



# REOPENING THE WORKPLACE

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## An Employer's Planning Guide

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**HELIOS HR<sup>SM</sup>**

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# Key Considerations When Planning the Next Steps for Your Workplace

## A Guide for Reopening Professional Offices

On April 16, 2020, the White House issued [Opening Up America Again](#), federal guidelines to reopen the U.S. economy through a three-phased approach. As other parts of the world start to rebound from COVID-19, there is increasing pressure to reopen regions of the U.S., with many states announcing reopening dates and moving forward with communicated plans. The approach for reopening the workplace will be employer-specific, subject to compliance with all state and local directives, as well as any industry-specific requirements. While the government and local jurisdictions are developing and rolling out plans to reopen, we recommend leaders consider what direct and indirect implications there may be with returning to the traditional workplace right away.

*Note: As of this publication date VA, MD, and DC are working on their jurisdiction-specific guidelines. Given our presence in the DC Metropolitan area, we will update this post once those state-specific guidelines are made available.*

- [Virginia Governor Northam's May 4<sup>TH</sup> COVID-19 briefing with phased guidelines for reopening Virginia](#)

**THE WORKPLACE-RELATED DECISIONS THAT EMPLOYERS MAKE OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL MONTHS WILL SHAPE THEIR CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP BRAND FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS.**

With so much discussion on how to safely reopen the workplace, Helios encourages leaders to think holistically about the choices they must make relative to their business. Reopening a state economy and requiring a physical presence in your office are two separate decisions; a state reopening date does not necessitate a return to the physical workspace. Helios HR (Helios) recommends taking the following steps to help determine what is right for your business:



## **STEP 1:**

# **Establish a COVID-19 Response Task Force**

If not already developed within your business, establish a COVID-19 task force. In addition to supporting employees during this historic time, this task force should be formed with the mission to ensure a thorough and intentional action plan is developed that supports the business from an employee safety, employee experience, operational, and business risk perspective. Helios recommends this task force include, at a minimum, members of senior leadership and representatives from the following functional areas: human resources, information technology, and office administration or facilities. Ideally, all things related to your COVID-19 response will be led by, or funneled through, this task force.

## **STEP 2:**

# **Assess and Evaluate Return to Work Decision**

Each employer will have to determine when the “right” time is to return to the physical workplace and that time for your business may be sooner or later than your competitors and peers within your industry, and that is okay. To best evaluate this decision, your COVID-19 task force should gather feedback from the management and staff about how things have been going on a day-to-day basis since the rapid expansion of the virtual workforce. This collection can be done through both formal and informal methods based on your culture and operating style and will help inform the future actions for the task force and the business.

With the above gathered information in mind, Helios recommends the COVID-19 task force discuss the following factors specific to your business:

### **What are the benefits to your business of having employees return to the workplace?**

In other words, what is not happening in your business that would require you to reopen the workplace? Is it truly essential for your employees to be in the physical workplace to successfully perform their role? For employees who must return to the office, consider phasing employees back into the office based on roles and business strategic priorities. Phasing can include staggering arrival/departure times and alternative workweeks.

### **How will reopening the workplace impact your employee morale in the short-run and long-run?**

Getting employees back into an office environment and adjusted to a “new normal” will be hard work for any employer. If you do not approach and execute returning to the workplace with your employees top of mind, it can have a devastating impact on employee morale, which in turn can lead to loss of productivity and a decline in your business’ financial health. When your employees look back six or 12 months from now, will they feel proud of how your leaders responded to this pandemic?

If employees are unhappy with how you navigate your response today, they are likely to leave as soon as they feel comfortable the economy has stabilized, which will present additional talent challenges for your business in the future.

### **Do your leaders know how employees feel about coming back to the workplace?**

If you cannot confidently answer this question, considering assessing how your employees feel. This can be done via manager/employee check-ins, anonymous survey, or other data collection method that best suits your culture and employees.

