

## Checklist: Return to the Office

Many employees have long since returned to the workplace during the pandemic, and many never left. Yet, there are employers with employees still working from home that are now bringing employees back to the office. Employers will need to determine which safety measures and policies they want in place as the world continues to learn how to live with COVID-19.

Returning employees to the workplace isn't as simple as announcing a reopening or return-to-the-workplace date and carrying on business as usual. The details of each employer's plan to return to the workplace will look different, but there are several key issues most will need to address.

### Workplace Safety

Employers will need to determine what safety measures are right for their organization. Both proactive and reactive plans should be in place.

Safety measures might include:

- Detailing [cleaning procedures](#) and procuring ongoing supplies.
- Implementing a workforce vaccination strategy which may include:
  - [Surveying](#) employees anonymously regarding their vaccination status.
  - Requiring employees to disclose their vaccination status, where allowable under state law.
  - Developing a [voluntary](#) or [mandatory](#) vaccination policy. Some state laws may prohibit a mandatory policy.
  - Handling religious or medical [accommodation](#) requests.
- Establishing physical distancing measures and masking guidance within the workplace:
  - Moving workstations to increase separation distance.
  - Limiting meeting room occupancy, incorporating virtual meetings to do so.
  - Remaining six feet apart when interacting with others, if possible.
  - Establishing when masks will be required (e.g., in the case of an increase in local infections or hospitalizations), and emphasizing that employees may always choose to wear one.
- Developing an exposure-response plan that addresses:
  - Procedures for an employee to notify the employer when the employee has been exposed or has tested positive for the virus.
  - Quarantine and/or testing requirements before returning to the office.
  - [Exposure communications](#) to affected staff.
- Restricting business travel:
  - Following government guidance to comply with any restrictions.
- Defining customer and/or visitor contact protocols such as:

- Discouraging handshake greetings; remaining 6 ft. apart when possible.
- Using video or telephone conferencing instead of in-person client meetings.
- Providing contactless pickup and delivery of products.

Understanding and complying with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) record-keeping and reporting obligations:

- Identifying positions, if any, with the potential for occupational exposure to the coronavirus.
- Reviewing OSHA regulation 29 CFR § 1904 to determine work-relatedness of illnesses.
- Following OSHA's [emergency temporary standard for health care](#) or [general guidance for employers](#) to keep workers safe.

### **Employee Benefits**

Employees working from home may have made changes to dependent care elections and may not have needed to utilize paid leave for quarantines. Now that the employees will be back in the office, these elections and policies need to be reviewed.

Review such issues as:

Flexible spending accounts

- Reviewing Dependent Care Assistance Program election changes with employees to ensure their new or revised elections are correct.

Paid leave

- Reviewing required leave (if any) under state or local laws and ensuring employees understand the eligibility requirements.
- Determining if there will be company PTO policy changes, including increasing or decreasing paid-leave benefits or additional restrictions in using paid leave.
- Understanding the coordination of leave benefits and communicating these to employees as needed.

### **Compensation**

Many employers may have made compensation changes during the pandemic. How the disruption has affected compensation policies going forward will also need reviewing and communicating to affected staff.

Things to address include:

Determining if employee status changes—exempt to nonexempt or full- to part-time status—are needed or if those already made will continue.

Considering a pay equity audit as pay may have been affected differently for those who took leave or reduced hours to care for children during the pandemic.

## Remote Work

Telecommuting may have proven to work well during the pandemic, and some employees may resist returning to the office and/or request to continue working from home.

Actions to consider include:

- Establishing and communicating the business reason for requiring employees to return to the office.
- Creating a plan for responding to employee requests to continue to work from home, including long-term telework arrangements.
- Designing an organizationwide telecommuting policy that includes who is eligible to work from home and when.
- Considering whether a phased-in approach for returning to the office may ease the transition for employees (e.g., allowing two, three or four days a week in the office before requiring a full five-day in-office workweek).

## Communications

Establishing a clear communication plan will allow employees and customers to understand any new practices or policies.

Topics to cover may include:

- How policies on staying home if sick and physical distancing are being used to protect workers and customers.
- Whether masks must be used and when and that any employee or customer may choose to wear a mask.
- What training on new workplace safety and disinfection protocols have been implemented.
- Have exposure-response communications ready to go to any affected employees and customers.

## New-Hire Documents and Procedures

Employees hired remotely during the pandemic who have never been to the office may need to update or complete some paperwork in person.

Actions to take include:

- Addressing I-9 issues.
  - Having employees complete Form I-9 in person upon return to the workplace, if it was [completed remotely](#).
  - Updating any expired work authorization documents or making note of which need updating as soon as new documents are received by the employee.

- Completing any in-person, company-required documents or procedures, if needed (e.g., photo ID, biometric information, etc.).
- Considering a reorientation that includes a tour of the office buildings and in-person introductions.

### **Policy Changes**

It is no longer business as usual, and employers will likely need to update or create [policies](#) to reflect the new normal.

Some examples include:

- Adjusting paid-leave policies, if needed.
- Relaxing attendance policies to encourage sick employees to stay home.
- Clarifying time-off request procedures to indicate when time off can be required by the employer, should sick employees need to be sent home.
- Implementing flexible scheduling options allowing for compressed workweeks and [flexible start and stop times](#).
- Adjusting meal and rest break policies to stagger times and processes implemented to encourage physical distancing.
- Updating travel policies to reflect any impact of domestic or global travel restrictions.
- Adjusting telecommuting policies to reflect when remote work will now be allowable and how to request it.

### **Business Continuity Plans**

Employers will have learned valuable lessons regarding their business continuity plans, or lack thereof, during the pandemic. Now is the time to review and revise the plan to prepare for future emergencies.

Consider the following:

- Implementing a [business continuity plan](#), including [infectious disease control](#), if a plan does not already exist.
- Amending existing plans to include the latest emergency information and workplace considerations or changes in protocols for responding to global disasters.
- Updating plan resources and contact information to ensure accuracy.
- Establishing a pandemic task force to monitor external and internal data and implement appropriate protocols. (Preparing for the possibility of additional remote work during the pandemic as COVID-19 infections rise and fall.)

See [SHRM's Vendor Directory: Business Continuity Planning Vendors](#)