

# Return to Work: The New Ways Companies Are Investing in Health and Wellness



*Returning to the office is proving to be more complicated than many employers anticipated. Focusing on safety, cleanliness and wellness can help mitigate employees' concerns about returning to shared office spaces.*

After a mass exodus from offices, returning to work is proving to be more complicated than anticipated. Not only is the Delta variant thriving across the country, but as vaccination rates stay stagnant, employees are reluctant to head back into the office.

At the beginning of the pandemic, employers were encouraging remote work, saying that they supported the model full-time. Yet, after a year of successfully working remotely, companies are changing their opinion—much to the chagrin of their employees. Recent data from Forbes shows that want a hybrid work model, preferring to choose where they work have no interest in returning to the office at all.

For companies, these statistics are staggering. But even more worrisome is that noted that they would change jobs for a place that offered flexible and remote working options. This would require employers to find new ways to retain talent and encourage them back into the office. Many companies look towards health and wellness benefits to improve work-life balance and employee wellbeing, while simultaneously improving the work environment. These can range from extended health and medical benefits to gym memberships.

As we look at returning to the office, though, the physical space plays a key role in encouraging in-person work and improving employee wellness.

## Focus on Safety and Cleanliness

The pandemic was a wake-up call to take cleanliness seriously and to treat communicable diseases as serious threats. In fact, protective measures for COVID-19—including masks and social distancing—helped in making the [2020/2021 flu season](#) quite mild. The reason for this is simple: good hygiene and sanitation habits help limit the spread of all germs, not just for one specific virus. This has caused many people to rethink how we were treating cleanliness and sanitation standards in a shared environment.

To mitigate employees' concerns when returning to a shared office space, it's important that employers and building owners focus on improving cleaning and sanitation methods. This could involve a more frequent cleaning and deep clean schedule, focusing on sanitizing desks, shared tables, and other office features daily. It could also mean enhancing the options available to keep people safe.

Touchless doors, hand wash stations and sanitation systems can reduce the spread of germs and improve people's comfort when navigating the space. Even something as simple as having more hand sanitizer in public spaces, such as conference rooms, can make a huge difference. Small investments in solutions that reduce touchpoints can go a long way to improving feelings of health and wellness.

## Improved Air Quality

As much as people panicked over high-touch areas, the real culprit for spreading the virus was poor air quality and ventilation in enclosed spaces. Many office buildings don't have the luxury of windows that open or outdoor workspaces, which means that most of the eight-hour workday is spent breathing in recycled air. But as employees reconsider their work environment, improving air quality can help everyone feel safer when they return to the office. And since most organizations are still working from home, this provides the perfect opportunity to upgrade existing HVAC systems with [supplemental filtration](#).

High-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter systems are becoming a necessity in high density buildings. HEPA filters remove airborne particles including dust, pollen, volatile organic chemicals (VOCs), mold, allergens, viruses, odors (like formaldehyde and smoke), bio-aerosols, nitrous oxide and many other pollutants that contaminate the inside air of workplaces.

Adding ultraviolet germicidal irradiation (UVGI) makes the treatment more effective against viruses and other pathogens. Similar to the UV surface-sanitizing devices you may have seen during the pandemic, these air filtration systems use UV-C light to neutralize organisms small enough to otherwise slip past the filter. UV-C light is capable of [irradiating and destroying the nucleic acids](#) in these microorganisms, rendering them unable to function or reproduce. Adding these to existing office spaces can signal to tenants and employees that their health is being taken seriously.

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## Flexible Working Spaces

The past year and a half has shown employers and employees that remote work isn't just possible, it's highly productive. That's why employers need a convincing reason to encourage employees to return to the office. The easiest way to do this is to promote collaboration and communication through flexible spaces.

Over the past year, the term "Zoom fatigue" has been felt by everyone working from home. Spontaneous interaction, innovation, communication and collaboration were a vital part of the work experience before the pandemic and is something that can be hard to recreate in a remote environment. When considering the physical space of the office, look for ways to facilitate this spontaneity.

Make shared spaces, boardrooms and social gathering places a central part of the office design to improve the mental health of employees. Balance this with quiet spaces where employees can complete their work and be productive individually. Perks such as workout spaces, activity rooms, and food and drinks were once reserved for technology companies, but to encourage employees back to the office, these will likely become commonplace and necessary. Flexible space, collaborative areas and social hubs are key to new office designs.

## Be Considerate

When finalizing a back-to-work strategy, start by looking at what will resonate with your employees. Even before the pandemic hit, health and wellness in the workplaces was becoming a priority. For many, this includes basic health and wellness items such as clean air—in fact, a [2019 survey](#) showed that temperature and air quality were four times more important to employees than having gym facilities.

It also has proven to improve employee productivity, which should make it a necessity to employers. Employees feel heard and feel safe, which means that employers need to consider health and wellness investments that will make employees thrive in the post-COVID work environment.

### About the Author:



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