Return to the office checklist

Introduction

Encouraging your people back to the office and ensuring they want to keep coming requires a thorough plan and communication strategy.

You want your employees to feel excited, inspired and safe when they return. A good starting point is recapping the importance of the physical workplace.

Before you start: remember the benefits

Leadership teams need to be aligned on the benefits of being in the office. This makes planning easier and ensures these key messages are communicated clearly to employees. Some of the key benefits of bringing people back to the office are:

⟶ Strengthens company culture

Remote working has left some employees feeling disconnected to the business and their colleagues. The office provides the perfect setting to reignite company culture.

⟶ Improves staff wellbeing

Workplaces often provide a healthier environment than the home, whether that's through better air quality, smart lighting or ergonomic furniture. People also thrive in groups, and the office can combat the isolation that some feel when working from home.

⟶ Maximises productivity

The initial productivity boost that many employees experienced when first working from home has started to disappear as remote work fatigue sets in. According to McKinsey, employers have found during the pandemic that although some tasks can be done remotely in a crisis, they are much more effectively done in person. These include coaching, counselling, and providing advice and feedback; building customer and colleague relationships; bringing new employees into a company; negotiating and making critical decisions; teaching and training; and work that benefits from collaboration, such as innovation, problem-solving and creativity[1].

⟶ Improves recruitment and retention

For the younger generations of the workforce, the office is much more than a place to work – it's also a place to learn, socialise and build long-lasting friendships. The office is the physical manifestation of a company's values and beliefs and vital to talent attraction and retention.

⟶ Fosters creativity

A virtual creativity session can be adequate, but an in-person session is unbeatable. People together in a room with whiteboards, food and the ability to collaborate is the ideal environment to share knowledge and come up with ideas.

With these benefits in mind, this is the checklist that will return your workplace to the hive of activity it once was.

Deloitte, London ❯

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[1] https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/whats-next-for-remote-work-an-analysis-of-2000-tasks-800-jobs-and-nine-countries

1. Develop a return to the office plan

The return to the office is multi-faceted, making a comprehensive plan a necessity. Which employees will have responsibility for rolling out the plan? How will you address employees that are reluctant to return? How will you communicate the plan? How will flexibility and autonomy of the individual be retained whilst balancing what the business needs?

Here are some of things you need to do to create a back-to-the-office plan:

1.1 Form a back-to-the-office team, including:

- Human resources
- The property department
- Someone from the board
- Facilities management
- Wellbeing champion and/or diversity and inclusion representative
- The IT department

1.2 Collect data to inform your changes

- Workplace survey to all staff
- Focus groups to hear more detailed feedback (can be done virtually)
- Interviews with department heads to gather their needs

Ask your people about:

- Their expectations (how many days they need/want to be in the office)
- Their anxieties and concerns
- What they expect from the office upon their return

Note: a **good workplace consultant** can help with the survey and discovery process.

1.3 Hybrid working

If you plan to adopt hybrid working, define and clearly communicate your hybrid working policy.

- Set out expectations for mandatory office days
- Confirm office hours when people are in the office
- Plan for the maximum number of people on site, including employees and visitors
- Create a company-wide shared calendar so employees can see when colleagues will be in the office
- Enhance meeting rooms with technology that support equal experiences for all attendees, whether in the room or on video

2. Make the office a 'destination'

Employee's expectations have increased and to exceed what your people want, make your workplace a destination – somewhere they'll want to be.

2.1 Determine how many desks you need

As fewer people will be using the office at the same time, take the opportunity to reduce the number of workstations. This will enable you to create a variety of spaces that people will love.

2.2 Provide collaboration spaces

Assess the number of breakout and collaboration spaces. With the return to offices your staff will need more spaces for collaboration. Numerous research studies have shown this to be the primary reason people want to go back to the office.

> Provide more sofas and comfortable seating
>
> Install high tables for impromptu team meetings
>
> Have plenty of white boards or interactive smart boards for collaboration
>
> Stock fridges with drinks and snacks
>
> Equip spaces with technology to ensure those remotely can access and input equally
>
> Install space booking technology so staff can reserve rooms; this will also help to track usage