### **Consider why you may benefit from continued work from home practices.**

At the start of this pandemic, some employers were experimenting with working remotely, which eventually turned into a forced stay-at-home order. COVID-19 has exposed more employers to virtual work than ever before. For leaders that were hesitant about the idea of telecommuting, they are now seeing a virtual environment *can* work for their business, and at this point, many have grown accustomed to operating remotely.

Aside from the obvious benefits of creating autonomy, no commute, decreased expenses, and for some, fewer distractions, there are other benefits to remote work that will help bolster your business. By adopting remote work policies, you increase your access to a larger pool of talent while helping retain the talent you have now. Employers can look outside of their normal demographic area and expand their search nationwide. Do you have a key person who wants to relocate to a different city? You can keep this employee without having to recruit, hire, and train an entirely new resource.

Who needs office space? At Helios, many of our clients are evaluating office space needs and reviewing their lease to explore potential cost savings for the future. Stanford professor Nicholas Bloom conducted a two-year work-from-home study which found the company saved almost \$2,000 per employee on rent by reducing the amount of HQ office space. You can watch Bloom describe the study and the findings in his [2017 TEDx talk](#).

### **Compile a list of “pros and cons” for reopening your workplace based on what you know today.**

This exercise will help maintain proper perspective and ensure a holistic approach while developing a well-informed plan. When compiling this list, consider the impact from a business perspective, safety perspective and employee experience perspective. With each cycle through these recommended steps, your pros and cons list will likely evolve as new information is made available.

Once this information is collected and evaluated within the COVID-19 task force, proceed through the following steps in preparation for reopening your workplace with a focus on the safety of your employees and limiting the risk of further spread and infection.

## STEP 3:

# Stay Apprised of Government-Issued Regulations and Guidance

To move forward, employers need to determine which laws, regulations, and safety requirements they must comply with. There are guidelines provided by the [White House](#), [OSHA](#), and the [CDC](#), in addition to state and local regulations. Employers should consider conducting a risk assessment using the prescribed guidelines and regulations to identify any areas of improvement or corrective action.

Both the CDC and OSHA have published guidelines to assist employers in making decisions regarding reopening the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### CDC

The CDC recently published [Reopening Businesses with Workers At Risk For Serious Illness](#), which is a tool to help employers decide whether or not they are ready to reopen the workplace. The CDC tool is not an all-encompassing toolkit; however, it does ask employers to consider some important initial questions before even considering reopening the workplace.

### ACCORDING TO THE CDC, EMPLOYERS NEED TO ASK THEMSELVES THESE THREE QUESTIONS WHEN DECIDING TO REOPEN:

1. Are you in a community no longer requiring significant mitigation?
2. Will you be able to limit non-essential employees to those from the local geographic area?
3. Do you have protective measures for employees at higher risk (e.g. teleworking, tasks that minimize contact)?

If you can answer “yes” to each of the three questions for your business, then you can consider the possibility of reopening your workplace. Recommended safety actions and ongoing monitoring are other key considerations in the CDC tool.

The CDC has also issued guidance on [cleaning and disinfecting workspaces](#). Highlights of their recommended guidance is provided below:

Develop a Plan	Implement the Plan	Maintain and Revise the Plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine what needs to be cleaned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean and disinfect visibly dirty surfaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue routine cleaning and disinfection</li> </ul>

## OSHA

At a minimum, OSHA's [The General Duty Clause, Section 5\(a\)\(1\) of the Occupational Safety and Health \(OSH\) Act of 1970, 29 USC 654\(a\)\(1\)](#), requires employers to furnish to each worker "employment and a place of employment, which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm."

The challenge for employers is trying to define what exactly the OSH Act means during the COVID-19 pandemic and how to navigate maintaining compliance with [OSHA's COVID-19 standards](#) on limited resources.

On April 16, OSHA released an [Enforcement Memo](#) that states "Compliance Safety and Health Officers (CSHOs) should evaluate whether the employer made good faith efforts to comply with applicable OSHA standards and in situations where compliance was not possible, to ensure that employees were not exposed to hazards from tasks, processes, or equipment for which they were not prepared or trained."

