



Rebooting the Office

There is no doubt that the workplace will be forever changed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the height of the economic shutdown, Statistics Canada reported that 3.4 million Canadians were working from home. Canadian CIOs believe that work from home is here to stay, anticipating that over half of their employees will continue to do so one year from now.

Jabra GN

Employers face not only the challenge of developing a plan to safely reopen the office. They must also begin to reimagine the future of work in this new environment.

In short, it is time to “reboot” the office.

The reboot will affect everything, not just physical office space, but also technology, people and policies. It is an opportunity to make the workplace better.

No one has all the answers in these uncertain times. Our goal is to raise key considerations and provide some insights to help as you enter this next phase of the crisis.

Deciding when (or whether) to reopen the office

When is the right time to start moving back to the office? Clearly, any consideration is dependent on the health of the community and any local restrictions in place. But, just because you can reopen, doesn't necessarily mean you should.

Employers have a duty to provide a safe and healthy workplace. “The return to the office will probably be more difficult than the move to work from home,” said Paula Allen, Senior Vice-President, Research, Analytics and Innovation, with the human resources firm, Morneau Shepell. Allen recommends that employers carefully consider whether it is necessary to have people in the office or whether the work can continue to be done from home for the time being.

“This is an emotional situation,” said Allen. “Put as much power as possible in the hands of employees to decide, based on their individual circumstances.” Allen also suggests that organizations should seek external advice before opening the office and that they should start opening slowly only after a solid plan is in place and fully communicated.

THE PHYSICAL OFFICE SPACE

Reopening the office:

Prior to reopening, employers must prepare a detailed reopening plan that focuses on the health and safety of the workers. The plan should be developed by a workplace team, drawing from provincial health and safety regulations as well as COVID guidelines issued by all levels of government.

At its core, the new workplace layout was described as the “six-foot office,” by commercial realtor Cushman and Wakefield/Stevenson in Winnipeg in a CBC interview. The six main principles are: prepare the building, prepare the workforce, control access, create a social distancing plan, reduce touch points, increase cleaning and communicate for confidence.

“ Going out of the office was easy because we were pushing people out of a burning building. Now, we’re asking people to move back into a building that is still smoldering.

— Paula Allen, Morneau Shepell

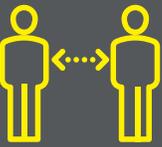
Pay special attention to places where people congregate, such as the coffee area, advised Dr. Lynora Saxinger, an infectious diseases specialist and associate professor of microbiology and immunology at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. “This is where people tend to forget good habits.

Employers should also keep in mind that the workday begins with getting to the office, said several CIOs at an ITWC roundtable. Managers may need to find ways to accommodate workers who may not be comfortable with public transportation.

Reimagining the office:

While many people will prefer to work from home at least some of the time, others see the workplace as essential for creative collaboration and staff development.

ARE YOU READY TO RETURN TO THE OFFICE? THINGS TO CONSIDER:

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|  <p>Physical Distancing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit entrance and exit points • Spacing of two meters between workstations and seating areas, plus physical barriers • Control traffic flow with arrows indicating directions. Remove surplus furniture to create wider passageways | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit entrance and exit points • Post maximum capacity for meeting rooms • Post signs about physical distancing, hand sanitizing and mask requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track who is in the office and when • Reservation/tracking system for work station use | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove all communal and personal items. • Reduce touch points /Install touchless equipment. • Review ventilation and air filtration systems/ windows |
| |  <p>Access Controls</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limits on the number of employees on site • Consider staggered and flexible work hours |  <p>Hygiene</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sanitizers, wipes and masks (and any other necessary personal protective equipment) available • Arrange increased office cleaning and disinfection |  <p>Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult, share and discuss safety plans with employees frequently |

“In the future, people will come in to work because they want to, not because they have to,” said Steve Delfino, Vice President, Corporate Marketing & Product Management at Teknion Corporation. Kathryn Roche, VP Workplace Consulting, with commercial real estate firm JLL agreed. “People will be in the office to connect, be seen, socialize and to feel a sense of belonging,” she said. Prior to the pandemic, a study by JLL showed that employees spend only about 30 percent of their day at their desks.

Roche predicts that the office will become an agile, collaborative work environment with no assigned seating, except for those that have difficulty working from home. “Big meeting rooms are done,” said Delfino. “The office will be transformed into a series of smaller collaborative spaces. At this point in time, Delfino suggests that employers should “plan for an uncertain future with open-ended office design solutions.”

TECHNOLOGY

Reopening the office:

The first priority is to investigate how technology can enhance workplace health and safety. A system to track the number of people in the office at any given time may be helpful for large employers, suggested Jean-François Landriault, the co-owner and Executive Sales Director for XAV Solution. There should also be a booking system for desks and meeting rooms that also ensures these spaces are sanitized after use. To turn meeting rooms into contactless environments, QR codes or wireless connections to phones and laptops should be set up to control the equipment.



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As some employees return to the office, CIOs must ensure that technology in the office is just as easy as at home and that technology at home is just as good as in the office. “What we did when the lockdown occurred was a hack that worked,” said Jim Love, CIO at IT World Canada. “We now need to go back and

build enterprise-grade security, productivity tools and sustainable, human-oriented systems.”

