

Is It Time? Considerations in Returning to the Office (January 2021)

Nearly a year ago, many office employees might have thought their work-from-home situations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic would last two or three months. Fast-forward to January 2021. COVID-19 case numbers are still significantly high. Unfortunately, many businesses have closed permanently. Many remaining (and thriving) businesses are fully remote and have decided to remain so indefinitely. But still others are taking a wait-and-see approach on their return to the office as the pandemic continues to unfold.

Luckily, vaccinations are underway, but the question remains for businesses that have had limited office access since last March: How and when is it safe to return?

Vaccinations Requirements?

Vaccinations might play a large part in how a business decides it is time for employees to return to the office.

In an [interview with NPR](#), Johnny Taylor Jr., CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), said businesses would be within their rights to require employees to be vaccinated before coming back to the office. Taylor cited Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) laws, which mandate that employers provide a safe environment for their workers, as the reason. He also said there could be exceptions for “sincerely held religious belief” under Title VII or disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). But the need for a safe workplace means most workers should be vaccinated.

Office Life

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) encourage employers to create their own health and safety plans. It also encourages open and clear communication with workers about changes in their work procedures or environment. Some widely suggested safety measures employers can take are as follows:

- Consider extended workdays with staggered work hours, or blended remote/in-office schedules for employees.
- Besides requiring masks to be worn in the office, make sure air filtering systems and ventilation meet CDC and OSHA guidelines.
- Evaluate the potential redesign of workspaces and communal areas to provide recommended distances, and clean these areas frequently.
 - Consider providing outdoor work or meeting spaces if possible.
 - Think of open spaces as possibilities for meetings rather than enclosed conference rooms.
- Require employees who feel sick to stay home. If COVID-19 is suspected, have them get tested and follow CDC isolating/quarantining guidelines.
- Encourage employees to help each other follow recommended guidelines and report safety violations to management if they can't be resolved on the spot.

This may sound harsh initially, but this is not the time for “Don’t ask, don’t tell” behavior.

- Develop business travel-related policies for employees conducting out-of-town work.

Lastly, fears and misinformation can easily lead to biased behavior in the workplace. Be sure that diversity and inclusion strategies are considered as you implement COVID-related policies.

Just as beginning to work from home was an adjustment, the same is true for resuming office work. In a [piece for LinkedIn](#), Susy Jackson wrote that employers should “give employees a reason to return to the office.” And once they are there, employers should provide continued flexibility and a period for acclimation and adjustment.

Classroom Implications

- Think back to a previous or current work or volunteer experience (if applicable) since the coronavirus pandemic began. Did you feel safe in your environment? If not, what measures could have been taken to improve safety?
- Imagine that you are a business owner. What factors would you use to evaluate whether or not it would be safe for employees to work on-site in your company currently?
- Ask a parent or mentor how the pandemic has affected their work and what safety measures they are taking or would like to take.
- Would you feel comfortable “calling out” a work colleague or classmate for not following safety procedures? Why or why not?

Further Reading:

NPR: [“When Everybody’s Working at Home and the Magic Is Gone”](#)

Investment News: [“Advisory Firms Split on When To Reopen Offices”](#)

Vault Rankings: [“How Safe Will Offices Really Be When They Reopen?”](#)

Employee Benefit Advisor: [“4 Questions Before Reopening Your Office”](#)

Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM): [“Employers Consider COVID-19 Testing as Vaccine Rolls Out”](#)

Harvard Business School Working Knowledge: [“COVID Killed the Traditional Workplace. What Should Companies Do Now?”](#)