

Return to Work Strategies

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Editor's Note - Every business and organization that we are in contact with are strategizing how best to have their employees return to work. Everything from 100% in-person to full remote to some kind of hybrid are in play. And as has been the "norm" for the last 18 months, NOTHING is staying the same. This article talks about the basics of return to work with the key being staying flexible.

Smart business leaders take time to plan successful return to work strategies. They know many employees don't want to come back, either out of caution or because they're just plain loving their new freedom.

For the smoothest "back-to-office after work-from-home" transition, communication is everything. Do your due diligence on the ever-changing COVID-19 laws and guidelines, and make sure to familiarize yourself with some common return-to-work setups that can ease the change for your most valuable assets: your employees.

This article provides strategies for SMBs going back to the office after working remotely during the pandemic. As you get ready to bring your employees back to the office, keep these things in mind:

- Assess your workforce
- Future-proof your office
- Support hygiene and distancing as you move forward

1. Rethink the return

How badly do you *really* need all of your employees to return to work? Is getting the entire team back into the office vital to your productivity? Consider whether all employees must return or if you can limit the in-person transition to a select group.

A study by Pew Research shows **more than half** of all teleworkers who started remote work during the pandemic don't want to go back to the office full time. Plus, **94% are thinking about quitting**, switching jobs, or even changing industries to ensure they can stay remote at least part of the time. It's been dubbed the "great resignation."

In most situations, working from home is **proven to help productivity**. If employees have had a drop in productivity, you may need to address that through training or providing equipment or other support. Teach your executives to **manage remote teams without micromanaging**, and make sure they have the right **remote work tools**.

Faced with a choice between losing valued team members and re-evaluating the need for in-person work, many companies are digging deeper into remote or hybrid options for the long term. Consider where the problem lies. Is remote work scuttling your productivity, or does your company need to pivot to better support remote and hybrid workers?

2. Focus on communication



With so many employees feeling reluctant about returning to in-person work, communication is by far your most important step. As with most big changes, the office transition announcements can't be one-way.

Many people in the workforce today are ready to fight for the benefits of the work-from-anywhere life. Some are understandably worried about increasing COVID-19 case counts, hard-to-find childcare, or vulnerable family member.

To ensure a smooth return, start by hearing team-member concerns. Create a forum where employees can express their views, either through MS Teams, email, online forms, or other avenues. The important point is to make them feel heard.

Workplace culture consultancy McKinsey recommends 1) frequent surveys, 2) a transparent planning process, 3) acknowledging strong emotions, and 4) marking the transition with a workplace ritual.

3. Know the laws and limits

Create a plan to stay abreast of fast-changing federal, state, and local **laws and guidelines**. Then, communicate it to employees in an easy-to-access, consistently updated way. Many employees are worried about the risks. Knowing their company is staying current can go a long way to alleviate those fears.

Stay abreast of the **CDC's COVID-19 workplace safety guidelines here**.

4. Choose a return-to-work schedule

Take the time to think through your reopening-the-office strategy. Creating a schedule that works for everyone from the chief executive to the front-line employee is key to a smooth transition.

Here are a few return-to-work models to consider.

All employees return at the same time

Expecting everyone to show up on the same day can create pandemonium for a large organization, but may be the best solution for a smaller team. It may be unwelcome and potentially unsafe depending on the size of your workforce. This is our least recommended model for larger companies.

Gradual phase-in

If you plan to return all employees to the office, consider a staggered approach. Some companies have held a lottery, while others use seniority or job responsibilities to decide who'll come back first.

Other effective models include creating categories for different work functions or lettered groups (like those used during airplane boarding).

Reduced full-time in-office work



With so many employees wanting to continue working from home, compromise is important. Some SMBs are choosing a permanent hybrid model. They let employees work some days from home and some days in the office. Consider allocating home and office days, or letting team members apply for at-home days based on their daily tasks.

Allow an organic return

Some firms are letting employees come back to work as and when they will. Gibson Smith, a human resources exec at Chicago's Avionos, is taking that approach.

"We're not mandating that anyone come into the office at this time unless they want to," **says Smith**. "We're seeing an organic return of our employees." Smith estimates that roughly 35% of their employees now come into the office to collaborate at least once per day without a mandate.

Work with employees who can't or won't return to the workplace

Take **high-risk employees** into account. Create a plan to let them continue to work from home until they feel comfortable about returning. Some may be fearful or have new family obligations. For the best results, take the time to determine what to do about these employees on a case-by-case basis.

5. Offer vaccine options and precautions



Misperceptions about workplace safety can create reluctance. Respect these fears, and work to counter them with options for vaccine administration appointments and safe transportation as well as precautions in the office. Masks, hand sanitizer stations, and social distancing guidelines can all help soothe employee fears. Again, communication is the key to addressing these fears.

6. Allow flexible work hours



Aside from creating a hybrid plan with a mix of work-from-home and office work, consider adding flexible hours. Employees worried about crowded spaces at work may be more willing to come back to the brick-and-mortar office if they can work at different times. Let team members work in the mornings, evenings, or on nights or weekends instead of during the

traditional 9-to-5 day.

Opening up to a flex-work schedule can put less strain on your facility, decrease the rush back to in-person work, and ease the fears of the more worried members of your team. [To create a culture of flexibility](#) limit meetings, clarify objectives like hours of required productivity per day, and provide training to ensure employees can keep pace with the new work model.

7. Create employee incentives

To interest your team in coming back, consider giving them a reason to opt-in. [Many firms are offering return-to-work incentives](#) like monetary bonuses, meal programs, childcare stipends, and reimbursement for fuel and transportation costs. Others offer flex time or exclusive benefits to encourage employees to return, like Mario Kart Mondays or Waffle Wednesdays.

8. Future-proof your office

Future-proofing is another way to address employee fears about going back to work after working from home. Opening windows and erecting taller cubicle walls or plexiglass barriers can help create a safer workplace.

Some businesses are [repurposing conference rooms](#) and large (previously shared) spaces into isolated workspaces to let employees spread out more. Others are upgrading their ventilation system.

Workplace health and safety isn't just about the plexiglass. Provide a plan for continued testing, as well as masks, hand sanitizer stations, SARS-compliant restrooms, and regular disinfection. Be sure to communicate any changes both nationally and internationally, and make sure all team members have a clear line of sight into the company's policies and procedures.

For help, see the Cleveland Clinic's [series on creating a COVID-safe workplace](#), which you can browse by industry.

9. Assess your workforce

Which employees can continue to work productively from home? Which need to be in person? You may be focused on returning to the office, but creating some time to [assess your team](#) can help streamline the process.

Consider conducting regular surveys, collecting data on [morale indicators](#), and tracking productivity.

10. Create a plan for dealing with those who don't want to return to work

Once you've assessed your team, you'll have a good idea of the percentage of office workers willing to return long-term. You'll also know how many holdouts there are, and if they will hurt your productivity. Collaborate with your firm's leadership to re-examine if home-based work is actually beneficial even for part of the team.

Decide how you'll approach remote workers who refuse to return after the COVID-19 pandemic ends. Be ready to make tough decisions.

Summary

Our world is changing fast as companies try to adapt, and many employees have formed new lifestyles they don't want to change. Dig into the reasons you want to bring employees back into the fold.

Open two-way communication with your workforce, address their concerns, and move forward with a solution, plan, and schedule that works for everyone on your team. With some care and creativity, your business can come out of this new crisis firing on all cylinders.

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