Videoconferencing is a classic example of a valuable tool in the current environment, but most users admit there is room to improve the experience. Pre-pandemic video solutions in the office may also need of an upgrade. “We need to look at the space and understand the user experience,” said Roche. For example, as employees began returning to the office, financial software company, Vena, installed the Jabra Panacast camera as part of a new video conferencing solution.



The Jabra Panacast is the only 180-degree camera on the market and it works with the leading videoconferencing solutions like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. "It is perfect for smaller meeting rooms," said Anthony Bastone, Director of IT with Vena, which has capped meeting room capacity at two to three people to ensure health and safety. Bastone says the camera has "changed the game from just looking across the desk, because you can see all of the people in the room, even with distance between them." With HD video and sound, the experience is more natural. "It's ideal for people and business relationships because it's inclusive, but you can also see the whiteboard," says Roche. "It's a better online experience."

Reimagining the office:

Office technology should evolve to support the collaborative and mobile environment of the future where employees will have more latitude to choose their location of work on any given day.

To support this environment and improve business continuity, organizations are accelerating their move to the cloud. According to IDC research conducted in 2020, nearly 63 percent of organizations in Canada are planning to implement a hybrid cloud environment over the next 12 to 24 months.



It has never been more important not to be chained to the desk by a headset

— Eric Ross, Jabra

Security remains a top concern for CIOs especially given the increased number of threats since the pandemic began. With a mix of employees working from home and the office, the majority of CIOs in the 2020 Canadian CIO Census indicated that they plan to review VPN or secure browser-based access. Many will also consider enhanced digital identity or Zero Trust solutions to facilitate secure collaboration.

Greater use of analytics by all office employees is also anticipated to improve decision-making and customer service.

Finally, office managers should not overlook tools that provide greater comfort to employees. During the pandemic, CIOs said that ergonomic office chairs and larger monitors helped to improve productivity for employees that spent long hours at their computers. Likewise, wireless headsets such as the Jabra cordless Bluetooth headsets allow employees to move away from their desks while staying in the conversation. “It has never been more important not to be chained to the desk by a headset,” said Eric Ross, Channel Sales Manager at Jabra.

PEOPLE AND CULTURE

Reopening the office:

The well-being of employees was identified as a top concern over the next 12 months in the 2020 CanadianCIO Census. Indeed, the hybrid model, where some employees work from home and others come into the office, is seen as the most challenging scenario to manage and to create a cohesive culture. “You can easily create second-class citizens when some aren’t included in certain conversations,” said one CIO at an ITWC roundtable discussion.

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— Paula Allen, Morneau Shepell

Flextime can improve the situation, said Allen. “Flextime has the lowest level of stress on people because you’re giving them the ability to manage their time,” she said. Extensive communications on new policies and expected behaviours will be essential. Allen also emphasized that employers need to focus on

the impact to mental health. Morneau Shepell’s Mental Health Index showed a massive decline in April and the change required to return to work has been a stressor as well, she said. “This is a time to ramp up support for mental health through employee assistance programs and also to lead with empathy,” she said. “Make sure that concern for wellbeing goes beyond masks.”

Reimagining the office:

Organizations should take this opportunity to think about the kind of culture they want to foster and plan accordingly, said Roche. “One of the main reasons people leave companies is because they didn’t feel a sense of belonging,” she said. Employers should create a place where employees will want to go to collaborate and innovate. “Provide an experience that accommodates different work styles and generations,” Roche said. “Think of offices as communities.”

OFFICE POLICIES

Reopening the office:

Employers must develop detailed return-to-work policies to cover all the new health and safety rules related to COVID-19, from screening to scheduling, said Allen. The policy should be made available on an internal website and training should be provided before employees return to the office. Allen recommends that employers seek expert advice to help with the policies and training.

Employees that don't follow the rules must be held accountable, said Carrie Cherveney, Senior Vice President of Strategic Client Solutions and Compliance at Hub International, in an article in Canadian Underwriter. Issuing policies that aren't enforced can "get you in legal hot water," she said.

It all comes down to communications and empathy, said Allen. "The main thing is that employees need to know that you have their back," she said. "Issue communications ten times more than you think is necessary. This is going to be hard."

Reimagining the office:

Prior to the pandemic, the rules and norms of the Canadian workplace were based on presence in the office. Collective agreements will likely evolve to catch-up with the sudden acceleration into the world of remote work. Executive status symbols such as corner offices and office hierarchy may matter less. In the virtual workplace of the future, there will, no doubt, be greater focus on skills and productivity.

In closing

The return to the workplace won't be easy. The reality is that there is no new normal. There is only different.

The challenge for employers is to develop a plan to safely reopen the office while also reinventing it. In many ways, this crisis has accelerated strategies that were already in the works. So far, Canadian leaders have proven their ability to adapt to rapid change. As with every challenge, there is also opportunity. In this case, it is a chance to redesign the workplace into a better and more collaborative place for people.

Resources

As stated, this paper was meant to be a starting point in the thought process, and not an exhaustive checklist for safely reopening the office. Here are some additional resources you may wish to review. Note that the Osler and Dialogue pieces also include links to resources in each province.

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- Government of Canada, [Risk mitigation tool for workplaces/businesses operating during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

 - Osler, [The Employer's COVID-19 Return to the Workplace Playbook](#)

 - Dialogue, [The COVID-19 Return to Work Guide for Canadian Organizations](#)

 - McKinsey, [Reimagining the post-pandemic organization](#)

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