

Ensuring Safety As We Return To Office

HR teams should remain flexible in helping employees switch out of the Covid-19 mode

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As Covid-19 transitions from pandemic to endemic, many businesses are shifting from an all-remote workforce to either a full return to the office or a hybrid model. It's hard to believe we are now going on our third year in the business world and discovered it could still function with most employees working from home. However, now many companies are planning to at least return to providing a space for people to work together, if not insisting they do so. Just as there were important considerations at play when moving from mandatory office attendance to lockdown-era telecommuting, the switch back to office attendance requires thought and planning, especially where worker safety is concerned.

The health and well-being of employees is key to a successful return to the office. In fact, the Biden Administration recently laid out a roadmap and a challenge to organizations to move the country forward safely while continuing to combat Covid-19. If offices become the super-spreader locations of tomorrow, we will be forced to return to fully remote work after an avoidable loss of health and life.

Safety in Hybridity

The first thing to consider when returning to the office is whether a mandatory return for all employees is necessary. For one thing, the truth is most employees would prefer to remain at least partially remote. The pandemic proved that workers, especially thought workers, could do their jobs just fine from home, without destroying company culture or driving their employers to bankruptcy. HR leaders, who oversee unilateral decrees wherein everyone must once more commute to work five days a week, are going to find themselves with positions to fill as key hires go seek more flexible employers.

Luckily, a hybrid work structure is just what the doctor ordered. Specifically, the doctor studying Covid-19. Social distancing remains a must to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, and the fewer employees in an office at one time, the easier it is to keep apart. Office spaces can be reconfigured to go from small conference rooms to spacious conference lounges in common areas or larger rooms. Companies can also save significantly on rent by switching to smaller office spaces to account for fewer people being present at one time, and these savings trickle down to IT, climate control, and air filtration.

Hybrid attendance also carries the invaluable benefit of hiring flexibility. Employers are no longer limited to candidates, who are local or willing or relocate. And every employee who does not come into the office is one fewer to potentially catch Covid at work. A hybrid system promotes the safest workforce, while giving workers a place to meet in person, and even get some peace from the kids.

Keep Following the Rules

No matter whether you bring your whole workforce back to the office or stick to a hybrid model, the rules for Covid-19 safety should remain in effect. People should stay masked indoors at all times and should wash their hands after leaving the office. Food in the break room should be kept in discrete packages, without any communal or shared items. And social distancing should continue as much as possible. Furthermore, unvaccinated individuals without a legitimate medical excuse should not be allowed on the premises for their own and others' safety.

Clearing the Air

When looking to ensure the safety of workers in an enclosed space, it is important to remember that Covid-19 is transferred most commonly via droplets carried in the air from an infected individual to a new host. Even the best masks and strictest hygiene cannot prevent droplets from entering one's system some other way. Normal HVAC filters cannot catch and cleanse these tiny particulates, making offices a potential breeding ground for Covid exposure — and the negative PR from turning one's office into a super-spreader hotspot is only the least of your problems when employees get sick and risk death from Covid.

Thankfully, more powerful filtration systems are available to scrub dangerous droplets from the air. Embracing cutting-edge filtration technology is a great way for HR leaders to keep their teams productive and disease-free upon their return to the office.

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