Swing into 2022 with these

BACK TO OFFICE STRATEGIES

Introduction

In 2020, the top concern of HR leaders around the world was how to transition their workforce to a remote operation. The dire circumstances of the pandemic forced all of us to quickly rethink how and where work gets done. Individual contributors, managers, teams, and leaders all had to make significant adjustments. For people who relied on in-person work arrangements, it was pretty tricky.

"Often the reluctance to allow remote work has to do with a quite outdated concept of how managers need to manage—for instance, you need to be able to 'see' people to police that they are doing what they are meant to," according to Sarah Kaine, a professor from the University of Technology Sydney, in Transitioning Asia-Pacific to a New Normal of Work.

Nearly two years later, the question for businesses is now: How do we facilitate a positive return to the office as we head into 2022?

Before identifying how to facilitate a positive experience, it's essential to understand the employee sentiment about coming back to the office. A survey by McKinsey in January 2021 revealed that 52 percent of employees want a more flexible working model after the pandemic and about 30 percent of those surveyed said they would switch jobs if required to return to work fully onsite.

In the UK, a survey from CIPD indicates that the number of people working from home will double, from 18 percent before the pandemic to 37 percent post-pandemic. In China, the Great Place to Work Institute's Chief Operating Officer, Alicia Tung, predicts that in 10 years, the organization will operate with a 60/40 split of onsite/remote work.

As these data points illustrate, employers worldwide have new territory to navigate when considering how to get back to working in person during the ongoing pandemic. Organizations must be flexible and ready to respond as employees and employers learn what matters most during these uncertain times.

5 steps to take when planning a return to the office

This guide will share five steps you can take in planning for the return to working onsite and three essential elements to ensure you have an intelligent plan.

1. Assess employee sentiment about the return to work

There are many theories and projections about how people feel about returning to onsite work. Some research indicates people will look for another job rather than return to an office. Other reports suggest that people miss the camaraderie of an office and long to have some in-person connections with their colleagues. Only your employees can tell you what's true for them.

The first step in your return to office plan should involve sending a survey to assess employee opinions in your organization. A survey helps you keep your finger on the pulse while allowing for confidentiality. Include open-ended questions to encourage more open and nuanced communication in addition to the Likert scale and multiple-choice questions that will help you gather a general idea of what could work best for your employees.

The survey should cover topics such as:

- Experiences with remote work
- Process and communications that employees need
- Individual preferences for return to work
- Health and safety practices required for employee comfort at work

If you want a turn-key back to office work survey, check out our 19 thoroughly tested survey questions that you can use for your company.

2. Follow federal and state vaccine guidelines and mandates

When it comes to returning to the office during the new normal of the pandemic, vaccine guidelines and mandates should be a vital element in employers' plans. As the New York Times reported earlier this year, mandates are constantly evolving:

"The president said two new requirements would apply to businesses with 100 or more employees: They must require that workers get vaccinated against the coronavirus or be tested at least once a week, and they must give workers paid time off to receive the vaccine and recover from any side effects."

The president's mandate was blocked in court, but individual states and cities, like New York City, have instituted local vaccine mandates "for all private employers."

Whether pandemic-specific or general employment policies, employers must diligently update policies as federal and local regulations change. As an HR team, make sure you follow updates closely to ensure your organization complies with applicable local, national, and industry rules. Some legal experts also recommend that employers track employee vaccination status to ensure they have the necessary records if mandates are updated.

It's essential to document your vaccine and other policies, communicate with your teams about updates, and provide necessary training. Your efforts in this area will not only protect your people, but due diligence in managing your organization's policies will also reduce the risk of future legal hassles.

3. Adopt flexible work options for good

To survive the pandemic, organizations had to adopt flexible work options. Even leaders who place great value on "facetime" realized that successful work practices do not require people to be onsite. Some industries, roles, or operations may not be able to adopt a fully remote model, but don't let that stop you from considering creative, flexible work options.

American Express is an example of a company that has embraced a creative approach in its flexible work options. They are allowing people—including those working hybrid, entirely virtual, and fully onsite—to work up to four weeks a year away from their primary worksite.

