

The New Normal: How to Welcome Your Team Back to the Office

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As the COVID-19 vaccine is more readily available to the population by each and every day, and as more states begin to reopen, ‘the world is beginning to get back to a new normal. With that new normal, one conversation comes to the forefront for businesses across the country and around the world: when should our teams return to the office, and how do we make them feel safe (and happy) to return? Here are five thoughts for businesses to consider to help their teams feel safe, welcomed and happy to emerge from their year of working from home and returning to the workplace.



Provide Ample Notice and Transparency About Your Return-to-Work Strategy

In March 2020, we all went home with the expectation that we would be back in the office within a few weeks. A lot has changed over the course of a year, including childcare (and pet care!) arrangements, and work and personal schedules. This tip is short and sweet: provide as much notice to your team as you can, so they can get all of their affairs in order before they physically return to the workplace. You may even consider developing a questionnaire for your team, which can open up conversations for families who may need a hybrid schedule, or for teammates who are still weary of being around others not in their own household. In addition to the notice, provide your team with the steps you will be taking to ensure their health is the #1 priority.

Make Health and Safety the #1 Priority

Over the past year, each person has been affected very differently from this unsettling pandemic—both physically and mentally. Above all, business leaders need to recognize this and be extremely sensitive toward each and every situation to make the transition back to the workplace as seamless and stress free as possible. The most important way for a business to show their team they care is by making health and safety their #1 priority. Since scheduling to get vaccinated can often be in tricky time windows, offer extra flexibility to help accommodate your teammates or provide additional sick time specifically for vaccinations. Be sure to supply your office with plenty of easily accessible necessities including hand sanitizer, soap, masks and antibacterial wipes. In addition to providing ample sanitizing supplies, you can also insist that team members wash



their hands upon return from outside the office, and place signage around the workplace as reminders for everyone to regularly wash their hands. Businesses can minimize outside guests from visiting, unless previously approved by the company.

To help make your team members feel heard and validated, offer an open forum or a virtual suggestion box via email, where team members feel safe to express any concerns. Even more importantly, take your teammates concerns into serious consideration, and take action or change protocols if needed. This will let your team know their opinions are valued and that the company is taking proactive measures to protect everyone's well-being. These are all small and easily achievable measures companies can take to help ease the anxiety and worries of the pandemic to ensure that health and safety is the top priority.

Implement Physical Distancing Practices

For over a year, social distancing has been critical to help slow the spread of COVID-19. It's only natural for team members to be weary of coming back to an environment of many people together in a confined space, especially if they work in open office floorplans that have become so popular in the past decade. While this may take a degree of reconfiguration, there are actions businesses can take to spread out their team to ease concern. If possible, situate people so they are stationed at every other desk, configure desks so that teammates face the same direction (and not each other) and utilize desk dividers if necessary. Have

access to windows? Open them up to circulate fresh air or invest in an air purification machine. Communication is another important factor to consider. Encourage calls instead of face-to-face conversations and host virtual meetings instead of gathering in conference rooms. If possible, limit the amount of people in a meeting and provide plenty of space in between everyone for ease of mind.

Our in-house Planning + Design team offers physical distancing analysis services, and have already helped hundreds of businesses navigate this new normal. Our team helps to identify social distance pinch points, suggested paths of travel throughout the workplace, opportunities to spread out, potential furniture reconfigurations, plan dimensions implementing social distancing guidelines and ways to communicate strategy with your team. Our team specializes in space planning of all types and densities, and we are here to help.

Mitigate Traffic Concerns by Offering a Flexible or Hybrid Schedule

From nationwide polls to our own personal experiences, let's face it: long commutes are often the #1 reason that the population is less eager to return to the office. While rush hour traffic situations are out of employers' hands, they can provide a few options to mitigate the stress of it all. If your company is able to, offer alternative work schedules for your teammates to choose from. Even a shift of 30 minutes can make the difference that cuts a commute time



in half, offering your team members less stressful mornings of battling traffic, more time to happily focus in the office, and more time at home with their families. If your company cannot accommodate a daily 30 minute shift (which is the case for a lot of businesses!), you might consider early Fridays to get a jump start on the weekends (and traffic) or offer a hybrid schedule of working from home and work. Either way, your team will notice and appreciate your efforts to make the transition back to the workplace a positive one!

Make Returning to Work a Fun Experience

Returning to work will take a lot of adjusting, and businesses should make extra efforts to let everyone feel comfortable and appreciated as they welcome their teams back into a safe workplace environment. During the return-to-work transition period, plan a time to reunite the team they had missed seeing every day while maintaining recommended social distancing, either in a large room or outdoor space with ample room to spread out to encourage connection with your team. You could even provide thoughtful return to work incentives like gas cards child and pet-care stipends, or celebrate the return with boxed lunches, mini care packages, and play fun music, plan activities and offer fun email chains throughout the day to reignite the office culture we have all missed so much while working from home!

The return to the workplace will be a time of great adjustment and also great joy as life begins to return to a new normal, when we can all be together again. While every business will have their own strategies and approaches, when

it comes down to it, business leaders know what will be right for their own companies and teams. We truly hope these five tips helped you to begin the conversation, and we are here to help in any way possible as you begin your journey back to the office! □

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