

Our Perspective on Returning to the Office in Uncharted Territory

By Shay Hughes | Lead from Within

Well, here we go...It's official! We will be returning to the office with a "soft opening" on July 7th, and a formal return-to-office scheduled for Tuesday, September 7th following the Labor Day weekend.

I am certain that every business leader has been struggling and searching for the right answer as to how best execute a "return-to-office." This is uncharted territory for all of us and leaders are being tested to answer the challenging questions around not just *when* we return but *how* we return.

Our company, Hughes Marino, is in the business of corporate real estate, so you would think we might have some good answers here. But the truth is, we are just doing our best to figure out the path forward like everyone else. For us, culture is king, and that only happens in person. It's a delicate dance of creating a safe and welcoming return to the office and knowing in our hearts that human beings are social creatures, and that in person is generally more fun, productive and engaging—employee engagement being the driver of business success in any book or blog you read. Nonetheless, I thought I would share some of our struggles and some of our solutions in case they are interesting and/or valuable for you.

Here are the questions that have been rattling around in our brains throughout this pandemic:

Can we really do our best work in a fully virtual context?

I am happy to report that we learned the answer to this question is a resounding yes! Except that I, for one, am done



with it, and I couldn't be more ready to get back into the office surrounded by our wonderful team.

Is our team really doing OK?

I think so. I hope so. But it can be so hard to really assess this on a zoom call. I want to sit down with our team and talk, and listen. I miss them.

When we execute our return-to-office, can I assure our team that they will all be safe?

This one keeps me up at night. And the answer is yes, especially since almost everyone on our team chose to get vaccinated.

Should we allow our team to choose to remain remote?

This is a tough one. We are landing somewhere in the middle, giving our team the freedom to choose to work remote at least some of the time, generally on Fridays, and on the same days, so we as a team are in sync on when we are in the office



and when we work from home. We will see how it goes, and we will adjust as needed over time.

Can we really sustain and even improve our foundational company culture with some team members not in the office?

This is the hardest question I face. Remote employees will miss out on things that occur spontaneously in the office, they will miss out on conversations, interactions and human connectivity, but we do everything we can to include them when they are working remotely. We've had a small percentage of remote employees for many years and with much success. As much as I wish it wasn't the case, not being together in person undoubtedly limits the number of collaborative opportunities for mentorship and learning by doing and those opportunities have been missed.

What is the best strategy for implementing our Return-to-office?

For us, it is going to be a three part plan: (1) baby steps, (2) frequent check-ins for ongoing, immediate feedback and (3) adjustments as warranted when new information comes to light.

There it is, that's our plan. Pretty simple stuff really.

Let's see how it goes...

If you have thoughts on any of this, I would love to hear from you.

Be well, stay safe and I'll see you at the office soon! ☐

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