

Returning to the Office Post-COVID

A Workspace Preparation Guide

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Navigating a New Normal

As we continue to adapt to the new normal that the COVID-19 pandemic has created, employers and employees alike are looking for ways to safely keep working and growing their businesses. With vaccine distribution in progress and CDC guidelines in place, most companies are ready to create a plan for bringing at least a portion of their employees back into the office. The question for many organizations is:

How do we do this in a way that keeps our employees both safe and productive?

The back-to-the-office approach that works for

your organization will depend on factors like office size, head count, workstyles, company culture, and more. You'll need to tailor your approach to meet your company's specific needs as well as the expectations of your employees.

The Vari® Post-COVID Workspace Flexibility Survey questioned hundreds of office-based employees across a wide range of industries about their desires and expectations in returning to the workplace. This guide will take an in-depth look at the results of that survey and offer our recommendations for your back-to-the-office plan based on our insights, as well as recognized CDC safety guidelines and best practices.



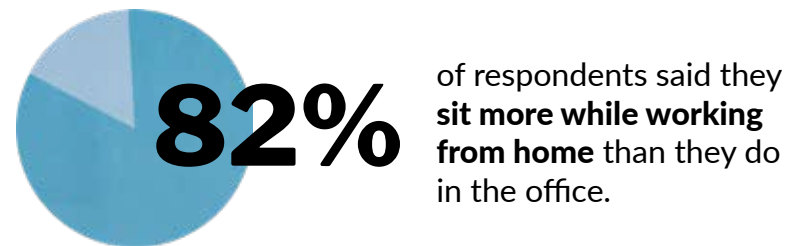
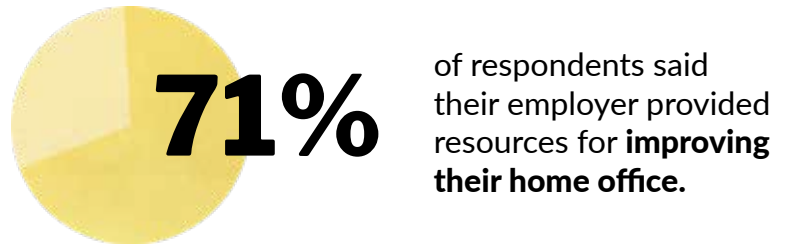
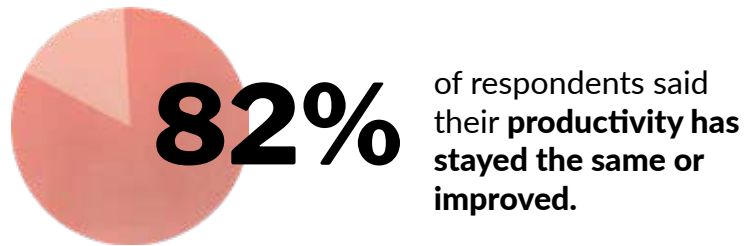
In the spring of 2020, many employees made the sudden transition away from the office to a full-time work-from-home schedule. In our Return to Productivity eBook, Texas A&M University researcher Dr. Mark Benden reported that it took approximately 30 days for teams to resume the same levels of productivity after making the change to a work-from-home environment. While employees in our recent survey responded that they felt more productive, they also reported some other interesting factors in their experience working remotely.

According to the Vari Post-COVID Workspace Flexibility Survey, most employees expected to be back in the office for at least part of the work week sometime in 2021, but 84% also said they expect their employer to implement a more flexible work-from-home policy post-pandemic.

