

Virtual Working Group: Bringing Employees Back to the Office

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Key Takeaways

1. Start with the basic questions of should we bring any employees back to the office and why?
2. Create a structure and process for making decisions about when to open an office.
3. Important to develop clear communications to help shift employee expectations and work culture.
4. Given the potential length of time that many employees will be working from home and dramatic changes to the work environment, companies need to enable a cultural shift in how work gets done effectively.
5. Need to deal with immediate issues of employee stress, fear, and mental health.

Professor Chris Collins conducted three virtual working groups with 32 participants from 30 different CAHRS Partner companies. The goal of these sessions was to build insights as to key challenges, best practices, and interesting ideas for how leading companies are preparing to bring employees who have been working from home back to company offices and facilities. While many of the participating companies have had some percentage of their employees still physically coming to work for essential tasks that can't be completed virtually, many have a large percentage of their workforce that has been working from home since the start of state and national shutdowns. Importantly, many of the participating organizations are looking to clarify questions around when to bring back employees that have been working virtually, which of these employees to bring back, and how to bring them back safely. There was a good deal of consistency to some of these questions and also quite a bit of uncertainty to some aspects of these questions. Below is a summary of some key themes and best practices from across the three virtual working groups.



Major Areas of Discussion and Learning Points

1. *Underlying Questions of When and Who to Bring Back to the Office or Facilities*

This section covers some basic questions that many of the participants identified that helped to guide initial questions and thinking by central headquarter teams in regard to bringing employees who have been working from home back to offices or facilities.

- **Should we bring employees back?** One of the most striking takeaways from the three virtual working groups, were questions around why companies would look to bring employees back to the office setting. While there may be some increasing pressure (political, economic, social) to open the economy, many of the participants were hesitant to bring back most of their employees to offices and facilities anytime soon. Importantly, given the need for physical/social distancing, complications based on workspace design and layout, challenges in consistent access to testing, employee fears, etc., there are many challenges that organizations will have to overcome in order to begin to bring employees back to work. In addition, because of changes related to solving these challenges (e.g., greatly reduced number of employees that can be in the building, restricted use of meeting rooms, cafeterias, breakrooms, changes in work protocols (use of Personal Protective Equipment, distancing, etc.)), the way people will be able to work in the office will be significantly different than before this crisis began. Between the significant challenges and the solutions to overcome the challenges, many companies are coming to the conclusion that there is little to be gained for most employees and for overall firm effectiveness by bringing employees back to the office until there has been substantial progress made in terms of vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. Because of the severe limits on the type of work that can get done under the current conditions, quite a few participants noted that they have decided not to bring back the vast majority of their employees that have been working from home until everyone can safely return without substantial social distancing.
- **Who should come back?** While answers to the first question may mean that many employees need to continue working from home for an extended period of time, there are some groups of employees that companies are looking to bring back sooner. Across the board, participants noted that employees who fell into this category would have to work with their managers to develop a business case to articulate the need to return to the office before the company would consider allowing them to return. Those who had a sufficient business case would then need to establish that they were able to return, including validating that they didn't have underlying health conditions that would put them at risk, didn't have others in their home with similar underlying conditions, had safe means of getting to work, etc. Other considerations that came up included:
 - Employees who need access to equipment, technology, files, data, etc. that cannot be effectively or safely accessed from home. The specific roles differed across organizations, but most participants noted that they had a percentage of employees that needed to return to the office because their tasks were highly reliant on physical assets in the office or lab work environments.
 - Employees who lacked resources or space in their home work environments to be effective. Some participants noted that certain employees did not have a home environment that would support a safe and effective work environment and would look to evaluate bringing back these employees on a case-by-case basis. Definitions or criteria for this condition seemed to vary extensively across firms.