## 2.3 Undergo a furniture audit

> Determine what to keep or refurbish
>
> Donate, recycle or upcycle unwanted items including offering unwanted items to employees for their home working
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> Determine what new furniture is needed
>
> Consider environmental credentials of new items
>
> Consider staff wellbeing when selecting furniture, ensuring choices meet all diversity, equity and inclusion considerations
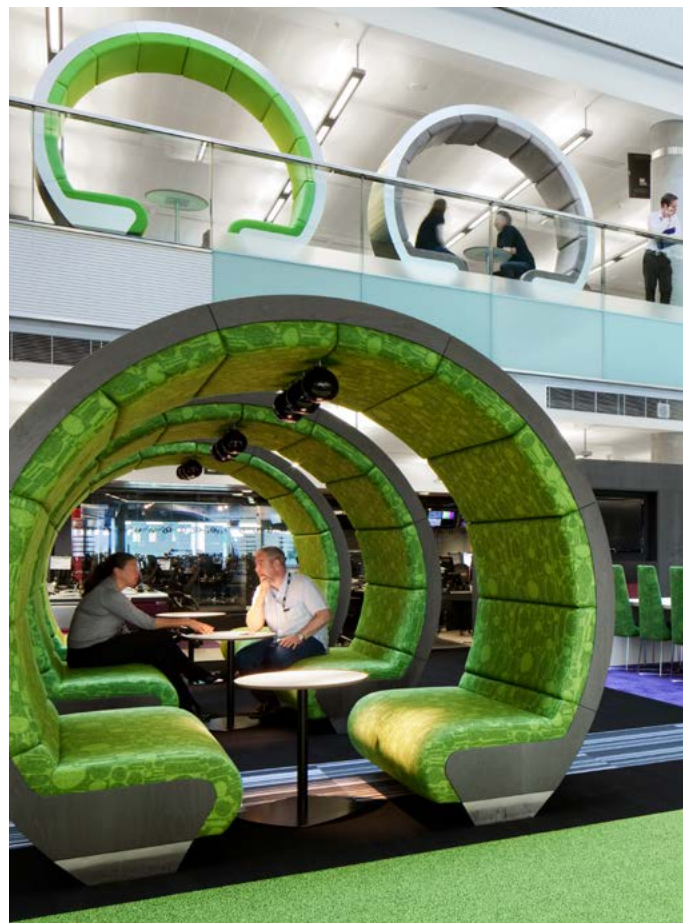
︿   **BBC Media City Salford**

2.4 Create more focus areas

Assess the number of focus areas and quiet spaces as many people have been used to quiet working at home

Consider installing phone booths for private phone calls

Upgrade soundproofing on all rooms to prevent frustration

2.5 Provide wellbeing spaces

Consider spaces for; chilling out, decompression, mother and baby, prayer, mental health and first aid

Add biophilia to include: natural light, living walls, plants, water features

Establish guidance about what wellbeing spaces are for and how staff can use them

2.6 Give people the comforts of home

Establish guidance for employees on how they can personalise their space

Offer tailored ergonomic solutions such as anti-glare screens and lumbar support

Give people sit-stand desks to encourage movement to help them feel better

Provide a variety of spaces for people to work

2.7 Use graphics to create a sense of purpose

Use your brand colours and logos to strengthen the sense of belonging

Visually communicate the brand identity and ethos through photographs and iconography

Use a graphic wall to tell a story of the brand's history and vision

ˇ   **Walker Morris, Leeds**

3. Communication

A communications strategy is crucial to underpin your return-to-the-office plan.

You'll need to have your key messages agreed and ready to share frequently across multiple channels. This is your chance to extol the benefits of the office so that people can buy into the return.

3.1 Recruit internally for 'back-to-the-office' champions

People who advocate being in the office

Social influencers

Skilled motivators

Know your business inside-out

Natural communicators

3.2 Include in your communication plan the following channels

Emails, including newsletters and direct communications from the board

Meetings and 'town hall' events

Intranet postings

Explainer videos

Conference calls

Posters

Leaflets

FAQs

Office etiquette guides

✓ **Channel 4, Leeds**

4. Implement your plan

4.1 Make the physical changes to your office

Share your employee research with a workplace designer to give ideas on how to implement a destination workplace

Engage a fit out company to make the changes before people return

4.2 Create a 'welcome back' event

Host an event on the first day back. Go over the practicalities of the return but also treat it as a celebratory event. Include a talk from the most senior person

Provide food, snacks and drinks

Train front of house staff with key messages

4.3 Give people room to work

Re-orientate desks following the space plan assessment

Retain a clear desk policy

Ensure some desks have more space around them for employees who may be nervous about social distancing

Identify pinch-points and how these could be alleviated

4.4 Prepare meeting rooms and communal areas

Ensure cleaning materials are available

Widen walkways where possible

Ensure complete compliance with building and fire regulations

Make sure all meeting room audio visual is tested and working properly

4.5 Lead by example

As your people return, your leaders must lead by example. If your company mandates that employees are in Tuesday to Thursday, senior leaders must be present on those days or all will be lost

4.6 Check services are in order

Air quality monitoring and control is a primary factor in the health of the work environment and a key concern for staff on the return to the office.

Heating and ventilation:

Full and rigorous inspection prior to returning to the office

Ensure optimum levels of air change and ventilation can be achieved

Ongoing occupancy monitoring and measuring to maintain optimum levels

Touch points:

Frequent touch points should be considered as priority cleaning areas including WCs flush/taps, biometric pads, kitchens and door handles

5. Review

Hybrid work is an evolving process. What works now may not in six months, so be prepared to adapt constantly. Regular communication with employees through surveys and informal chats is essential.

5.1 Follow-up research

Run a follow-up staff survey to see how things are working

Undertake a utilisation study to see how the space is being used

Gather feedback from the 'back-to-the-office' champions

5.2 Measure the success:

How much the office is being utilised

Absentee data

Recruitment and retention statistics

Levels of engagement and motivation

Diversity and inclusion measures

Staff wellbeing statistics

Productivity statistics

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