Preparing to Re-open Your Office

SQUAREFOOT

Contents

Bringing business back safely

IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

As the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak became increasingly clear earlier this year, many businesses were ahead of the curve in taking steps such as stopping business travel and issuing work-at-home protocols for employees. The shift from working in a collaborative office environment to working from home was made somewhat easier by the abundance of technologies available to employees; from video conferencing tools to team chat channels. However many companies, and employees are looking forward to a time when they can head back to their office spaces.

Official policies on re-opening

Many states and cities across the US have policies regarding what types of businesses are allowed to be open, and are starting to issue guidance on a phased reopening plan, indicating which industries can re-open soon. The logistics are largely being left up to the businesses themselves. In New York State, for example, Governor Andrew Cuomo's office has simply stated that:

> *Each business and industry must have a plan to protect employees and consumers, make the physical work space safer and implement processes that lower risk of infection in the business.*

On a national level, the White House has released its "Opening America" plan, created in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which specifically directs businesses to develop and implement policies regarding:

- Social distancing and protective equipment
- Temperature checks
- Sanitation
- Use and disinfection of common and high-traffic areas
- Business travel

Challenges and opportunities

There is no getting around the fact that reopening will not be simple. Experts are largely in agreement that, until there is a vaccine, COVID-19 will necessitate some version of social distancing measures and much more rigorous cleaning procedures than we may be used to. Constant hand-washing, PPE, keeping six feet apart from people, and avoiding large gatherings will be the norm.

The ability to adapt is key. Amidst the challenges, businesses should also embrace opportunities to improve. These might include:

- Incorporating new technologies and platforms
- Saving on costs by eliminating unnecessary business travel
- Upgrading safety and cleanliness standards that will improve overall health for all employees

The Planning Phase

In advance of re-opening businesses will be required to carefully plan for the safe return of their staff to the office. Among the key points to consider:

1 WHAT ARE THE OFFICIAL GUIDELINES?

What local, state, and federal guidance on reopening has been made available to businesses? This can vary considerably based on location. Localities offering comprehensive guidance will provide a kind of blueprint to work with, while other regions will leave it up to businesses to do what they think is best. Also be aware of which guidelines are suggestions, and which are mandatory.

2 CONSIDER THAT THE BUSINESS MAY HAVE TO CLOSE AGAIN

As you make all decisions, bear in mind that a second wave of infection could take its course and that until a vaccine is available it is possible that people will need to quarantine again and businesses will need to close. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has said that a second wave in the fall of 2020 is inevitable. If infections are widespread enough, it may become necessary for states to implement stay at home orders for another period of time. This will undoubtedly affect some of your choices as your business undergoes scenario planning for reopening.

3 THINK ABOUT THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF REMOTE WORKING

While the uncertainties surrounding COVID-19 and its effect on our communities makes it hard to look ahead, it is wise to consider a variety of potential scenarios going forward. As you mull over these possibilities, consider what your office space needs will be in the future. Pre a coronavirus vaccine might it be better to have employees in some roles continue working from home? Or assign Monday-Tuesday workers and Wednesday-Thursday workers and have everyone work from home on Friday. These kinds of tactics allow essential employees to practice social distancing on return to the office. This also helps reduce the numbers of commuters having to travel to the workplace everyday.
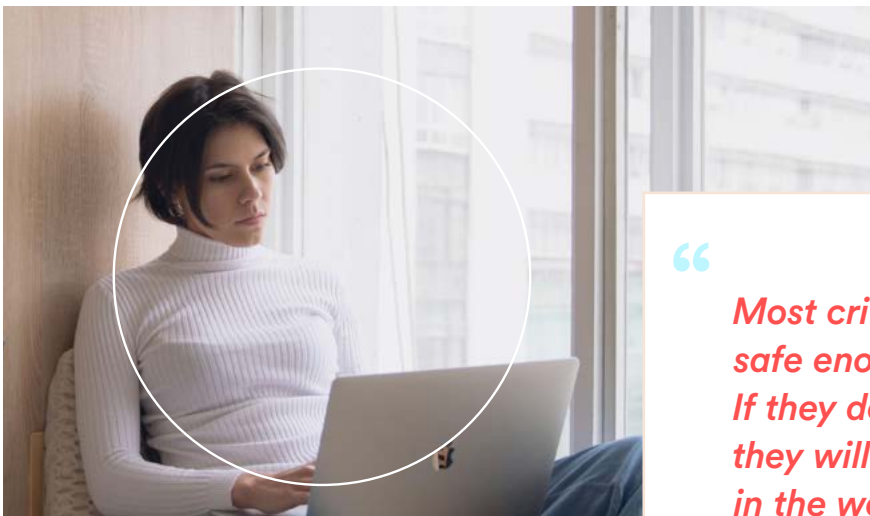
Safety first

