



**RETURNING TO THE WORKPLACE:  
BUILDING A DETAILED PLAN TO RETURN  
YOUR EMPLOYEES AND GUESTS TO THE  
WORKPLACE IN A COVID-19 WORLD**



## Overview

As of July 2020, there are nearly four million positive cases of COVID-19 in the United States, with over 140,000 deaths. Understandably, the pandemic has brought significant fear, uncertainty, and doubt to the workplace. We've been bombarded with terms like "the new normal," "PPE," "social distancing," "reopening the economy," and more. Given the amount of noise and distraction around the very real effects of the pandemic, how does a business or other organization ensure they are making the right decisions regarding when to return employees to the workplace, how to do it safely, and what a return to work plan should look like?



The goal of this Whitepaper is to provide a foundation for building and executing on a Return to Work Plan. By following the points detailed in this document, any business or organization can create a comprehensive plan to safely return employees, customers, or any other visitors to the workplace.

Navigating through the hyperbole and news stories of the day can be exhausting. We recommend relying on science and sound fundamentals of Environmental Health and Safety, which are the basis for this document.

## LEGAL DISCLAIMER

This document is intended to provide learnings, information, and resources to help organizations build a plan to safely return to the workplace. To ensure legal compliance, every organization should consult with legal counsel. YellowBird does not assume liability or responsibility. This information is provided as is with no warranty or other legal claims.

## Summary

This document details each item in our Return to Work Checklist, as well as providing further information and supporting resources. The key elements of a strong Return to Work plan are as follows:

1. COVID-19 Response Team and Training
2. Limiting return of employees to the workplace
3. Onsite Testing of Airflow and Surfaces
4. Screening Process for anyone entering the workplace
5. Contact Tracing and Stay at Home Plans
6. Social Distancing and PPE Plan
7. Sanitization
8. Communication Plan
9. Recurring Assessment
10. Office Shutdown Plan

## COVID-19 Team and Training

Setting up a team specifically to address Return to Work and the COVID-19 response in general is critical to ensure a successful return to the workplace. The team should have an overall leader, with individual leaders for each component of the plan. Set up the team as soon as possible, and before completing and rolling out the plan. The initial responsibility of the team will be to ensure the plan is complete and covers both the standard items that need to be addressed, as well as those unique to your organization.

Ideally, all departments are represented in the team. There may not be perfect alignment between the components of the plan and your organization structure, and that's ok. Ensuring completeness is more important than perfect alignment. It is also not necessary for the highest ranking member of each department be the COVID-19 team member. Each organization may have their own specific criteria for selecting team members, but in general the team should have expertise in the plan components and a thorough understanding of the department processes, tools and technologies, infrastructure, people, logistics, etc.

## Returning Employees to the Workplace

Employees should be returned to the office in a phased approach, and where possible, continue staggered work schedules to reduce the total number of people in the office at any given time. Determining the ideal number of employees in the workplace for each shift should be based on size, layout, feasibility of installing guards and separators throughout the workspace, and general social distancing rules.

Prioritizing the order of returning employees will be unique to each organization. The order should be based on type of work performed, business criticality of role, ability to perform work remotely, current health of employees, results of most recent tests, and any other human factors. Respect for employees' mental and physical health, as well as creating a safe and healthy environment, should be the most important factor in all decisions and planning.

And finally, consider permanent full or partial remote work for any employees who can effectively perform their duties in a remote situation. An important learning from the pandemic, has been seeing that many more jobs can be performed remotely than previously believed. If you can deliver on your business goals without returning all employees full time in the office, you will create a much safer workplace for those who must be on-site.

The CDC website is a valuable resource that should be consulted for further information on employee health and guidelines for returning to the workplace.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html>

In addition to the CDC, OSHA has similar guidelines available.

<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/>

## On-Site Testing of Airflow and Surfaces

An important and often overlooked element of a Return to Work Plan is testing of airflow and surfaces. Per the CDC and many other sources, the primary method of transmission of coronavirus is via airborne droplets and aerosol. It is therefore critical to ensure your HVAC system is adequately cycling air through the office, as well confirming usage of the proper filters. An efficient and properly configured HVAC system can efficiently remove airborne coronavirus.

The other critical testing procedure for an effective return to work plan is surface testing for COVID-19. While the primary method of transmission is airborne, there is still a possibility of touching infected surfaces, then touching your nose or mouth and transferring the virus. While aerosol-based viruses tend to hang around in the air until contacted, evaporated, or cycled through a filter, droplets often deposit on the floor, furniture, or other surfaces. These droplets, with the virus which can survive for hours, are the source of surface-based transmission.

Additionally, surface testing can also prove or disprove the presence of coronavirus in your workplace. Taking a baseline before sanitization, then regularly as you return employees to the office can show the efficacy of your sanitization plan, as well as risk to anyone who entered the location of a positive surface test.

