between employee reality and managerial expectation is exactly where coffee badging thrives.

Why Coffee Badging Has Become So Common

Coffee badging did not appear out of nowhere. It is the natural result of three years of conflicting workplace signals, shifting policies, productivity debates, and a workforce that is trying to protect the flexibility it gained during the pandemic.

A return to office strategy that feels unclear.

Many organizations across Canada implemented return to office guidelines that were intentionally flexible. Leaders wanted to encourage presence without creating rules that would spark backlash. The result was often vague expectations like asking people to come in two or three days a week but without clarity on which days matter most or why those days are useful.

When expectations are unclear, employees fill in the gaps with their own logic. If the only requirement is that they appear in person, then appearing becomes the task, not collaborating, planning, innovating, or building culture.

Commuting has become a major point of friction.

For many employees, especially those in large Canadian cities with high housing costs, commuting is viewed as wasted time. A survey from Cisco found that 79 percent

of Canadian hybrid workers believe commuting is the least valuable part of their workday. If the commute takes an hour each way, but the employee can complete their work perfectly well from home, they begin to question the value of the entire in office experience.

Pandemic habits reshaped expectations permanently.

For nearly three years, employees proved they could maintain productivity from home. They built routines around their home office. They built family schedules around remote work. Many corrected their work environments with better technology and better ergonomics. Returning to the office feels like losing something they worked hard to establish.

Presence based culture never fully disappeared.

Even with strong productivity during remote periods, many organizations still hold an unspoken belief that visibility equals value. Employees sense this. If they believe their presence matters more to leadership than their outcomes, they will find ways to appear present while still protecting their autonomy.

Managers have inconsistent comfort levels with hybrid work.

Some leaders trust remote work because they saw strong results. Others trust it less because they struggled with oversight or communication. This variation creates inconsistent practices across teams. Coffee badging often flourishes in environments where some managers enforce office attendance while others do not.

The combination of these factors has created the perfect environment for coffee badging to take root.

How Common Is Coffee Badging Today

Several recent surveys show that coffee badging has become widespread across North America.

A 2023 Owl Labs survey reported that 52% of hybrid employees have coffee badged at least once. Another 38 percent said they do it at least once per week. In a Gartner HR Pulse survey from the same year, almost one third of HR leaders reported that coffee badging was a noticeable pattern in their organizations.

By 2024 and 2025, the trend continued. A Flex Report study found that badge swipes increased in many organizations without any actual increase in time spent in the office. That means employees are coming in just long enough to register in the system.

Even Canadian specific data suggests the trend is rising. A 2024 recruitment industry report revealed that 46% of Canadian hybrid employees admit to performing some version of coffee badging. The percentage was even higher for workers under 35.

These numbers align with what HR professionals report anecdotally. Badge data often shows elevated entry counts in the morning followed by empty offices by mid-afternoon. Some HR teams say the badge logs show hundreds of morning entries but only a handful of employees visible by lunchtime.

Coffee badging is no longer an isolated behaviour. It is a cultural signal.

What Coffee Badging Reveals About Your Workplace

Coffee badging is not the problem itself. It is a symptom of bigger issues in your culture and management practices. When employees feel the need to perform compliance instead of genuinely participating in office life, it suggests that something deeper is misaligned.

Employees do not see the value of in person work.

If employees believed that being in the office improved their work or supported their teammates meaningfully, they would not be leaving after thirty minutes. Most people do not skip activities they find valuable. Coffee badging reveals that the office is not seen as a place where meaningful collaboration, mentorship, or connection is taking place.

There is a trust gap between leadership and employees.

When employees feel pressure to perform a ritual of attendance, it often means they fear the consequences of simply saying the policy does not work for them. At the same time, leaders who rely on badge data as a measure of accountability are showing that they do not fully trust their teams to deliver without physical oversight.

Return to office communication has not been compelling.

Most organizations have communicated return to office guidelines as a rule, not a purpose. Employees respond to purpose, not monitoring. If the narrative is simply that leadership wants people back, employees do what is necessary to stay out of trouble rather than what is necessary for strong performance.

Managers are struggling to articulate why specific days matter.

Many return to office plans mandate two or three days a week without specifying which days are most valuable for cross functional work. If every employee chooses different days, the office becomes unpredictable. Coffee badging happens when people arrive expecting collaboration but find empty desks and silent floors.

Employees feel the company is measuring the wrong things.

