



# The new

# normal

The ultimate COVID-19 guide to reopening offices and securing your business's future

**WIPFLI**

# The future of business in an ever-changing world

As the economy continues to reopen, are you ready to return to pre-COVID-19 business as usual? You might have a long wait.

Many aspects of business are expected to change forever. Thermal scanning, immunity passports and antibody certificates could become commonplace.

Some businesses are evaluating the potential cost benefits of maintaining remote teams indefinitely. Others are wondering how they need to adjust their management practices to help redefined teams excel. Most see the rising number of cyberattacks and understand how critical the right technology is to not just surviving COVID-19 but also being able to move forward effectively.

Your new normal doesn't have to be full of scary unknowns. In this guide, we cover how to reopen safely and transition from emergency operations to your new normal. We also take an in-depth look at managing employees and measuring performance. And we go through how to rethink your evolving needs, from office space to technology, so you can adapt to a new world with new pressures — and new opportunities.

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A woman with long dark hair and bangs, wearing a patterned face mask, is seated at a desk in a blue-tinted office environment. She is focused on her work, with her hands on a laptop keyboard. In the background, another person is blurred, and office equipment like a monitor and cables are visible. The overall scene is bathed in a monochromatic blue light.

# 01 What to consider before reopening

# What to consider before reopening

So, business as usual doesn't exist anymore. There's a new normal, and your business has to meet it if it's going to survive — or if it's going to grow instead of stagnating.

The first two steps are recognizing what's changed and determining how you can navigate these changes effectively. So before you reopen, here's what you need to consider:

## 1. Rethink business travel

Many of your employees, like those on your sales team, rely on regular personal interaction. Social distancing is forcing them to revamp the way they connect with clients and colleagues alike. Business travel is expected to be irrevocably changed because of COVID-19. Traveling across the country to hammer out deals or strategize with clients is likely off the table, at least in the near future.

And for those who do need to make an essential business trip, getting on a plane is going to be a much pricier and more arduous process:

- **Higher ticket prices:** Rules stipulating that aircraft need to fly at lower capacity could result in higher ticket prices as struggling airlines try to recoup their losses.
- **Fewer routes:** Getting to your destination could also become trickier, with routes and schedules likely to be cut as fewer people travel.
- **Longer check-in procedures:** At the airport, online or contactless check-in could be compulsory, along with temperature checks and health questionnaires. Some airports are already considering fully disinfecting passengers and luggage or using robots to scrub facilities clean.
- **Employee hesitancy:** Employees might balk at the lack of social distancing in commercial travel options.

It's time to find fresh and innovative ways to nurture long-distance client relationships. Consider reallocating your travel budget into high-resolution video conferencing tools, account-based marketing or virtual demonstrations.

## 2. Get ready for virtual everything

**Conventions, trade shows and conferences:** Events can be important ways to make contacts, seal deals and keep up to date on the latest industry developments. Over the past few months, companies have had to adapt events to the new environment. Many conferences have moved online, with virtual conference panelists joining remotely and questions being asked via Microsoft Teams, Slack or other messaging tools.

This trend is likely to continue. If you host such events, think now about how you can make them standouts. For example, virtual reality headsets could enable attendees to use avatars to move around remotely, visiting booths and interacting with one another. Event apps can help attendees chat with each other and network. Virtual booths at events can allow you to interact with attendees online.

**Workplace:** Skeleton staffing, separated desks, masks and regular temperature testing are likely to be the new normal — for those who return to the office.

A greater reliance on virtual teams could lead to more streamlined corporate structures. Companies may also opt for AI technology solutions to automate tasks currently done in the workplace, such as initial customer support.



### 3. Help employees find balance

Whether you bring staff back to the office or continue with some form of remote workforce, working hours will need to be more flexible. Depending on your location, many commuting workers will want to reduce their time on public transportation during busy travel hours. And those at home could be dealing with school and childcare disruptions for the foreseeable future.

