

# How to Safely Reopen Offices in the Covid-19 Era



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Jul 1 · 4 min read



## Physical and behavioral changes are key

Every day, businesses across the country face a critical question: as states and cities lift Covid-19 restrictions, how can they safely reopen offices? From physical changes to shifts in employee behavior, there are many challenges to consider.

For example, because the virus spreads via airborne droplets, it's important to keep people distanced. One simple way to do this: allow them to continue working at home part of the time. "Reducing density is the best solution to lowering risk," says Antonio Argibay, AIA, managing principal, Meridian Design Associates, Architects, a New York City firm whose work includes design of commercial interiors. "You can have everyone at home on Friday and then have half work in the office on Monday and Wednesday and the other half, Tuesday and Thursday."

## Practical approaches to consider

Other common-sense methods include having installed higher quality filters (such as MERV 13 or better, which measures a filter's effectiveness) in mechanical or air conditioning systems to restrict the spread of particles as much as possible. "In older buildings, open the windows, and in newer buildings, run the ventilation system 24/7," suggests Argibay. "Set up barriers around desks to reduce airborne transmission if you are unable to limit the density due to the work you do."

Before opening, meet with the landlord to find out what they're doing for safety and don't hesitate to make suggestions. Confirm that your landlord has prevented bacteria or mold from growing in ventilation systems while the building was closed. Ask if they've added markings where people must stand in elevators and modified building doors for hands-free opening and closing. Be sure to relay the information you receive back to staff. On your end, hire a certified cleaning service to disinfect the entire office, from desks to phones to drawer pulls.

Additional steps include discouraging people from congregating in common areas. Limit kitchen use and urge employees to bring their own beverages and food. Observe social distancing guidelines in conference rooms by providing clear markings of acceptable distances. Avoid creating situations where your employees must touch common surfaces as much as possible. For example, keep as many doors as possible open and accessible during business hours and avoid sharing equipment such as copiers without proper sanitization.

Rely on electronic distribution as opposed to paper whenever feasible.



## **Adapt to the new normal**

Transparency is crucial to the success of your business' return strategy. Develop and distribute a detailed communications program that is focused on the new norms (e.g., wearing masks, temperature checks, frequent handwashing, distancing, etc.). Leader-run meetings demonstrating commitment to the new procedures are a good place to start. Let employees know what steps have been taken to protect their health. This can be done a few days before the office opens, so everyone is prepared, less anxious and ready to work when they enter the office.

Leaders should set the tone by modeling appropriate behavior, such as wearing masks, regularly washing their hands, and maintaining distance. Also, consider gentle reminders about smart behavior via intercom or company-wide emails every couple of hours. The Centers for Disease Control guidelines (<https://bit.ly/36XM6GQ>) offer additional recommendations for safe reopening.

### **A look ahead**

Until scientists develop a vaccine for Covid-19, fears regarding the disease will remain. That's why, as companies plan future workspaces, lower density design is essential. "Employees don't need to be in the office for eight hours a day, five days a week. Post-Covid-19 planning should account for less than 70 to 80 percent of employees there at one time," says Argibay. "And think about tangible tactics, such as installing barriers, and sensible layouts that allow employees to socially distance while not feeling 'cut off' from office life."

Keep in mind that while people enjoy the flexibility of working from home, employees will still have to go to the office for activities that are difficult to handle remotely and to collaborate with their team. "Since people will not be in every day, there's much less of a need for assigned offices and other workspaces. The future workplace will be less dense, and the worker will have an opportunity to choose their best working location for that day," says Argibay.

"This can be managed by creating 'neighborhoods' — logical placement of teams and sub-departments that establishes a sense of workplace community while avoiding the territorial considerations that have historically determined workplace design, predominantly seen in private, individual spaces. This flexible and community approach to the workplace goes hand-in-hand with circulation and ample access to amenity spaces. There must be enough room so workers can avoid crowding," notes Argibay.

Physical adjustments will take time, and in some cases, it will be a challenge for businesses to achieve these adaptations without relocation. Be sure to continuously communicate with landlords and staff, and make common-sense changes to office space now. In the long run, future office workplaces should provide the comfort necessary to ease employees' anxieties about returning to work and help them stay productive and healthy.



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