

Planning for Office Reopening

As governments begin to grant permission to reopen businesses, companies all over the world are considering how—and if—they can safely reopen offices and help teams readjust to the new normal. As a global consulting firm with expertise in change management and employee engagement, Global Prairie has compiled a list of short- and long-term considerations to help organizations manage these important decisions and plan for ongoing changes. For more guidance on how to adjust to shifting conditions and help your organization thrive, contact us at info@globalprairie.com.

Considerations Before Opening

→ **Solicit input from employees before decisions are finalized.**

There will likely be a wide spectrum of reactions to the prospect of returning to the office. Some employees may be chomping at the bit to get back to their desks, while others may feel anxious about the health risks to themselves and those they live with. Many working parents may also be concerned about navigating ongoing childcare challenges. Before making final decisions about reopening offices, we recommend that organizations solicit input from their employees. By conducting a team survey, leaders can better understand employee concerns, needs and requirements for feeling safe at the office. They'll also demonstrate a willingness to listen and craft policies that take into account the real and varied needs of their people.

→ **Weigh the advantages and risks.**

Though stay-at-home restrictions are loosening, some local authorities are continuing to recommend businesses encourage remote work whenever possible. Organizations will now need to carefully consider what will be gained by reopening offices and weigh the associated costs and risks. We suggest first establishing a plan for exactly what will need to be put in place to meet virus-related safety requirements and ensure employees feel comfortable. It's important to think through how safety measures will impact the benefits of in-office work—for example, teams may still not be allowed to gather together in meeting rooms to collaborate, and some employees may feel frustrated by requirements to wear masks throughout the day. Ultimately, organizations will need to ask themselves whether productivity and engagement will be enhanced enough to justify



the increased risks and required safety measures. Of course, this assessment will be different across industries and companies and will likely change over time as the public health situation continues to evolve.

→ ***Prepare the office and establish health protocols.***

For some organizations, a phased approach with incremental steps towards reopening may help ease the adjustment and ensure employees feel comfortable returning to work. As a first step, leaders will need to activate plans for ensuring offices meet safety requirements. In addition to thorough cleaning and disinfecting, spaces may need to be reorganized to create at least six feet of distance between individuals and reduce touch points in communal areas. Organizations will also need to consider health protocols for employees to protect themselves and their colleagues from the virus. Larger offices may want to institute health screenings and temperature checks at office entrances. Other guidelines around mask-wearing and maximum number of employees in rooms will need to be considered and codified prior to reopening—and these may vary by geography. We always advise turning to the local, state and national public health experts for the latest guidance.

→ ***Communicate changes with clarity and compassion.***

When leaders share the decision to reopen, they need to ensure they are demonstrating sensitivity and concern for their team's safety and well-being. It will also be important to acknowledge that this phase is yet another change for employees – as most have now fully adjusted to the work from home arrangement – and give them the flexibility to move through this adjustment in a way that works for them. Ideally, leaders should explain the plan and rationale for reopening, the measures that have been put in place to protect teams and any available options for employees to continue to work from home until the crisis resolves to a level that supports the full team return.

Longer-Term Considerations

→ ***Take a breath to reflect on lessons learned.***

Leaders and their teams have spent months now in crisis mode managing logistics to protect people and adapt to a steady stream of new challenges. We know now that this is a stamina game and organizations will need to plan for ongoing changes. As leadership expert Bréne Brown says, now is the time to “settle the ball”—to think about the kind of organization we want to be when we emerge from this crisis. We recommend carving out time during this new phase of adjustment to assess how your organization's response to the pandemic has—or hasn't—lived up to your purpose and values. What lessons can be learned from the last months of disruption? And moving forward, how might you better filter decisions through your purpose to benefit your business, your people and your community?

→ ***Reconsider and redefine remote work policies.***

For many leaders, even staunch critics of telecommuting, this forced global experiment with remote work has demonstrated its viability. After the pandemic resolves, organizations should anticipate that a percentage of employees may wish to continue to work from home at least part time. For some companies, reducing office space requirements may be appealing—in a recent Brookings Institute study, nearly one in five surveyed CFOs said they plan to keep at least 20% of their employees working remotely to cut costs. As leaders are thinking through how they will continue to evolve during and after this crisis, now is the time to reflect on how their experience with a virtual workforce will inform their post-pandemic policies on remote work arrangements.



→ **Embrace performance over face time.**

It's not just where people work, but when they work that has changed during this period of telecommuting en masse. We've seen expectations about traditional work schedules evolve to help employees manage new homeschooling and caregiving duties. Successful organizations have adapted by focusing on outputs instead of hours and ensuring employees have clear and measurable goals. While this model isn't new, many companies are fully activating results-oriented management for the first time. Leaders can strengthen team performance and provide ongoing flexibility for employees in the long run by equipping managers to individualize their approach, communicate measurable outcome and deliverable expectations, and help employees understand how their work supports broader organizational goals.

→ **Explore reskilling opportunities.**

As business models change to accommodate new COVID-19-related demands and restrictions, many job requirements may dramatically shift. Organizations should start to identify the new skills they'll need and how they might reskill current employees or even rehire and retrain those who have been laid off as the economy recovers. With many innovative and affordable professional development companies entering the market, leaders should begin to evaluate their learning infrastructure and explore opportunities for new partnerships that will help retain valued employees in the long term.

→ **Don't assume culture will thrive when offices reopen.**

Many organizations made special efforts to maintain company culture while teams worked remotely and it's important that purposeful culture-building practices continue as working arrangements return to "normal." For employees who have lost colleagues to furloughs or layoffs, returning to the office may be unsettling and may damage company morale. And unfortunately, we will all likely continue to live under uncertainty and stress for the foreseeable future, carrying this burden to our offices. It's important that organizations continue to proactively invest in supporting and engaging their teams through this crisis. We recommend taking regular culture pulse checks throughout the crisis to assess how employees are perceiving leadership decisions and how engagement can improve. On the bright side, the organizations that rise to this challenge and demonstrate commitment to their purpose and values will earn the loyalty of employees and external audiences.

Sources: Global Prairie, Harvard Business Review, SHRM, Washington Post, Forbes