This is one of the most important signals. When organizations lean on badge swipes as a substitute for performance measurement, employees start gaming that system. People improve what they believe is being evaluated. Coffee badging demonstrates that the perceived metric is presence, not productivity.

Coffee badging is a cultural diagnostic tool. If it appears in your organization, it is pointing toward misalignment between policy and purpose.

How Organizations Can Identify Coffee Badging

Most HR teams recognize coffee badging intuitively, but it is helpful to understand how it shows up in data and daily operations. Unlike quiet quitting, coffee badging is visible if you know where to look.

Badge data and occupancy do not match.

This is the most obvious indicator. If the badge system shows high morning traffic but floor occupancy falls rapidly by midday, coffee badging is likely occurring. Some organizations report a rush between 7:30 and 9:00 am followed by a sharp decline.

Employees cluster around low enforcement windows

If people choose to arrive during times when managers are less likely to observe their exit, such as early morning or late afternoon, it often indicates strategic attendance rather than purposeful participation.

Managers report that scheduled team days are not productive.

If a hybrid team meets in person but the experience feels sparse or disjointed, it may be because some members have already left. Coffee badging disrupts team cohesion because it gives the appearance of compliance without participation.

Conversations reveal that people are “checking in” rather than working onsite.

Employees sometimes admit that they come in “to say hi” or “to be seen.” These are signals that the return to office plan does not align with how they structure their real workday.

Output remains consistent even as attendance rises.

One of the more subtle signs is that productivity metrics do not improve even when badge data suggests increased in person attendance. If the organization sees no correlation between office presence and performance, employees may be coming in only briefly before returning to environments where they believe they can work more effectively.

Identifying coffee badging is not about catching people doing something wrong. It is about recognizing that your hybrid model needs refinement.

Why Coffee Badging Becomes a Problem If It Goes Unaddressed

Coffee badging seems harmless at first glance. People show up. They get counted in the system. They continue their work. The organization avoids conflict. Everyone moves on. But over time, this small behaviour begins to erode critical elements of workplace culture.

It weakens trust.

Once leaders realize that badge swipes do not reflect actual presence, they begin to question employees' intentions. Once employees realize that leaders are concerned about physical presence over meaningful outcomes, they begin to view attendance as performative rather than purposeful. The result is a cycle of suspicion on both sides.

It undermines the purpose of hybrid work.

Hybrid models were created to blend the best of remote productivity with the unique benefits of in person collaboration. Coffee badging eliminates that balance. It turns onsite work into a symbolic gesture rather than a strategic opportunity for connection.

It depresses onsite engagement.

When employees come in only briefly, the office never gains the critical mass needed for spontaneous collaboration, social connection, or mentoring opportunities. New hires, younger workers, and employees who rely on informal learning feel the absence

of peer presence most acutely.

It frustrates managers who are trying to plan effectively.

If a manager organizes an in person planning day and half the team leaves after thirty minutes, the session loses its value. This inconsistency becomes demoralizing for managers who genuinely want to build culture.

It reinforces a compliance mindset instead of a performance mindset.

If employees believe they are being measured by presence, even if this is not true, they start focusing on how to satisfy that metric with the least inconvenience. This reduces intrinsic motivation and shifts attention away from quality and results.

It sends the wrong message to leadership.

Executives who fought to institute return to office guidelines often interpret coffee badging as disobedience. If the leadership response, then becomes more control, rather than better alignment, the problem only worsens.

Coffee badging is not simply about people coming in for coffee. It is a sign that the entire hybrid strategy is off track.

What HR and Leadership Can Do About Coffee Badging

Coffee badging is not solved by enforcing badge hours more aggressively. That approach usually intensifies resentment, increases turnover risk, and pushes the behaviour underground. The more effective way to address coffee badging is to rethink how the organization designs in person work and how it communicates the purpose of being onsite.

Shift from attendance-based rules to purpose-based expectations.

Employees respond far more positively when the organization explains why specific days matter. For example, instead of saying that all employees must be onsite three days per week, say that Tuesdays and Thursdays are collaboration days because these are when cross functional teams coordinate, solve problems, and plan.

This approach works best when leaders explain the specific value that in person work delivers. When employees understand how their presence benefits others, compliance becomes voluntary rather than forced.

Design the office experience intentionally.

If employees feel the office does not support the work they need to do, they will avoid it. HR can work with facilities teams to create environments that feel purposeful. This may include collaboration zones, quiet rooms, open project spaces, and areas where teams can plan, brainstorm, or review work together.

