

# BACK-TO- OFFICE GUIDE

FOR HR, MANAGERS, AND EMPLOYEES



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# Introduction

As the economy begins reopening in the [aftermath of COVID-19](#) shutdowns, HR leaders, managers, and employees face uncertainty on how to safely return to the workplace. In this new normal, the top priority must remain the health and safety of all team members. Implementing measures that maintain a secure working environment and effectively communicating these measures will also build employee confidence. Coming back to work can be stressful but with proper planning and dialogue, HR and managers can help teams navigate the transition while [minimizing disruptions](#).

Many businesses urgently need to resume operations, but it will likely take some time to strike a balance between output and wellbeing. Working together, managers, human resources leaders, and team members can make coming back to work safer while enhancing connectivity and collaboration.

# What can HR do?

In times of crisis, HR is indispensable to formulating and executing a management plan that secures vital business assets and processes while preparing employees to survive the crisis and thrive once it is contained. In this sense, HR has a big part to play in planning the return to work from COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders, both in setting up the business ahead of employees coming back and in maintaining ongoing safety protocol and outbreak preparedness.

## Back office procedures

Reopening workplaces will be contingent on being able to observe social distancing and hygiene practices. Most working environments are unsuited to COVID-19 restrictions, so before bringing employees back, it will first be necessary to reconfigure the space.

## 1. Know your site's regulations

It is unlikely that restrictions will be lifted in unison across different regions or even across different sectors. Before bringing people back to work, it is first important to understand each site's regulations. Ensuring compliance will likely require keeping up to date with shifting regulatory changes and planning for a variety of potential scenarios. Both the [CDC](#) and [OSHA](#) have released comprehensive guidance to businesses reopening during COVID-19, including industry-specific guidelines.

## 2. Prepare the office

Once you have a better understanding of what regulations apply to your workplace, steps must be taken to prepare the location for returning employees. Thoroughly clean and disinfect the facilities, paying special attention to high-traffic areas such as stairwells or elevators, dining areas, shared spaces, and bathrooms. Sanitize surfaces that are touched frequently such as doorknobs or light switches. Improve ventilation by installing an air filtration system or keeping windows open.

Some workplaces are not conducive to social distancing measures or outbreak-preparedness. If this is the case, evaluate moving to an alternate location that can accommodate a distanced workforce or unexpected closures.

## 3. Re-map the seating arrangement

Social distancing requires a minimum of two meters/ six feet between people. For businesses to be able to maintain this restriction, HR should be proactive in reconfiguring individual seating arrangements and shared spaces.

First, assess what seats can be used while maintaining distance gauge capacity. This will be the maximum number of people that can safely work in the space simultaneously. Next, stagger workstations and indicate distances clearly, for example with floor markings or carpets. Finally, consider installing transparent shields to further protect against the virus.

One company that is making news with its [Six-Foot Office](#) is the Dutch real-estate firm Cushman & Wakefield. This concept includes not only office set-up, but also recommendations for traffic flow, rules of conduct, and virus-safe facility design.

#### 4. Hybrid solutions to maintain distance

Bringing large numbers of employees back to work at the same time is not a possibility considering the high risk of spreading the virus, so managing who comes in and when will be integral to your recovery strategy. These arrangements will likely be long term making flexibility the key to maintaining both morale and safety.

Many employees have moved to [work from home](#); keeping team members remote will reduce interaction and therefore risk. Furthermore, the continued chance of lockdowns will be more disruptive if your workforce is in-house, rather than at home. If it isn't feasible to keep employees home, stagger how many people return to work and structure schedules to keep numbers low.

##### **Alternatives to reducing of the number of employees in the workplace:**

- Set fixed capsules of employees who work in the office on the same days and times to reduce exposure.
- Set daily shifts staggering when individual employees come and leave to prevent large groups congregating.
- Rotate groups of employees between WFH and working in the office, ideally with set capsules.

#### 5. Recalculate meeting room capacity

It will likely be a very long time before large gatherings of people are permitted, making this the right time to reconsider what meetings are important and who really needs to be there. For a number of years, [surveys have revealed](#) that many managers and employees believe that meetings distract from creativity and collaboration. With the coronavirus kibosh on face-to-face conferences, carefully consider what your meeting room's capacity is and how to best use it.