In some sectors, the social and psychological impacts of COVID-19 are creating a crisis in work-life balance. A greater use of remote teams and flexible hours going forward is likely to boost staff retention, lower sick days and open a wider pool of potential talent for companies.

### 4. Prepare for supply-side changes

The pandemic's global trade impact has forced many businesses to [reassess their supply chains](#) and look to source components, raw materials and finished products closer to home. Instead of relying on imports from China, Vietnam or Indonesia, some U.S. companies are looking to buy more goods from Mexico, Latin America and North America, even if a shorter supply chain comes at a higher price.

But forecasts for a sharp post-pandemic downturn also might prompt companies overall to reserve as much cash as possible and put major investment plans on hold until the outlook becomes clearer. As COVID-19 has shown, no one can forecast what the future holds, but companies should look to brace themselves to deal with even the most unlikely eventualities.

A woman with long dark hair and bangs, wearing a patterned face mask, is seated at a desk and typing on a laptop. The scene is dimly lit and has a strong blue color cast. In the background, another person is visible but out of focus. The overall atmosphere is professional and focused.

# 02 5 steps to a safer reopening

# 5 steps to a safer reopening

OK, you've recognized important changes and how they impact your business. What else do you need to focus on to safely reopen?

Lessons gleaned from reopenings in Asia and Europe may prove valuable for U.S. organizations as they operate within tight new constraints for the foreseeable future.

As you get back to on-site business, these five steps can help you maintain safety for yourself, your employees and your customers.

## 1. Update the workplace

Open-office plans, which gained popularity over the past decade, were touted to encourage employee interaction and innovation. Now, they are being rapidly scrapped in favor of socially distanced workspaces that limit physical contact.

- **Forget workspace clusters:** Instead, consider installing high-sided cubicle partitions or even individual glass-fronted offices.
- **For now, close break areas and cafeterias:** This discourages mingling. Remove or relocate office water coolers or coffee stations to help maintain social distancing rules and reduce contamination risk.
- **Analyze the flow of office traffic:** This helps you determine which routes people typically take to reach their desks and where jams most frequently form. Lay out distance and direction markers on the floor to avoid office gridlock or crowding around entry and exit points such as elevators.
- **Consider maintaining remote work when feasible:** Even as staff return to the office, consider how you can continue some remote work. For example, use video conferencing for meetings instead of sitting around a conference table.

Creating a safe environment is critical to enticing workers back into the office, so actively communicate any changes to help put employees' minds at ease.

## 2. Stagger shifts for social distancing

Social distancing and other restrictions often mean that only a chunk of your previous workforce can be in an office or factory at the same time. This can create challenges for work schedules and production timelines.

To minimize the impact, invest in cross-training to help employees fill in for colleagues who can't physically be in the same location simultaneously. When such multitasking isn't an option, alter work schedules to balance particular skill sets across select days.

## 3. Be flexible

Not all employees feel comfortable returning to the workplace, even as stay-at-home restrictions are lifted. This might be especially true for staff who are at risk or have at-risk family members or those who rely on public transport.

This is not the time to cling to previous ways of working. By being flexible, you can reduce employee stress. This in turn can improve productivity and morale, enabling your organization to better weather this time of uncertainty.

- **Consider flexible scheduling:** Allow people to work longer hours over fewer days, for example, to manage childcare needs or to minimize the trips they must make on public transportation.
- **Evaluate the family friendliness of your policies:** Many parents are still struggling with limited childcare options. Those challenges could increase in the fall if schools remain closed.

- **Make exceptions for staff in high-risk categories:**  
Explore ways to enable them to continue working remotely. Consider extending those allowances to staff with high-risk dependents.