The goal is to shift the mindset from “the office is a place to sit at a desk” to “the office is a place to connect, ideate, mentor, and strategize.”

Engage managers directly in building the hybrid culture.

Managers have the most influence on hybrid behaviour. They set the tone. They explain expectations. They guide team norms. HR must ensure managers understand the purpose of in person work and can articulate it clearly. They need support in developing team agreements, scheduling collaborative days, and setting realistic expectations.

Use transparent communication, not implied consequences.

If leaders imply that people must come in without explaining the purpose, employees respond with compliance theatre. Clear communication builds trust. Leaders should say something like this:

“We want everyone onsite for two specific days because these are the days when we collaborate, share updates, and solve issues together. Your presence matters because it strengthens the team and reduces delays.”

This kind of clarity improves participation more effectively than mandates.

Give leaders real metrics that reflect productivity.

When badge data is the only visible metric, everyone focuses on badge data. HR can support leaders by providing performance metrics tied to outcomes, client impact, timeliness, collaboration quality, and productivity. When leaders see meaningful metrics, badge swipes lose power as a proxy.

Train employees on how hybrid models work best.

Employees sometimes coffee badge because they believe hybrid work means choosing one's own days. HR can clarify expectations by explaining how hybrid alignment improves team performance. This includes showing employees how collaboration cycles work, how onsite days support brainstorming, and how schedule inconsistency harms team cohesion.

Be honest about the limits of remote work.

Many employees believe they are equally effective at home. In many cases, they are correct. Some work, however, benefits from in person discussion. HR should help leaders identify which tasks are enhanced by face-to-face interaction and communicate this openly.

Acknowledge that flexibility is valuable.

If employees feel that return to office plans are inflexible or disconnected from their real needs, they will resist them. A small amount of flexibility goes a long way. For example, offering compressed commute days, staggered arrival times, or optional work from home Fridays helps reduce stress and increase trust.

Avoid punitive responses.

If HR responds to coffee badging with strict badge tracking, surveillance software, or disciplinary actions, the behaviour may stop temporarily, but the cultural impact is damaging. People do not engage authentically in environments where they feel monitored. The solution must be constructive, not punitive.

Create shared rituals and events that build genuine office value.

Office culture does not rebuild itself. HR can support leaders by creating regular touchpoints that make coming to the office feel worthwhile. This can include team lunches, quarterly planning sessions, mentorship circles, learning days, or cross functional workshops. When people have positive experiences onsite, they are less likely to treat the office as an obligation.

What Coffee Badging Tells Us About the Future of Work

Coffee badging is not a permanent trend. It is a transition behaviour. It happens when the workplace is caught between two cultures. One culture values time and presence. The other values outcomes and flexibility. Coffee badging sits in the gap between these two systems.

The future of work requires something different.

HR leaders across Canada are moving toward models where onsite time is purposeful, structured, and meaningful. They are building environments where the office is not a place for mandatory attendance but a hub for team activity. They are shifting performance measurement from time visible to results delivered. They are recognizing that trust is the foundation of hybrid work and that trust is earned through clarity, communication, and consistency.

Employees are not coffee badging because they want to deceive anyone. They are doing it because they are trying to navigate unclear expectations. They are trying to balance their best work with policies that feel misaligned with their everyday reality. They are seeking flexibility in a system that still carries old assumptions.

By treating coffee badging as a signal rather than a violation, HR can move the organization closer to a hybrid model that works for everyone. Instead of asking how to stop coffee badging, the better question is how to make the office a place people choose rather than avoid.

Conclusion

Coffee badging is not about coffee. It is not about laziness. It is not about rule breaking. It is a behaviour shaped by an evolving workplace that has not yet found its balance. It happens when employees feel they need to be seen, not when they feel they need to be engaged. It happens when the organization values badge swipes more than shared purpose. It happens when the benefits of in person work are assumed, not demonstrated.

The good news is that coffee badging is solvable. It requires a shift in how organizations design their hybrid models, how managers communicate expectations, how performance is measured, and how trust is built. It requires acknowledging that flexibility is not a threat to productivity but a key ingredient in attracting and retaining talent in a post pandemic labour market.

If HR can lead this cultural transition with clarity and empathy, then coffee badging becomes an opportunity. It becomes a chance to revisit outdated assumptions, rebuild trust, and design a workplace where employees want to be present because the work, the people, and the culture make presence meaningful.