"Ultimately, our goal is to achieve the best of both worlds—recapturing the creativity, connections, collaboration and relationship building of working together in person, while also retaining the flexibility and progress we have made together in this virtual world," said their CEO in Amex Flex—Our New Way Of Working.

If you're looking for a way to attract and retain talent, it's important to consider how you can offer flexible work options. Without flexible options, your organization could be at risk for losing top talent. In a tight labor market, and during the "Great Resignation," HR professionals play a key role in helping employers attract and retain talent.

Devjani Mishra of Littler told HR Executive that existing employees will be raising requests for flexible work options, and job applicants will be asking about the same during the interview process. Rey Ramirez, co-founder of Thrive HR Consulting, estimates that companies miss out on 50 to 70 percent of candidates when they don't offer flexible work options.

Companies that adapt and embrace flexibility are demonstrating that they're listening to employees.

"A whopping 76 percent of employees say they want their company to make work permanently flexible, for example when it comes to things like schedule or location," according to The Great Work/Life Divide report.

As the BBC reports, there's no one right answer for what flexible work looks like. What works for one company may not work for another. Business needs for the return to working onsite will vary depending on sector, size, and structure. What's essential is that each organization tries to think creatively about how to make work more flexible. Recent conversations about mental health, work-life balance, and burnout only emphasize the need for a new way of working.

4. Continue your use of technology

We have seen a dramatic shift in people using tech to help them communicate from remote locations. Slack, MS Teams, project management tools, and HR tech tools have helped employees and managers maintain communications and retain a sense of organizational norms. As a result of being remote, companies have also started thinking of digital ways to innovate the employee experience.

"We've used Miro, for example—a virtual whiteboard solution—to brainstorm ideas and capture thoughts and feedback," a brand and event manager told the BBC. "To maintain our company culture, we've also had to become very creative over Slack—we've had Paddlers create custom music videos, and we've paid to have Cameos [personalized videos made by celebrities] done for us to celebrate big milestones."

Now is not the time to ignore the digital strides you've made! As you plan for and adopt an approach to returning to work in person, keep using the tools that worked well. Even if some people come back to the office while some still work from home, take advantage of the ways technology improves how work gets done in your organization.
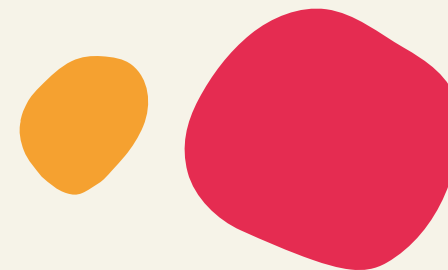
5. Prepare for changes due to time away

Whether after a pandemic or a leave of absence, people must adjust when they return to the office. As part of your plan, don't forget the elements related to personal interactions. After time away, those personal connections can be some of the most challenging for people to navigate when they return.

"People with even a hint of social anxiety or shyness before the pandemic have generally not been troubled by staying home and working remotely— and may feel relieved not to deal with in-person interactions," Margaret Wehrenberg, psychologist and author of "Pandemic Anxiety: Fear, Stress, and Loss in Traumatic Times," told CNBC Make It. "Going back to their environment will be very hard," she says.

As people return to the office, make employee morale a top priority. After a significant in-person absence, people may be struggling with a sense of disconnection and even disengagement. They may be struggling with new demands or the desire to maintain some flexibility between their work and home life.

Preparation is critical for these challenges—ensure that you have programs and policies, such as flexible work options, mental health benefits, and team-building activities in place to support your people.

To help your people navigate a return after time away, also look at your communication approach. If you're switching to a hybrid work model, what parameters do you have in place for how people communicate with each other? Similarly, in what ways will you reinforce collaboration and ensure everyone has the tools they need to partner? Finally, if the return to work is after tumultuous times, consider what team-building methods you might be able to use to build trust within the "new" work environment.

3 keys to a smart return to office plan

It's not enough to tackle these five critical topics. How you build your office work plan is just as essential. Planning for that return requires more than a mask, social distancing, and an unlimited supply of hand sanitizer.

For a successful return, your organization must be transparent, encourage employee input, and respect the needs of your entire workforce.

Adopt a transparent approach

In the past, it may have been acceptable to simply state the next steps. But after so much uncertainty in recent years, people want as much information as possible.