- Return to the office voluntarily. Most of the participants noted that return to the office while the pandemic continues will be voluntary. Further, employees with underlying conditions as defined by the CDC or other health organizations, expecting mothers, those with fears or anxieties about returning to work, would be discouraged or potentially not allowed to return. Participants noted that they will explicitly build in an opt-out policy in to any return to work plans so that employees who don't feel ready or are unable to return to work (e.g., underlying conditions, kids at home) do not have to return to work.

2. Structure and Process for Decision-making on Return to Office

This section pertains to specific actionable steps or procedures for opening an office, specifically in regards to the employees who have been working from home. With slight variations, there was a great deal of consistency in how participating companies were making decisions about when a specific building, office, or facility could be opened and allow employees to return to work.

- **Structure of Decision-Making Body.** Most participants noted that they have established a centralized Return-to-Work taskforce (often different from the initial crisis management team, but sometimes the same group) to create the ground rules or global playbook of how to make decisions about when to bring employees back to the office and procedures to follow to bring employees back safely. Most participants noted that this group will set the ground rules and have final decision making authority to approve which locations, facilities, offices will be allowed to open. Because of different local regulations, local office teams will be responsible for making sure that locations are compliant with city, state, regional, or national policies regarding compliance with regulations that may impact a specific office or facility. Instead, this group is focused on creating a consistent overarching set of guidelines to aid in decision making and preparation to bring employees back to the office. While the members of this team varied across participants, members of the team were frequently drawn from some combination of leaders from HR, employee health and safety, business continuity, communications, real estate, Benefits/wellness, security, risk-compliance/legal, operations, and IT among others.
- **Decision Gates or Markers.** While wording differed, there was relatively strong consistency in the criteria or decision gates that teams would have to meet before being able to open facilities and bring back employees who have been working from home. That is, the Return-to-Work taskforce would take requests from local teams to reopen an office only when the local team had developed a strong business case and met the below stage gate hurdles.
 - **Compliant with local Government Policy.** The first hurdle that local facilities would have to pass is the state of government policy for the location – an office could only begin to think about opening when local regulations allowed for the opening of the office in question.
 - **Meeting directives from CDC or other leading health organizations for reopening the economy.** While this may have some variation across nations or regions, this would typically include seeing a 14-day-trend in disease reduction in the local community (i.e., consecutive days of reduction in new cases, hospitalizations) and increase in local hospital capacity. New spikes in local cases or hospitalizations would start the clock over or lead to immediate shutdown of reopened facilities.
 - **Business case.** Each site would need to make a strong business case for which employees need to come back to the site, how many, and why. Given space constraints related to social distancing, most employees would not be able to return in the near future, so the local team



needs to establish which employees need to return based on clear business necessities. It is essential to identify which jobs/roles or individuals most need to return to the office for access to equipment, files, technology, etc. or to support business continuity.

- **Site specific preparations.** Each local site would have to verify that it had properly prepared the site for return to work, including:
 - Plan on how to clear employees for entering the facility on a daily basis before allowing them into the office. This process could include testing, temperature checks, risk checklists, etc.
 - Providing or requiring PPE for employees
 - Clear mapping of workflow and movement around the office to maintain physical distancing guidelines – could include traffic patterns in hallways, closing off or limiting meeting rooms, break areas, cafeterias, marking which desks or workstations are available, etc.
 - Establishing clear cleaning protocols, including providing hand and surface sanitizers to be used by employees during the day, cleaning protocols between shifts, etc.
 - Clear signage to reinforce the prior two points, that may include rules on numbers of employees in a particular space, where they can sit, how to move down hallways, cleaning reminders, etc.
 - Enhanced ability to track and trace – if an employee who has returned to work becomes symptomatic or tests positive for the virus, the local organization must be able to effectively identify which other employees may have come into contact with this person. Some companies are asking employees to keep personal journals of where they were and who they met with on a daily basis (when in the office), others are using badge scanning data, others are simply trying to limit where employees can go in a facility to limit potential contact points in order to facilitate tracking and tracing. Participants noted that they are not currently considering apps that may specifically trace the movement of employees within the building over the course of a day as this seems too invasive and controlling.
 - Based on occupancy limits under these guidelines, the local team would also potentially need to establish how to bring in employees in phases or shifts to accommodate business needs. Several identified using an A/B or A/B/C format where employees come in staggered across weeks – for example, in the A/B/C format, the A group would come in one week, B the following, and the C group of employees on the third week – this format would enable a 14-day quarantine period for any group where a person in that group developed symptoms or tested positive for COVID-19.