OSHA's definition of good faith compliance means, "the employer thoroughly explored all options to comply with the applicable standard(s) (e.g., the use of virtual training or remote communication strategies, any interim alternative protections implemented or provided to protect employees, and whether the employer took steps to reschedule the required annual activity as soon as possible."

Once employers can carefully overcome the safety regulation hurdles, it's time to take a deep dive into your policies, practices, the make-up of the workforce, and determine if it's necessary to reopen and if it makes practical sense to reopen the workplace.

## STEP 4:

# Plan and Prepare for Your Business Impact

If a determination is made that reopening the physical workplace is the right decision for your business, the next step for employers is to prepare your workplace for workers to return. This preparation includes:

- ✓ deciding who needs to return to the workplace;
- ✓ planning for how you will navigate employee challenges;
- ✓ limiting business risk; and
- ✓ keeping employees' safety top of mind.

**EVEN IF AN EMPLOYER CAN LEGALLY REOPEN ITS WORKPLACE, THE RISK FOR ADDITIONAL LEGAL EXPOSURE STILL EXISTS, AS WELL AS A MYRIAD OF OTHER POTENTIAL ISSUES.**

Prior to letting employees return to the workplace, there are several questions business leaders should consider as part of their decision-making and implementation process.

## Questions to Plan for Prior to Reopening Your Office:

**1. Do all employees need to return to the physical workplace?**

There may be scenarios where some, but not all, of your employees need to be in the physical workplace to perform the duties of their job. A plan to reopen your workplace does not have to be an “all or nobody” decision. Choosing only to require essential roles (for purposes of this decision, an essential role would mean it is essential to be in the physical workplace to perform the job duties successfully) may make adherence to safety guidelines more feasible.

**2. How will you maintain a clean workplace?**

Does your business need to make any changes to your cleaning services contract or add in any additional services? All workspace areas including offices, open workspaces, conference rooms, breakrooms, equipment, tools and restrooms should be properly sanitized prior to opening and routinely for the foreseeable future.

**3. What exposure risks exist in your workplace beyond your direct employees bringing the virus into the office?**

Many businesses are in shared spaces, so consider not only how your employees come in and out of your workplace, but who else has access to your workplace and what control you have over the potential risk. Have you ever thought about how the HVAC system works? What contractors come into the building to service various utilities? What about social distancing in elevators? Some news outlets are warning of Legionnaires’ disease for buildings whose water lines have been stagnant for two weeks or more. Employers should work with their facilities and or the building management team to explore how to navigate some of these challenges.

**4. Does your workspace configuration align with your plans to reopen?**

Employers will need to reconfigure their workspaces to abide by the six-foot social distancing guidelines. Evaluate your floor plan to see what changes your business may need to make. Have you heard of a sneeze guard? It is basic plexiglass, or another type of barrier, designed to prevent pathogens from spreading by sneezes. These sneeze barriers are growing in popularity, particularly with businesses that have an open office plan. Cubicle walls may serve the same purpose as sneeze guards. Cushman & Wakefield, a global commercial real estate services firm, is experimenting with what they call the [“Six Feet Office”](#). A visual design concept that displays unique foot traffic routing for each office to ensure employees maintain six feet apart for social distancing.

**5. What will you proactively communicate to be your social distancing rules?**

Handshakes might be a thing of the past. Employers will need to be proactive about putting measures in place to limit gatherings and in-person meetings at the office. For planned conferences, “all hands”, or other large meetings, utilizing in-office videoconferencing is still recommended. Lunch and/or break schedules should be established to reduce the number of employees in common areas at any one time. Some employers are exploring a uniform signal that employees can use to communicate to their colleagues “you’re too close to me, I

need some space”. If employees do not follow the distancing guidelines, consider removing some chairs or seating from the room.

**6. How will you address concern from employees who cannot return to the workplace?**

Most schools and daycares around the country are still closed and while there are some limited exceptions for essential workers, many employees who need childcare will not have access to childcare. Employers need to be prepared on how they will respond to employees who have childcare obligations and cannot easily return to the workplace at this time.