Ideally, keep in-person meetings under eight people and maintain distance at all times. If your meeting room cannot safely hold the number of people and remote conferencing isn't an option, find an off-site location that can accommodate. Wherever your people are getting together, ensure proper hygiene and cleaning both before and after the meet-up. For larger meetings, stick to video conferencing. This also remedies the challenge of coordinating a meeting time between team members that might have different capsules or shifts. Finally, even if all of the meeting members are in the office, encourage meeting virtually from individual workstations rather than congregating in one room.

# Front office preparations

Once the workplace is prepped and primed for the return to work, the next step is to ensure that they'll be able to maintain proper hygiene during the workday. Promoting socially responsible practices will keep people safe and reduce the risk of virus-related closures.

## 1. Put up posters communicating hygiene rules in the office

Communicate hygiene rules by putting up posters with clear guidelines at multiple locations, such as elevators or dining areas. Include basic recommendations such as maintaining distance, washing hands regularly, wearing masks and gloves in common areas, and sanitizing workstations before and after use.

Helpful tips on how to navigate shared spaces can also be included, for example how to use the kitchen or meeting rooms while staying safe.



## STAYING SAFE AND HEALTHY AT HIBOB SITES

1. Stay on top of personal hygiene! Wash your hands regularly and use an alcohol-based disinfectant.
2. Keep your nose and mouth covered. Based on government regulations, for protection of ourselves and others, we are all required to wear a mask over our mouth and nose.
3. When in public spaces, we recommend using disposable gloves.
4. Adhere to social distancing regulations. Maintain a 6-foot/2-meter distance between each other.

### Maintaining a safe personal space

- Minimize time spent in public areas, and pay attention to the distance between you and other employees.
- Eat at your personal desk using disposable plates and cutlery.
- In the kitchens, we will stock individual packages for the food and use only disposable plates and cutlery.
- Avoid using shared appliances in the kitchen work area, such as the microwave. If you must work in the kitchen, wear gloves and disinfect the areas you used with 70% alcoholic wipes.
- Disinfect your personal space with 70% alcoholic wipes before you start working.

### Conducting safe meetings

- Avoid face-to-face meetings with a large number of people. If you need to conduct a large meeting, conduct the meeting over a video call, and participate from your personal desk or from home.
- Avoid any get-together or meeting that includes more than eight people.

### Fever protocols

- You are required to check your temperature before you come into the office and report it to your office manager or on a dedicated application.
- You should not come to the office if your temperature is higher than 38° Celsius/100° Fahrenheit or if you are not feeling well.

Please follow these health and safety requirements to keep you and your colleagues safe and healthy.

**LET'S GET THROUGH THIS TOGETHER!**



## 2. Keep sanitizing equipment available

To encourage compliance, make sure that sanitizing products and equipment are readily available. This will include stocking masks and gloves, 70% alcohol cleaning wipes, and hand sanitizer. If employees require PPE, then this should also be provided. Making it easier to maintain hygiene will take the pressure off of employees and reduce the risk of spreading or contracting the virus.

## 3. Implement temperature checks

As the economy reopens, one thing that everyone is becoming accustomed to is temperature checks. It's vital to communicate the importance of temperature checks to employees. Ideally, you should trust your employees to check their temperature at home and report if they have a fever. With some companies developing self-reporting mobile apps, this process can promote privacy, individual responsibility, and mutual trust while protecting employee wellbeing.

If it is necessary to check temperatures at work, this should still be done in private and with confidentiality. It is unlikely that every workplace will have medical professionals on hand to take temperatures, so delegating this important task and providing training will also require some forethought. Personal protective equipment and a no-touch thermometer are critical to keeping this practice safe and respectful to all involved. If an employee is found to have a fever, this should be kept confidential and handled with sensitivity.

For a detailed guide to employee temperature checks and other hygiene protocols, look at [SHRM's](#) comprehensive directive to employers.