## Screening Process

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) updated its guidance on April 23 on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and coronavirus, explaining that employers may screen employees for COVID-19. This includes both performing COVID-19 testing, as well as taking employees' temperature. Any mandatory medical test must be job-related and consistent with business necessity, the EEOC explained.

"Applying this standard to the current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, employers may take steps to determine if employees entering the workplace have COVID-19 because an individual with the virus will pose a direct threat to the health of others," the agency stated. Consequently, an employer may administer COVID-19 testing to employees before they enter the workplace.

Based on this ruling from the EEOC, the Return to Work plan should include provisions for screening employees as they enter the building. Temperature checks should happen daily for anyone entering the workplace, while employees would ideally be tested for COVID-19 anywhere from daily to weekly. Testing more frequently than weekly may not be feasible, but each organization will have to find a cadence that works for them. This will be determined by budget, availability of tests, and several other factors.

<https://www.eeoc.gov>

## Contact Tracing and Stay at Home

After determining which employees will be brought back to the office, it is critical to have a policy requiring anyone who is feeling ill or exhibiting symptoms to stay home. Regardless of the role of the employee, it is not prudent to risk the health and availability of the rest of the organization for any one role. This includes senior management.

Even with extreme caution and a solid plan, there will be still be risk of an infected person coming into the workplace. If this occurs, the organization should immediately start a contact tracing protocol. Who did the infected individual come in contact with while in the office? What parts of the office did they visit? Did they make contact with tools, equipment, furniture, etc?

## Social Distancing and PPE Plan

The most critical element of the Return to Work plan will likely be based on the standard recommendations we've heard since the early days of the Pandemic. This includes social distancing, washing and/or disinfecting hands regularly, and wearing a mask. These are tried and true methods of controlling the spread of virus, dating back as far back as the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic.

These measures work, and will be the front line defense against the spread of COVID-19. The office must be reviewed and segmented into the proper configuration to allow for 6 feet minimum between employees. Additionally, sanitization stations should be provided throughout the workplace. Additionally, clear panels and other dividers should be used when possibly. And finally, requiring masks for anyone entering the workplace, for the duration of their time on-site, will complete this frontline defense.

## Sanitization

Before employees or anyone else can return to the office, a thorough cleaning of the office, using approved cleaning products, must be performed. Consider bringing in a certified Industrial Hygienist to validate the sanitization products, as they can review and determine what products will be most effective at killing the virus.

Once the correct products are identified, perform a thorough one-time cleaning, then schedule recurring sessions to keep the office virus free. In order to provide a baseline

before the initial cleaning, surface testing should be performed in high traffic areas. This will indicate if the virus is present on any surfaces in the workplace. Additional testing can be done after each cleaning session to determine the effectiveness of the sanitization.

In addition to cleaning all surfaces throughout the workplace, the HVAC system must be addressed. As previously mentioned, the latest research has indicated that the primary method of transmission is airborne droplets and aerosol. It is therefore critical to prioritize the HVAC system and any additional airflow or air quality devices. The earlier section addresses airflow and air quality testing, but this part of the plan addresses using the right filters, as well as cleaning and/or replacing regularly.

## Communication Plan

A key deliverable from the COVID-19 Response Team is a detailed communications plan. This plan should cover who receives notifications and other communications, how those recipients are grouped, how the content is created, reviewed, and approved, as well as any other details required to clearly and consistently communicate across the entire organization.

The communication plan will be required throughout the remainder of the pandemic and include updates going forward. If you have a Risk Management department, and/or a Business Continuity Plan, the communication plan can be rolled into the overall contingency planning of the organization.

## Recurring Assessment

After the plan has been executed and employees are brought back to the office, there will be additional assessments and actions required to keep the workplace safe. These recurring assessments should be documented as part of the initial planning, including the frequency and scope of work. Additionally, budget should be considered when scoping the recurring assessments, as it may not be feasible to perform the entire plan monthly. However, some level of cleaning, testing, and review must happen on a recurring basis.

## Office Shutdown Plan

The final section of the plan should be a detailed strategy and response, ready to execute if there is a second wave, or other spike in cases that would require another lockdown. This will also serve as the Remote (Work From Home) plan for any future event that would require offices to shut down and employees to work from home. Most, if not all organizations will have already worked through this process when the original Stay at Home orders were issued in March. Obviously, this helps tremendously, as all the necessary actions took place and were hopefully documented and formalized already.

The goal for this section of the plan is to pull together the processes, documentation, and other learnings from the previous office shutdown, to compile into a proactive and comprehensive plan. If future circumstances should require another lockdown, this plan will allow the organization to be fully prepared with little to no lost productivity.