Most critical is that employees feel safe enough to return to the office. If they don't feel confident that they will be able to remain healthy in the workplace, they won't want to risk returning to the office. Equally, trying to force staff to return when they don't feel it is safe to do so will only create a hostile and unproductive work environment.

Employees should feel reassured by businesses rolling out return to work plans. Executives should in turn work alongside employees to hear their thoughts on reimagining the workplace in a pre vaccine, COVID world. Before returning to the office employees should be provided with remote training, materials that thoroughly explain new health and safety protocols, and plenty of information on precisely how a potential sickness will be handled. Provide opportunities to answer questions and to listen to employee feedback. It may also be helpful to offer free counseling services.

Establish a special COVID-19 team

A smaller dedicated team should be created that meets regularly and addresses all COVID-related issues as they arise. Team members might include a key decision-maker, an HR representative, a legal advisor, and the office manager. Each individual business will be best equipped to determine who should serve on this team.

The team should be in regular contact with local officials who are handling the COVID-19 response and the office building management company to ensure the business and building is keeping up with updated rules and policies.


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Getting the Workplace Prepared

Before the first employee walks in the door, many changes will need to be made to your workspace. Items on your checklist should include:

1. **Contacting your landlord to ensure the building is running and ready** for your office to reopen. What health and safety measures has the landlord taken? Are there any new rules your employees need to be aware of?

2. **Touching base with other businesses** in the building that you may share space with or regularly interact with.

3. **Bringing in a crew to do an extremely thorough deep cleaning of the office**, and then ensuring either they or another service will be able to continue performing regular cleanings that are up to the new safety standards.

4. **Organizing the set-up of the office space in a way that allows for maximum social distancing.** Remove or discontinue the use of some desks to allow for more space between employees. Assign designated desks, create cubicle-type spaces with high barriers, and remove some shared furniture like sofas and chairs if it does not adhere to social distancing guidelines.

5. **Replacing existing upholstered furniture** or other items with plastic furniture and similar pieces that are easier to clean or wipe down.

6. **Hiring a contractor to make any major changes to the space**, such as constructing or removing barriers, improving ventilation systems, etc.
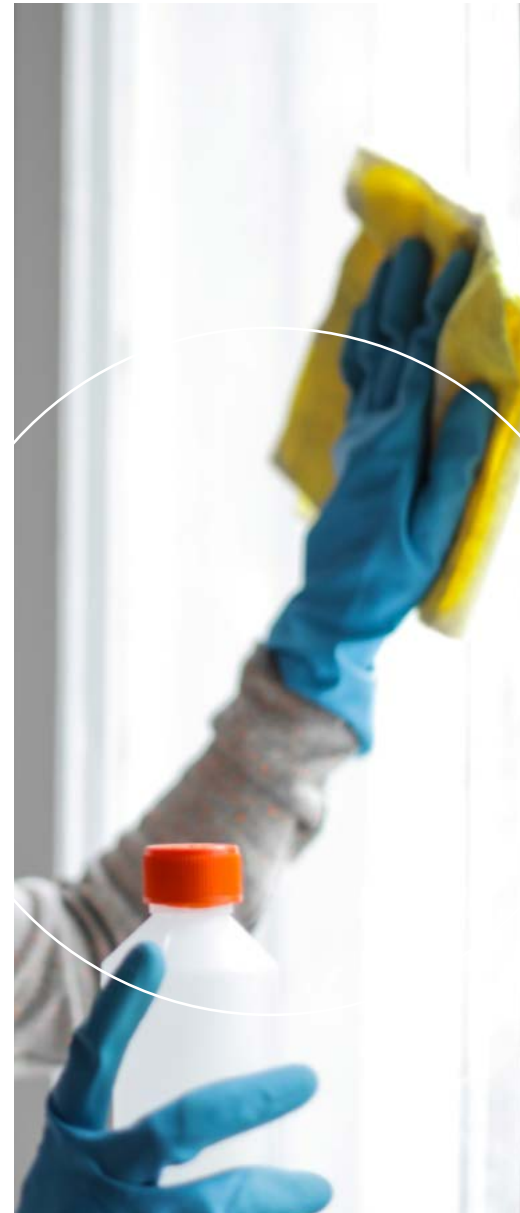
Reintroducing Employees to the Office