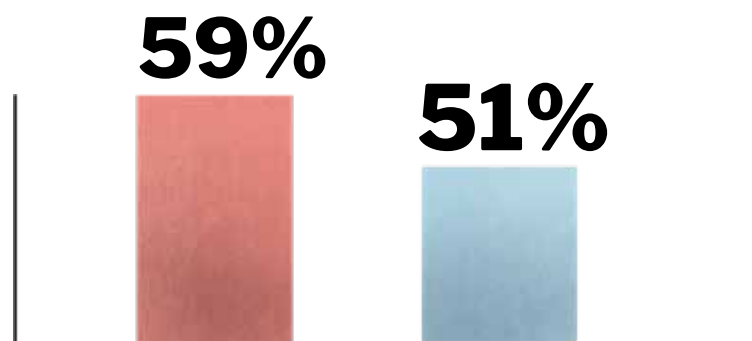
Global Workplace Analytics estimates that 56% of U.S. workers have jobs that are at least partially compatible with working remotely, and that 25-30% of the workforce will be working from home multiple days a week by the end of 2021.*

So, for many organizations, the new reality going forward will have to be a hybrid approach that accommodates the workspace needs of employees both at home and in the office.

How Working From Home Has Worked Out.



Hybrid Workspace Models Are on the Rise.



employees expect to transition back to the office by Q2 or Q3 of 2021.

Vari corporate customers say they will be adopting a hybrid workforce model once COVID-19 precautions are no longer necessary.

* Global Workplace Analytics (2020), Global Work-from-Home Experience Survey, [n = 3,000]. <https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/global-work-from-home-experience-survey>



77%

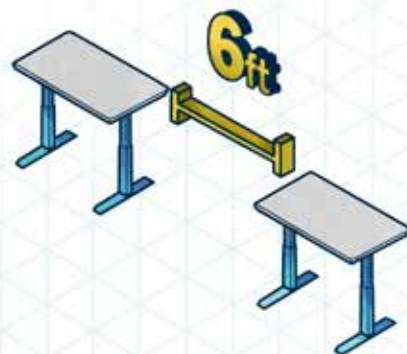
Have Privacy Panels or Other Physical Barriers Around Workstations

The Changes Employees Want

When creating a back-to-the-office plan, the health and safety of employees is obviously the most important consideration. Those returning to the office want to know that the proper precautions are being taken and that any concerns they may have about returning to the office are being listened to and addressed.

When asked about what they expect upon returning to the office, employees mentioned a range of precautions that they want their employer to implement to keep them safe and confident at work. The most popular included mask mandates, social distancing between workstations, increased sanitization, and limiting in-person meetings.

Increase the Distance Between Workstations (51%)



Offer More Sanitization Stations (52%)



Limit In-Person Meetings (51%)



Implement a Mandatory Mask Policy (51%)



Why Go Back to the Office?

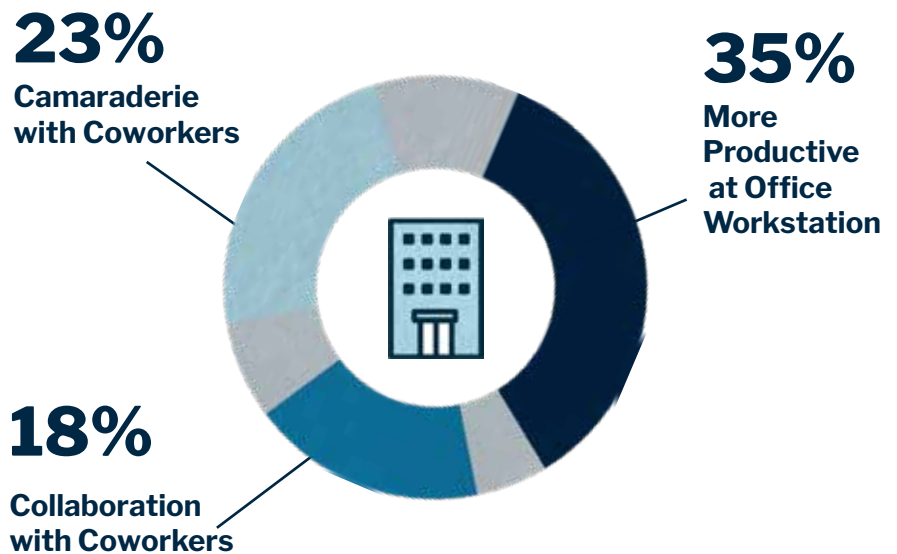
After a year of such unprecedented change, many employees are looking forward to getting back into the office. Our survey found that the leading reason respondents would prefer to work primarily from the office is productivity. Culture is also an important factor, with respondents saying they look forward to more camaraderie and collaboration with coworkers.