**7. How will you address concern from employees who do not want to return to the workplace?**

There are various reasons why an employee may not want to return to the workplace such as the examples below:

- **Vulnerable or high-risk individuals** – elderly employees and employees with certain health conditions are considered “vulnerable individuals” under the [Opening Up America Again](#) guidelines, and employers are strongly encouraged to provide “special accommodations” through phase two of the re-entry program. It is important not to presumptively prescribe the need for an accommodation (or even to determine for them that they should not return to work) for individuals you believe or perceive to be at higher risk. To mitigate your risk around potential discrimination lawsuits, communicate your reopening plans and let the individual come to you with a request for accommodation. Be prepared to apply uniform decision-making processes for all requests and give forethought to the types of accommodations you are prepared to offer.
- **ADA considerations** – Employers need to recognize that it is not only physical impairments that can impact an employee’s work, mental health has a significant impact as well. Many individuals with preexisting mental illness have been elevated by the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 17, 2020, the EEOC issued [new guidance](#) on the potential application of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) upon return to work.
- **Fear** – Understandably, some employees are scared to return to the workplace. Under the [OSH Act](#), employees may only refuse to work if they believe they are in “imminent danger.” Transparently communicating the measures you are taking to provide a safe workplace is critical to easing the fear your employees may be experiencing. Think about how you will respond to individuals who, essentially, refuse to “return to work”.
- **Commute** – Employees who utilize public transportation to commute face increased exposure risks. Consider extending or modifying your remote work policies or extending commuting benefits to encourage employees to drive into the office rather than using public transportation. Allowing these employees to return to the workplace via public transportation could increase risk exposure within your office space.
- **Unemployment** – What if an employee tells you they do not want to return to the office because they are making more money collecting unemployment? This could be the case if you ask a previously furloughed employee to come back part-time, for example. Be thoughtful about the impact of your reopening plans on your employees.

**8. Will you ask employees to self-certify they meet certain criteria to return to the workplace?**

If you are asking employees to return to the workplace, consider having employees complete a COVID-19 questionnaire. Because employees have been working remotely, employers have no way of ensuring their employees were abiding by social distancing rules, travel bans, or have been using safe hygiene methods. Any questionnaire that is implemented needs to be administered and handled with care, keeping in mind an employee's privacy, ADA laws, and avoiding unintentional discrimination practices. Ensure the process to implement this practice does not create more risk to your employees (for example, by having a line of individuals at a check-in desk using the same pens to complete the form).

**9. Will you conduct temperature checks or other types of testing?**

According to the [EEOC](#), employers are permitted to conduct temperature checks for employees. If you choose to implement temperature checks, you will need to allocate additional resources and manpower to conduct those checks. Additionally, policies and procedures will need to be put into place as well as training for individuals on how to perform the test and how to react when someone's test result confirms a fever.

**10. Will you require the use of any personal protective equipment (PPE)?**

With guidelines for individuals to wear masks when out in the public, and many choosing to wear gloves, consider if you will require PPE to be worn by employees while in the office. If you are going to require it will you provide the acceptable PPE to employees? What risks exists if employees are re-using masks and gloves without following proper cleaning procedures?

**11. What if an employee contracts COVID-19?**

Be prepared to respond quickly to the news that an employee has tested positive for COVID-19. A quick response means taking swift action to sanitize the workplace and any other area the employee had access to while at work. You will need to notify all employees who have had contact or have been in the same work area as the infected employee. Will a positive test by an employee who has been in the office since potential exposure lead to a 14-day closure of your physical space? Do you have a re-exit strategy if multiple COVID-19 cases are confirmed in your workplace?

**12. Do you need to create new policies or revise existing policies?**

Most employers have now recognized their future workplace practices will look different from their previous workplace. Employers should consider implementing policies to include temporary social distancing rules, hygiene and sanitation requirements, and new expectations in the workplace. Employers are reviewing and modifying existing policies such as leave, benefits, safety, compensation, furlough, and layoffs. Business continuity plans should also be evaluated considering recent federal, state, and local legislation.