To begin, businesses should not introduce more than 25-50% of the workforce back to the office at once. It is important to protect particularly vulnerable team members, such as people who are 60+ or who have respiratory or other underlying conditions, by having them continue to work from home.

Those who do come back to the office will be able to try out the new protocols and see how the set-up is working, which will then enable the fine-tuning of policies and procedures. If things go well over the first few weeks, consider slowly introducing more people to the office.

However it is key to monitor the situation, and if employees begin to get sick, it may be necessary to close again entirely.

New roles, or assignments for employees may need to be created to take on these new protocols. Someone should be in charge of sanitizing deliveries and any other new items introduced into the office space. Someone should be appointed a first contact for any employee who is feeling sick or experiencing other health concerns to consult with.

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Keeping the Space Safe and Clean

Perhaps the biggest challenge in reopening your office will be to maintain a clean workspace where your employees can remain healthy. And, even in the most hygienic environments, there is still the potential for the virus to spread given how contagious it is. Here are a few strategies for businesses to employ:
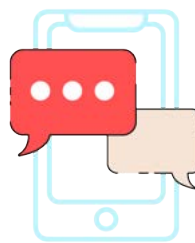
INSTITUTE A SERIES OF BEST PRACTICES FOR INTERACTING WITH CO-WORKERS
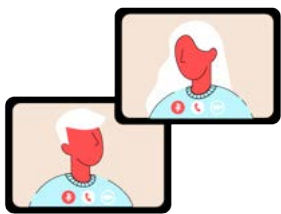
Limiting in-person meetings and conferences

Mandating that meetings never include more than a certain number of people (i.e. 10 and under)
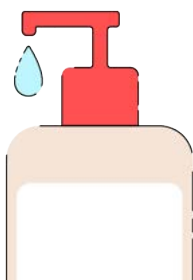
Primarily communicate with each other through phone, email, and chat

Wearing masks and other PPE

CREATE PROTOCOLS FOR GOOD HYGIENE IN THE WORKPLACE

Provide hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes at every desk, and in common areas

Post signage about handwashing

Put tape on floors to provide visual distancing cues

Unfortunately areas designated for employees to share and gather in may need to be closed for the time being, particularly shared kitchens where it would be easy for germs to spread.

Managing Employee Health

Many health experts have emphasized that safely reopening is dependent on testing. The "Opening America" plan instructs employers to monitor the workforce for indicative symptoms and not to allow symptomatic people to physically return to work until cleared by a medical provider. It also says that employers need to develop and implement policies and procedures for workforce contact tracing following employee COVID-19 tests.

If the business is large enough to have an on-site medical professional, daily temperature checks for staff could be a possibility. Smaller businesses may want to look into bringing in a medical professional to perform periodic health checks.

Ensure employees are aware of where they can get tested for COVID-19, whether or not there will be any costs associated with testing or hospitalization (should that be necessary), and other relevant healthcare concerns.

Moving Forward

Once the office has been reopened and the inevitable challenges are being managed, start considering other improvements that may not be immediately vital but are nonetheless important.

Look into implementing more hands-free technologies (sensor-based lighting, automatic doors, etc) that will make it easier to keep the office space clean and germ-free.

Find new ways to nurture camaraderie among employees that allow for social distancing, such as online happy hours with trivia or outdoor activities that provide plenty of distance.

We know that this is a lot of information to take in. The challenges of reopening a business as the world is still grappling with the COVID-19 outbreak are considerable, but with plenty of preparation and a willingness to adapt as we learn, people will be returning to the office and adapting to a new normal.

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