#### 4. Keep shared spaces safe

The highest risk of virus infection is when people gather in close proximity to one another. To ensure that shared spaces can safely remain in use, take steps to allow distancing and proper hygiene. Reorganize seating and layouts to keep people six-feet apart and consider setting up shifts or time slots for when individuals can use these spaces. Leave time in between shifts for sanitizing, for example wiping down kitchen surfaces or meeting rooms.

With all of these measures, the main goal is to reduce the number of people in one place at the same time and keep the number of exposures to a minimum. Consider maintaining capsules both for working hours and for rotating through shared spaces to minimize exposure. This includes using elevators, stairwells, and other high-traffic areas.

#### 5. Determine kitchen and food guidelines

One place where people tend to gather is in the kitchen or common eating area. With high traffic and a high risk of contact, clearly communicate how employees should prepare food and eat in the office. Here are some tips for keeping lunchtime safe:

- If you provide food, switch to individually packaged snacks or meals
- Set up shifts for break times
- Discourage sharing of food
- Encourage bringing food from home
- Provide disposables (ecological products are readily available and are not significantly more expensive than plastic)
- Remove any equipment that cannot be safely used, for example, water coolers or coffee percolators, and install machines that allow individual use without touching
- Encourage employees to eat at their workstations or outdoors rather than sitting together

Keeping kitchen areas hygienic is vital to maintaining a safe working environment, so make sure surfaces are sanitized between use.

## 6. Cleaning arrangements

Organizations returning to regular operations will need to reassess cleaning arrangements and prioritize sanitizing protocol. Provide cleaning staff with protective equipment and virus-specific cleaning supplies, and emphasize thoroughly cleaning high-touch surfaces such as handrails, elevator buttons, and light switches.

Most workplaces will not have cleaning staff working throughout the day, so encourage employees to take measures to sanitize their workstations, shared equipment like printers, and any areas they come into contact with by supplying alcohol wipes. Employees should also be encouraged to wash their hands often. With routine disinfecting and adequate prevention, teams prevent the spread of COVID-19.



# What can managers do?


As organizations return employees to work, managers will carry a lot of responsibility for maintaining healthy work culture while promoting hygiene. Making sure your people are properly informed and prepared to come back to the office is essential to boost confidence and reduce uncertainty.

## Communicate strategy and bear in mind employee safety

Keeping as many employees as possible working remotely is the best way to keep them safe, so review operations before determining which staff is essential to bring back to work. Once this is decided, clearly communicate regulations and outline how these are being facilitated to take the burden of compliance off of employees.

Being recalled to work can be stressful, so be considerate and flexible when strategizing your back to work plan. Here are some things you can include in your strategy to keep your team safe and productive:

- Let people come back to work in stages and consider bringing volunteers first. Find out which employees are comfortable coming back to the office using surveys or by speaking to individual workers.
- Bring your team back to work in capsules or shifts. The hybrid model reduces contact between people and gives employees time to adjust after months of WFH.
- Prioritize keeping higher risk employees home. This will include older individuals, immunocompromised individuals, and those who suffer from asthma. If it is necessary to recall vulnerable employees, take [added precautionary measures](#) to protect them from exposure to the virus.
- With childcare and schools in many areas still closed, many of your employees who are parents will need extra consideration. If possible, let people with kids still at home, work remotely, and with flexible hours.
- Postpone all non-essential business travel and consider offering local transportation to and from work to reduce the number of people using public transit.



For employees returning to work, communicating all protocols will help your people prepare for what lies ahead and take necessary precautionary steps to keep their colleagues safe. Leverage your tech deck to get real-time feedback from your team and adjust back to work strategies accordingly. Keeping lines of communication open will be essential to maintaining collaboration, connectivity, and output.

### **Communicate changes in advance**

Managers should position themselves as sources of accurate and timely information. Maintain regular communication and include details of any changes to work protocol. A [three-phased approach](#) has been suggested in many countries, so sharing details of how your organization will roll out their own plan and keep people safe is essential to mitigating anxiety. Encourage employees to voice their fears or concerns and take the time to address them with sensitivity.

The workplace is a focal point of sensitization to preventative health measures, so conveying accurate information and precautionary regulations can actively reduce the spread of COVID-19. The virus will most likely be with us for a long time, causing intermittent disruptions to regular operations. As much as possible, communicate any changes in advance to reduce stress and uncertainty. Keeping your team agile and prepared will increase resilience and protect productivity despite the constantly shifting landscape.

