



## 5 Considerations for Businesses Returning to Work

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Palladium Health Practice

## Introduction

For many office workers, it has been over 6 months since they last stepped foot in their office buildings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But as the pandemic continues with no end in sight, and the world settles into a ‘new normal’, employers may make the decision to reopen physical office spaces.

For businesses choosing to reopen in the coming weeks and months, there are five things to consider to keep all employees as safe as possible.

### 1. Who is Returning to Work

Businesses should select as few employees as possible to come back to the office. Consider the following strategies to minimise the number of employees in the office:

#### Tiered Employees

Take into consideration the work that they do and the tools they need to do them, grouping employees into at least three tiers of workplace access: (1) Must be at workplace to get the job done; (2) Sometimes need access; and (3) Rarely/never need access.

#### High Risk Employees

Due to family, environment, and health, some colleagues may be more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others. Parents of young school-aged children in virtual classes face distinct challenges as well. There shouldn't be penalty for these circumstances. Put a plan in place to provide work tools at home or create a task sharing system to better accommodate employees who have a high risk of suffering from COVID-19 or have family circumstances that prevent them from returning to work.

#### Cohorting

Slowing the spread of COVID-19 includes reducing the number of people that interact with each other. Could employees be grouped into a “cohort” who always access the office on the same day and time? Cohorts can also aid staffing flow and timing.

#### Testing and Screening

With so many people expected to be asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19, testing is the only way to truly know if someone is sick or not. Some employers and businesses have opted for universal testing, despite the logistical and financial challenges. While temperature, symptom, and exposure screening questions are an easy and popular approach, these will only distinguish symptomatic patients. Businesses should take a combined approach to try to catch as many cases as possible.



“There is no point if people do not adjust their behaviour toward prevention.”

## 2. Office Environment

Ensure the physical space and equipment within the office aids, not inhibits, employees' ability to maintain social distance and hygiene. The following additions and precautions can help.

### Ventilation Assessments

With aerosol transmission being one of the top risks of working indoors, providing adequate ventilation and filtration to clean the air in which employees work is vital. Check if office ventilation has been assessed by your building manager to ensure that it meets standards.

### Physical Barriers

Temporary plastic barriers can help maintain distance between busy workstations.

### Sanitation and Hygiene

Proper personal and office sanitising equipment throughout the office will keep the space clean and will encourage hygienic practices. Frequent office and bathroom cleanings should also be part of the new status quo.

## 3. Preventive Behaviour

Despite great care to create a 'safe' physical environment, there is no point if people within it do not adjust their behaviour toward prevention. These are the three already well-known ways to reduce your risk of infection, and a good understanding of your company culture will tell you how likely it is that your employees will adopt these behaviours.

### Maintaining Distance

Encourage employees to keep 2 metres / 5-6 feet apart from each other.

### Hand Washing / Sanitising

Keeping hands clean is an easy, affordable, and effective way to prevent the spread of infection. Hand sanitiser use in common areas like the kitchen, bathroom, and meeting rooms should become second nature.

### Masks

Prevent the virus from spreading through universal use of masks indoors.

## 4. The Commute

Returning to work means commuting and having a plan for employees to stay safe outside the workplace as well.

### Public Transportation

Some regions still categorise the use of public transport as a high-risk activity, and schedules have been changed or reduced. Consider how staff are getting to work and how to best mitigate the potential risks associated.

### Off-Peak Hours

If possible, encourage employees to enter and exit the office building during off-peak hours to avoid crowded elevators and lobbies. Given the high risk elevators pose, stairways can also provide a useful alternative.



**“Help your employees to connect with their purpose.”**

## 5. Internal Communication and Management

Your employees will be returning to a very different office setting than the one they left. Setting expectations and enforcing policies requires effective communication, training, and management. Healthcare facilities prevent infections because they manage themselves accordingly.

### Risk Education

Educating employees on office risks and risk mitigation practices is a proactive way to reduce transmission within the office. Employees are facing a new set of workplace risks and hazards and must be provided with resources to learn what is expected.

### Management Distribution

The burden of planning for a safe reopening often falls on a few key employees. With many conditions at play, it's easy for items to slip through the cracks. Ensure that teams overseeing your office reopening are adequately resourced to manage the entire process of bringing and keeping people back to the office safely.

### Staying Engaged

Tensions are high, your employees are rightfully anxious, and so much of what you're facing is unprecedented. Be patient with yourself and your colleagues. Rally behind your company vision, help your employees to connect with their purpose, and when in doubt, err on the side of overcommunicating.

## Conclusion

Above all, evaluate your reasons for reopening the office. If your work can continue without an in-office presence, your return to the physical office space might not bring enough added value to offset the risks. If you do decide to welcome your employees back to work, ensure that your reopening plan contains the detail, resourcing, and alignment with the advice of public health authorities needed to keep everyone safe.

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