3. Communications

Even when organizations bring employees back to the office, the work environment will be substantially different given the changes identified above. Participants noted that a key step to bringing employees back to the office will be effective communications to reset employee expectations, enable employees to make decisions about returning, clarity on policies and procedures for returning, etc.



- Participants noted that one of the most important parts of the communication effort will be to reset employees' expectations of what to expect if they return to work – this is both to mentally prepare employees for the changes and to help employees to make decisions about the potential value of coming back to the office. Many employees may still be thinking that they will be returning back to the office environment prior to the middle of March, so it is important to clarify new requirements for wearing PPE, physical distancing, limited sizes of meetings, limits on food and break areas, etc. Because of these changes, many employees may decide that they can potentially be more productive by staying at home rather than returning to the office.
- Clear guidelines on requirements for entering a facility. Employees will need clear instructions so that they know what they need to do before being allowed to enter (see protocols above) and how to complete these steps (ahead of time through apps, at security gates or entrances, etc.), how and where to enter the building, where they are allowed to be in the building, how to report changes in their own health or the health of people who they are living with, etc.
- Clarity on expectations of who needs to return to the office, when it is optional, and who should not plan on returning to the office for now. Many participants noted that they will continue to urge most employees to continue to work from home and that return to the office is optional so that employees don't feel pressured to come back to work, potentially increasing the likelihood of employees who are sick or in a high risk group return to the office.
- Clarity on procedures and policies for employees who are fearful or reluctant to come back to the office. For employees in potentially essential roles based on business continuity, access to equipment and technology, etc., participants noted that they are looking to establish a process for how to opt out from returning to work or to find alternative means of completing essential work for employees with underlying health risks (or family members with underlying health risks).
- Communicating an overall set of decisions and actions to help employees understand the big picture. Several participants noted that it is critical to communicate decisions, processes, policies about returning to work from a large picture as well as small detail perspective. It is important to convey the totality of decisions being made on facility openings, who returns and who doesn't, new work processes, changes to pay or benefits, etc. so that all employees have clear lines of sight as to the full picture of what the company is doing, why the company made these decisions, and the net impact on them as individuals and as a collective.

4. *Changing the Culture of the Office and Work*

Importantly, the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace (see above) is going to potentially last for an extended period of time and will have significant impact on how and where employees get work done. Multiple participants noted that their organizations are trying to reset aspects of the company culture in light of these changes. Most significantly, they are looking to embrace virtual work to a greater level than ever before, rethink how leaders and the organization evaluate performance and support employees, and redefine the role of the office.