This presents employers with the challenge of providing an office environment that prioritizes safety and creates an office that is a place for culture, collaboration, and communication.

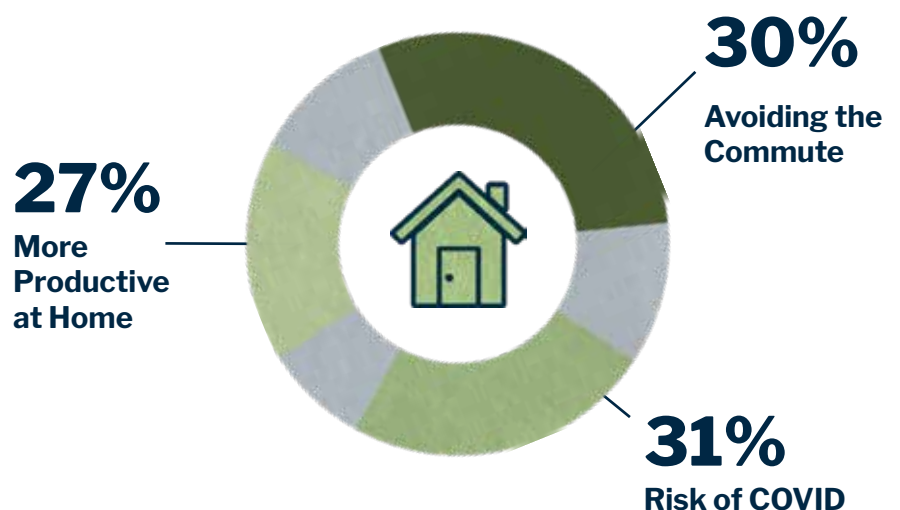
However, there are also some employees who would prefer to continue working primarily from home. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the leading reason they give for wanting to remain at home is to avoid the risk of virus transmission in the office.

This presents employers with the dual challenge of creating a new work environment that brings people safely back to the office while also making sure that employees working from home can stay productive and feel connected to their team.

The leading reasons employees would prefer to work primarily at the office:



The leading reasons employees would prefer to work primarily from home:





A Comprehensive Back-to-the-Office Guide

Based on insights derived from the Vari Post-COVID Workspace Flexibility Survey and existing CDC guidelines, we've compiled this guide to help you create a back-to-the-office plan that meets the needs of your organization. It's broken into 3 categories: Communications, Operations, and Office Space.

Communications

Successfully implementing any kind of organization-wide change requires open and honest communication with your employees. By being transparent with your team and encouraging a dialogue, everyone can feel invested in the process and have a clear vision of the goals and expectations.



Gather Feedback

Using an online service like SurveyMonkey, develop a survey for your employees to gauge their comfort level about returning to the office. Creating a space for staff to voice any concerns they may have is not only important for morale, but could also lead to new ideas for enhancements that will need to be made to the “new normal” workday.

Develop and Share a Detailed Plan

Most businesses weren’t able to plan for the transition to work-from-home back in March, but now you have the opportunity to create one that will help everyone prepare for this next major shift. Your plan should include a clear timeline outlining the different phases of the transition, a detailed list of team members’ personal responsibilities while working in the office, and a description of any operational changes you’ll be making due to COVID-19. Present your plan in a special meeting rather than just emailing it or posting it on your intranet portal – that will elevate its importance to your team.

Consider Alternative Arrangements

Not everyone is going to be ready to return to the office, especially individuals that are high-risk or that have shared a high level of concern. Avoid making them feel pressured to return to the office, and instead give them the option of continuing to work from home, or work with them to find a suitable alternative.