Another important point to communicate is what health services or assistance are available to employees transitioning back to work. By providing detailed guidance to team members who might be struggling or are fearful to come back to work, managers will signal a culture of care and flexibility.

## Define the next checkpoint

Let employees know what to expect down the line by communicating a detailed step-by-step plan for bringing people back to work with defined milestones. Of course, these milestones will depend on continued recovery from the virus and on government regulations, but any proposed benchmarks should be communicated as early as possible.

For example, in the first phase, only 20% of employees will be brought to work in shifts. This phase will end after a predetermined amount of time, at which point an additional 30% of employees will be brought back. Even though lockdowns are being lifted, it remains critical to prevent crowding in workplaces, so any strategy should make this the top priority.

Employees should be given advance notice if they are being recalled so that they can make arrangements or communicate if they are uncomfortable coming back to the office. Some employees may prefer to work from home and may choose to take unpaid leave if working remotely isn't an option. This will also give managers time to find alternate staffing arrangements or adjust schedules to accommodate those who will not return to the office out of concern for contracting the virus, or for other reasons.

Other information that should be communicated clearly and in advance includes what protective equipment employees will be required to wear, how temperature checks will take place, and details of any shifts or capsules, including arrival, departure, and break times.

## Listen to your employees

Articulating your organization's back to work strategy clearly and in advance doesn't mean that people won't have questions and concerns. [Recent research](#) has found that close to 60% of employees surveyed are fearful of contracting COVID-19 if they return to work. Managers should take employee concerns seriously and not dismiss them.

As much as possible, let employees decide when they are ready to come back to prevent unnecessary stress and tension. In particular, if an employee shares that they are vulnerable to the virus, take additional steps to keep them safe. If a team member expresses that they are struggling with mental health issues, guide them to appropriate resources and let them work from home if possible.

## Back to the office survey

While it is essential to listen to employees, it is equally important to respect their privacy and maintain confidentiality. Keep your finger on the pulse without putting people on the spot by using surveys that deliver real-time feedback to inform your back to work

strategy. Your back to work survey can include open-ended questions to encourage more open and nuanced communication in addition to Likert scale and multiple-choice questions.

### Before bringing your team back to the office:

1. Ask how the WFH experience has been for them and gauge whether employees feel they can continue working from home productively. This is also an opportunity to ask what your employees need in order to thrive either at home or in the office.
2. Determine what fears and challenges people are facing as the crisis winds down, both generally and specifically related to coming back to work. This may include asking whether employees are comfortable leaving their families yet, how fearful they are of infection, and whether they will be able to comply with hygiene requirements such as temperature checks and wearing face guards.
3. Assess whether employees are satisfied with management and workflow. This should include inquiring how available managers are to their people and how comfortable employees are approaching their managers.

4. Finally, get an overall understanding of employee morale by asking if they are confident that the organization will recover from this crisis and what they like or dislike about their jobs.

A back-to-work survey can help HR determine whether employees are prepared to come back to work after an extended period of working from home and which employees to bring back first. Support your people and help them feel more comfortable by using survey insights to guide your organization's recovery plan.

## **Want to gauge your team's feelings about the COVID-19 period?**

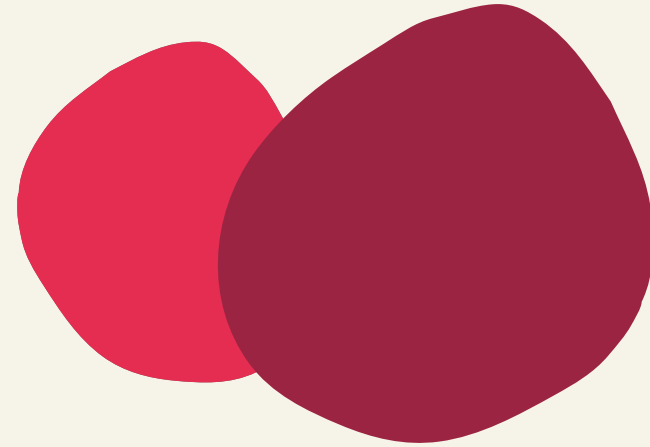
Check out our survey questions [here!](#)

For more information about conducting surveys in bob, [click here.](#)

# Maintaining culture with the new office norm

Corporate culture is [integral to employee engagement and satisfaction](#). This means that while ironing out practical logistics is vital to protecting employees from the spread of coronavirus, the human component of back to work strategies is equally important.