- One powerful perspective that was offered from a participant was the belief that his/her organization needed to reset their face-to-face culture and instead establish the norm that the office is an employee resource center where employees come in when they need resources, support, etc., and that the office is not a desk where you come to do your work every day. In essence, for an extended period of time (at least until there is a vaccine and maybe as a permanent change), employees need to embrace working from home and enhance their ability to work, team, and impact the organization virtually.
- In support of this point, many of the participants noted that they have been investing in how to increase employee comfort with working remotely and to enhance employees' abilities to effectively work remotely. This has included training and learning efforts around remote teaming, time management and strategies for working from home, technology training, etc. Companies have also invested in technology and equipment resources to enhance employees' ability to productively work from home, socially engage with coworkers, etc., and to do so safely (e.g., repetitive motion issues, proper posture).
- Many participants noted that this culture change to support remote work will be partially dependent on enabling managers to become more effective remote leaders, which includes enhanced ability to coach and provide feedback to employees, become more effective at identifying individual needs across employees, enabling employee voice, effectively managing team dynamics across remote settings, being agile in creating and communicating shifting goals, and demonstrating behaviors that are required in the new environment (agility, resiliency, openness, transparency, etc.) A number of participants noted that their organizations have been enhancing their virtual training/learning portfolio to provide managers support in navigating these changes.
- Adapting performance management expectations and systems to reflect massive changes. These changes might include revising quarterly and yearly goals, increasing the volume/cadence of check-in and feedback meetings, building in understanding and acceptance of periods of lower productivity, flexible standards and policies for evaluating employees that need or want to continue to work from home relative to those that return to the office, etc.
- Balancing workforce demands – the changes in work and business demands will mean that some roles are naturally seeing lower demands while others are seeing increased demands at different points in time. Participants noted there is a need for more continuous workforce planning – identification of hot jobs, high demand roles, key skills – and developing plans for short-term reassignments, project opportunities, task redeployment to help balance the load for high demand work/jobs. Part of this effort will include communicating the developmental opportunities for skill development, internal assessment of skill pools, and internal recruitment for short-term projects and assignments.
- Simplification of priorities. One way to help maintain agility and to also reduce stress is for managers, teams, units, etc. to create greater clarity on the most important priorities and to focus on those and reduce the total number of priorities that employees are asked to be working on at any particular point in time.



5. *Providing Support to Employees*

The participants across all three working groups noted that their organizations are working hard to provide more support to employees given the levels of stress, anxiety, and pressure that employees are experiencing. Many of the participants noted that they are actively working on plans, practices, activities to provide employees and managers more support from an emotional, social, mental health perspective because of the inherent strain caused by the current environment. There were quite a number of innovative ideas identified that companies have implemented to help employees manage and reduces stress, anxiety, and potential mental health issues. Some of the interesting steps included:

- Need to create an environment of psychological safety where employees feel it is safe to raise concerns or bring up issues, to take advantage of existing employee assistance programs or other programming, or seek help from their manager or HR.
- Providing employees with free access to learning portals, live sessions, videos on mindfulness, meditation, resilience, stress reduction, grief management, emotion management, or other tools that can help employees to manage stress, deal with anxieties, and develop coping mechanisms.
- Providing access to online tools, videos, etc. for physical activity and exercise ideas that help provide employees with safe and creative ideas for exercise that can help with stress, anxiety, and physical well-being.
- Creating global mandates around work flexibility in order to give employees clear policies to help them manage the accumulation of priorities that are mounting on top of work priorities. This may include changes to work schedules, revision of work goals, paid time off, etc.
- Change in bereavement policies to accommodate those facing multiple losses, deferring leave to later in the year when burials might take place, etc.
- Access to training, courses, videos that assist parents who are also taking on educational responsibilities or having to balance caring for young children while working.
- Medical health hours – standing weekly meetings where company physicians or other medical personnel answer questions from employees across a range of issues.
- Ramped up Employee Assistance Programs that help connect employees to company resources, mental or physical health assistance, counselors, etc.
- Reminders and/or revised policies regarding vacation days, mental health leaves, personal days, etc. It's important to remind employees to step away and recharge – some noted that it was critical to remind employees that they should use available paid time off to get away from work or to work with their manager or HR leader to arrange for alternative leaves.
- Facilitating small group discussions or interest groups where employees can share ideas, strategies, or even just commiserate about challenges with other employees face similar issues. Increased frequency of sentiment analyses, pulse surveys, etc. to keep an updated picture on employee stress, burnout, fatigue, etc. in order to be able to effectively deploy and tailor resources to hot spots across the organization.
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This Summary Report was prepared by Chris Collins for the Bringing Employees Back to the Office Virtual Working Group.

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