**13. Do you understand the associated implications of reopening on your Workers' Compensation Policy?**

Employers should review their workers' compensation and business insurance policies. The question of whether COVID-19 is compensable under workers' compensation is not a "yes"

or “no”, it is a “maybe”. Some states have pending legislation to expand the coverage for certain workers. It is expected that other states will follow suit and introduce similar initiatives as it relates to workers’ compensation. The National Council on Compensation Insurance (NCCI) is [tracking legislative activity](#). The DOL acknowledges it is difficult to determine the precise moment and method of virus transmission and has created [new procedures to address COVID-19 claims](#) specifically.

**14. What costs are associated with the response measures you are putting into place?**

What direct and indirect costs exist with your decision to reopen the workplace? Some expenses to consider include reconfiguring your office space, additional office cleaning, training to employees on new policies and procedures, etc. Will there be a loss of productivity, or impact on your client experience, as your employees return to a workplace they may not feel comfortable with? For some, the added expenses alone may sway you to maintain your entirely virtual workforce for some time longer.

## STEP 5:

### Repeat Steps 2 through 5

Employers should assume the impact of COVID-19 on our nation will continue to evolve, along with guidance issued by our federal and state governments. The CDC anticipates another wave of significant impact in the fall of 2020. Your COVID-19 task force should regularly revisit the steps outlined above and adjust your response accordingly, even if that means reversing a decision that was previously made for the overall good of your business and your teams.

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## Reopening Plan of Action Checklist

Helios has created a Reopening Plan of Action Checklist, which includes many of the items discussed in this article, to help prepare your workplace for employees to return.

Navigating the decision to reopen the workplace and the specific measures necessary to do so safely is not an effort to be taken lightly. Helios encourages all business to leverage a COVID-19 task force to consider the government guidance, the business implications (cost, strategy impact, risk) and the employee implications (safety, morale, trust in leadership) to make the decision that is right for your unique business and culture. The future culture of your business will be heavily shaped by the way you lead your employees through this historic time in our country.

## Plan of Action Checklist

### Business Considerations

- Establish a COVID-19 Task Force
- Assess how your employees are feeling about returning to the workplace
- Decide who MUST return to the workplace
- Decide who should NOT return to the workplace
- Understand federal and local legislation/guidance
- Conduct risk assessment
- Review budget considerations for issuing PPE, re-configuring office space, training, etc.
- Be prepared to address employee concerns

### Safety Regulations

- Follow all state, local directives, and industry-specific requirements
- Follow the CDC tools and guidance, and prepare a plan to reopen the workplace
- Document any efforts to comply with both CDC's guidelines and OSHA's COVID-19 standards
- Clean with [CDC-approved](#) products

### Supplies

- Provide personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Supply disinfectants near or on each desk or work area, particularly those that are shared

### Training Areas

- Proper use of PPE
- Temperature checks
- Maintaining enhanced cleaning and disinfecting practices
- Hygiene practices
- Social distancing expectations

### Communication

- Health and safety precautions
- Prepare for employee complaints and concerns

### Physical Office Changes

- Prepare and post reminders of social distancing and cleaning protocols
- Reconfigure your workplace to incorporate social distancing rules
- Restrict use of common areas such as the kitchen
- Remove high-touch shared tools such as whiteboard markers, remote controls, etc.
- Disable shared touchscreens
- Consider no-touch switches
- Clean desk policy
- Create a storage space or area for personal items
- Limiting gatherings/meetings in the office
- Implement a "Visitors" protocol/policy for the workplace
- Implement schedule adjustments or staggered shifts
- Maintain a log of everyone who was in the building/workspace

### Business Policies

- Review workers compensation policy

- Review BI/EPLI insurance

**Implement and/or review Employer Policies and Practices**

- COVID-19 specific laws and regulations
- Equipment Use
- Leave entitlement and the use of vacation when the workplace is reopened
- Remote work policies
- Bringing employees back from furlough, including notifications, phased rehiring's, and re-enrolling in benefits
- Onboarding
- Review of existing incentive or bonus plans
- Reporting time
- Split work shifts
- Workforce and succession planning

**Proactive Monitoring**

- Continuous review of COVID-19 impact
- Document and apply lessons learned