

# Returning Employees to the Physical Workplace

Guide to post-pandemic management of remote work, telecommuting and the ever-evolving office

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**R**emote work, video meetings and telecommuting used to be uncharted territory for most organizations. As late as 2019, I remember writing telecommuting policies for a few clients, requiring the CEO to sign off on any employee's request to telecommute and a 30-day trial period (except in the case of reasonable accommodation and other legal requirements). Those kinds of policies changed for everyone in March 2020, when public health lockdowns necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic made telecommuting widespread.

Two years later, as we begin to return to the physical workplace, organizations must recognize how employees' needs and expectations have changed. Below are some suggestions on managing the return to the physical workplace.

- **Flexibility and consistency.** Throughout your organization, remain flexible in your expectations and consistent in your policymaking and decisions regarding remote work. Not every job is designed to be done remotely—but the labor market and job applicants will demand flexibility and options if the job *can* be done remotely. (Consider, for instance, whether a job can be completed with a blended mix of days in and out of the office.) Proactively build a system designed to grow more flexible.
- **Open communication.** Communicate openly with employees. If someone requests remote work and there is no availability for a position to be done remotely, say so—approve or deny the request. Clear communication is necessary to build a strong culture in any organization. Remember to account for federal, state and local laws governing reasonable accommodation and remote work.
- **Health and safety.** Returning to a physical workplace might be overwhelming to those who have concerns about health and safety. Ensure that everything is in place throughout the organization to reinforce its commitment to health and safety: proper procedures, policies, return-to-work action plans, personal protective equipment, cleaning services and training. In light of the importance of mental health, communicate the availability of employee assistance programs and encourage employees to use them.
- **Policy, procedure and performance reviews.** Remote work is here to stay. Every organization should adopt or evolve policies, procedures and performance reviews to meet the current needs of a remote workforce. Provide communication and training to employees about them. (Don't forget about Fair Labor Standards Act requirements for nonexempt employees.)

Working remotely is a big change for any of us—it was for me when I started doing it in 2014. Talented people will always seek opportunities for more flexibility. Without an evolution in the way organizations manage in-person versus remote work, they will miss out on talent. HR professionals can look to the SHRM Body of Applied Skills and Knowledge™ (SHRM BASK™) for resources to help their organizations evolve and redefine the workplace.

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