"Workplace transparency is proven to breed long-term success," according to Glassdoor. "Implemented properly, increased transparency creates trust between employers and employees, helps improve morale, lowers job-related stress (which is especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic), while increasing employee happiness and boosting performance. And being transparent costs nothing, which gives it an exceptional ROI."

As you make decisions about returning to the office, adopt a transparent approach. Share the what, as well as the why, behind company decisions. There's no need to over-communicate, but with a few simple explanations, you can reassure people and help them understand your rationale. Even if they disagree, they will have the information they need to move forward.

Request employee input

As you plan a return to onsite work, it's critical to reach out to employees and ask for their feedback.

"There is an enormous disconnect between what employees and employers want," a global head of marketing told Forbes. "The vast majority of people surveyed currently working remotely do not want to return to physical offices, but their employers are going to ask or mandate that they do."

Important information and insights arise when you ask the people on the frontline. You may not be able to meet every request or make every desired change.

Something as simple as asking for employee input shows you're doing your best to make the return to the office a positive and comfortable experience.

Respect the perspectives of your entire workforce

Every organization has its own nuanced workforce characteristics. Whether those characteristics come from job roles, generations, geographic location, worksite type, or all of the above, your return to office plan needs to respect and address each perspective.

"By engaging in a dialogue with employees, leaders can gain valuable insight about their concerns and challenges, establish trust, foster engagement and build a stronger sense of community," said Patrick Hyland, Ph.D., Director of Research and Development at Mercer, an HR and benefits consultancy.

It's common for leaders to not fully understand the day-to-day realities of a job because they're not in the employees' shoes. For a return to office work to be successful across the organization, it's essential to understand the perspectives of each group.

A project manager may feel excited about a hybrid work opportunity. At the same time, an administrative assistant may be concerned about duplicative work to set up meetings for in-person and online audiences. Look for the common denominators in employee experiences and the unique identifiers to ensure your plans represent as many perspectives as possible.

Conclusion

Not every organization will reinvent how work gets done as part of their return to office strategy. However, it's essential to consider how your company can build an even better workplace and work experience for your people.

Onsite, hybrid work, and remote HR leaders can drive culture, two-way communication, engagement, performance, and compensation—all while streamlining and automating their processes. While it may feel like a huge hurdle to envision a new model, keep in mind there are potentially some great benefits to productivity and employee wellbeing resulting from a thoughtful return to office work plan. Powered by the right HR tech, overcoming your back to office work hurdles becomes that much easier.
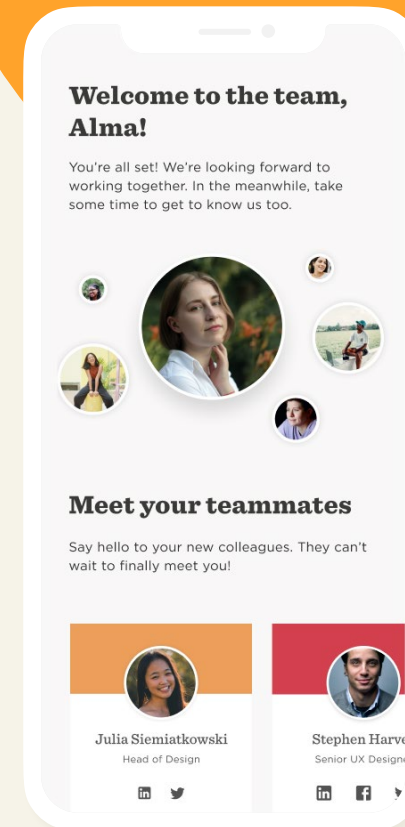
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bob harnesses the powerful combination of data and human factors to give HR leaders, managers, and individual contributors the predictive and analytical understanding they need to make better people decisions in our new world of work.

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Welcome to the team, Alma!

You're all set! We're looking forward to working together. In the meanwhile, take some time to get to know us too.

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Say hello to your new colleagues. They can't wait to finally meet you!

Julia Siemiatkowski
Head of Design

Stephen Harve
Senior UX Designe

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To learn more about Hibob and our data-driven tools, get in touch with us at

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