Keeping your team motivated and rebuilding morale under these difficult circumstances is integral to your organization's success. Some employees may be afraid to return; others may have been terminated or resigned and won't be returning at all. Employees may have been sick or may know someone who was sick. Others may have lost a loved one. Invest in communicating with your team and listening to their concerns with sensitivity. Maintain clarity of purpose, clearly detailing all regulations and



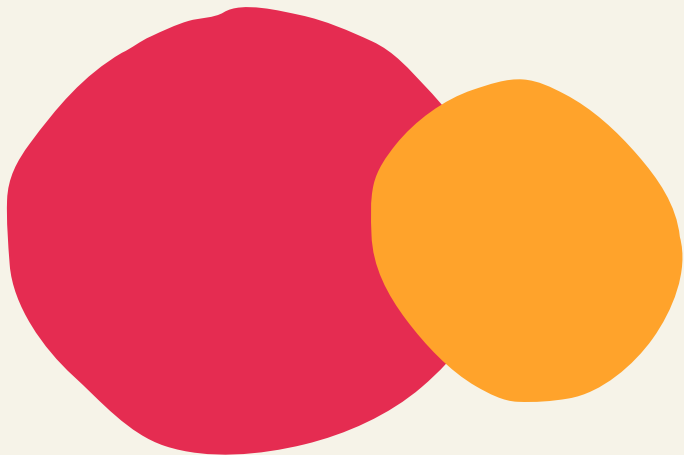
precautions will instill confidence. Whenever possible, let employees work from home, but keep your team collaborating and communicating by employing digital tools.

The hybrid workplace is here to stay. Business leaders can facilitate this shift while keeping their people working as a team by communicating, staying flexible, and being sensitive to individual circumstances. Employees that feel heard and respected will take a more active part in putting your organization on the right path to recovery, so prioritize people over short-term productivity.



# What can teams do?

Returning to work after months of sheltering in place can be scary. As economies start to reopen, workers around the world are acclimating to a strange new reality of temperature checks, social distancing, and protective equipment. This may seem overwhelming, but with compliance and consideration, these practices will become less strange over time.



## Communicate your needs and concerns

In the lead-up to coming back to the office, communicate with your manager or HR if you have specific concerns or requirements so that adequate accommodations can be taken. This may include a lack of childcare during business hours or high-risk status that prevents you from being in public places. Whatever it is, reach out to relevant business leaders to discuss solutions and alternatives well in advance. Be honest about what you can reasonably take on in terms of workload and when you will be able to begin coming to work. Articulate any changes in your status or health immediately to prevent disruptions and over-burdening other team members.

## Maintain hygiene

Once you are back in the office, it is your responsibility to promote the health and safety of your colleagues by maintaining proper hygiene and distancing requirements. Here are some of the practices you should get used to if you are going back to work:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water
  - Bring your own food and drinks to work
  - Use 70% (or higher!) alcohol hand sanitizer after touching surfaces
  - Avoid touching your face
  - Sneeze or cough into a tissue, or the inside of your elbow
  - Sanitize your workstation and frequently used items
  - Wear protective equipment including masks and gloves when in public, in shared spaces, and on public transit
  - Take your temperature before leaving the house and stay home if you have a fever or don't feel well
  - Stick to your shift or capsule according to the schedules set up by management and HR
- Take the stairs if you can Combating the spread of COVID-19 is a shared responsibility. Each of us should do our part in reducing the risk of infection, especially for more vulnerable members of our communities. Communicate any concerns you may have before going back to work and adhere to organizational standards to protect yourself and those around you. Working together, managers, HR, and teams can get back to work safely and with renewed motivation and morale.

In 2020, it's time to make smarter decisions  
when it comes to your people and organization.

To learn more about hibob and our data-driven tools,  
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