Lead By Example

Now more than ever, the conduct of leadership will influence how well employees follow the rules. For example, if a member of leadership walks around the office without a mask, it undermines your mask mandate and could lead to an unwanted gap between leadership and staff that negatively affects morale.

Operations

From new policies and procedures to scheduling, staffing, and technology, these tools will help you put an organizational framework around your transition back to the office.



Start With a Hybrid Approach

To limit the number of people in the office while you work out the kinks, start by staggering your team's at-home and in-office schedules. That will give you the chance to see if a blended approach works for your organization, and allows you to safely address any issues that may come up as you transition back to the office.



Create a Transition Task Force

Have each key group in your organization assign their own "COVID-19 task force" member to represent their team. This person will meet regularly with other task force members to discuss challenges and solutions. Each member should be empowered with the responsibility of holding their team accountable for following the safety guidelines set out by leadership.



Continue to Invest in Digital Tools

A spike in the use of digital tools like Microsoft Teams and Dropbox showed what a necessity they were for many organizations in 2020. You'll likely want to continue the daily use of videoconferencing and other tools that help you maintain safe social distancing in the office and reduce the number of people in meeting rooms. Continue to explore digital options that complement your current technology stack.

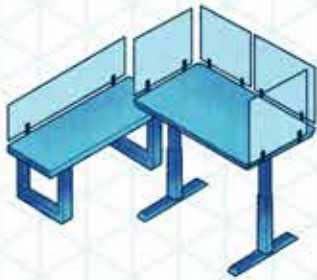


Safeguard Shared Spaces

Shift from more standard "hoteling" practices to more restrictive guidelines for desks and other shared spaces. For example, implement by-appointment-only use of desks or meeting rooms, allow for only a single user per day, and add barriers to shared desks or walls around workstations to define these spaces better and keep people at a safe distance.

Office Space

Whether you're retrofitting your existing office setup or completely redesigning your entire space, making your physical work environment as safe and productive as possible is easier than you may think.



Make the Most of Your Space

Consider reconfiguring your layout to move workstations into training rooms and any other underutilized spaces in your office. Repurposing that square footage for desks helps to lower density and increase social distancing efforts. To plan your new layout, start with the outer walls, space workstations 6 ft. apart, and work your way inward.

Add Barriers to Workstations

If your office layout doesn't allow for increased spacing of workstations, creating physical barriers between employees is the CDC recommendation. This can be done by adding modular walls or privacy panels between desks. Open office environments should consider using transparent options to maintain a light and open feel in the floor plan while providing safety barriers.

Use Signage and Other Visual Cues

Communicate rules and guidelines with visual aids like floor decals in common areas to indicate foot traffic flow, or entrance and exit signs in meeting rooms. Whiteboards and other temporary signage can also help reinforce best practices and offer a place to post encouraging, positive messages to your team.

Add Sensors and No-Touch Technology

In high-contact areas like kitchens, bathrooms, or break areas, consider investing in touch-free technology and other contactless solutions. For example, hand sanitization stations with sensors, RFID cards over keypads, and handle-free entrances and exits help to reduce surface areas that can be contaminated.

Make Meeting Rooms Virtual-Enabled

Outfit meeting rooms with cameras and other technology enhancements that allow in-office and virtual teams to collaborate seamlessly. With fewer team members in conference rooms, meetings can be safer without sacrificing communication or productivity.

The Future is Flexible



Conditions and guidelines are sure to continue to change, so staying flexible will be absolutely essential. Organizations that are set up to embrace the changes that come their way will find it easier to thrive and stay productive. By following the guidelines above as well as those of the CDC and local health authorities, you can meet your employees' expectations for safety and comfort, while setting up your organization for success.

If you would like a detailed workspace design plan and consultation on how to make your workspace safe, contact a Vari representative at (877) 504-7250

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