#### 4. Prioritize health and safety

As employees return to the workplace, many companies are implementing more stringent safeguards to help protect staff:

- Frequent temperature checks
- Compulsory facemasks
- Strict social distancing rules
- Evacuation, disinfection and quarantine procedures
- Procedures in case someone falls ill at work
- Tracing policies to alert workers and contacts who might be exposed

As you determine which of these tools to implement, refer to [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) (OSHA), state and local regulations for your industry and location.

Regularly update staff. Reinforce the importance of rigorously applying social distancing measures and keeping up with the latest health guidelines from the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC).

#### 5. Provide incentives

Lastly, find creative ways to thank your employees for their work in uncertain times. For example, with staff kitchens and cafeterias likely to be shut, lunching “at desk” is likely to be compulsory. Consider offering staff vouchers for personal lunchtime food deliveries. Arranging for local stores to pick up and deliver dry cleaning or shopping can also help minimize employees’ social contact and improve morale.





# What does the data say?

The United States Census Bureau has been [surveying small businesses](#) once a week, every week, since April 26 on the different impacts COVID-19 has had on their business. The bureau's data paints a stark picture of this impact.

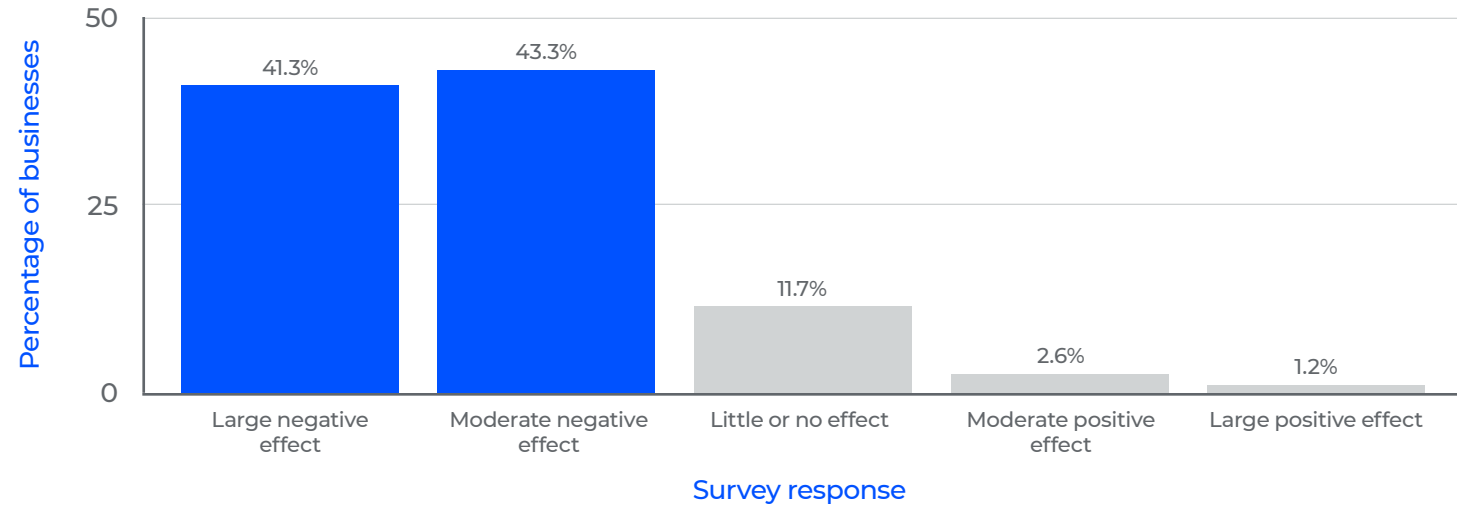
As you can see from the first graph, 84.6% of businesses surveyed were moderately or largely negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Business owners recognize that it's going to take time to return to normal operations. Of the businesses surveyed, 41% believe it will take more than six months, but 10.1% believe their business will never return to its normal level of operations. On the other hand, 38.9% are far more optimistic and believe that returning to normal levels will take between one and six months.

\*Source: Small Business Pulse Survey

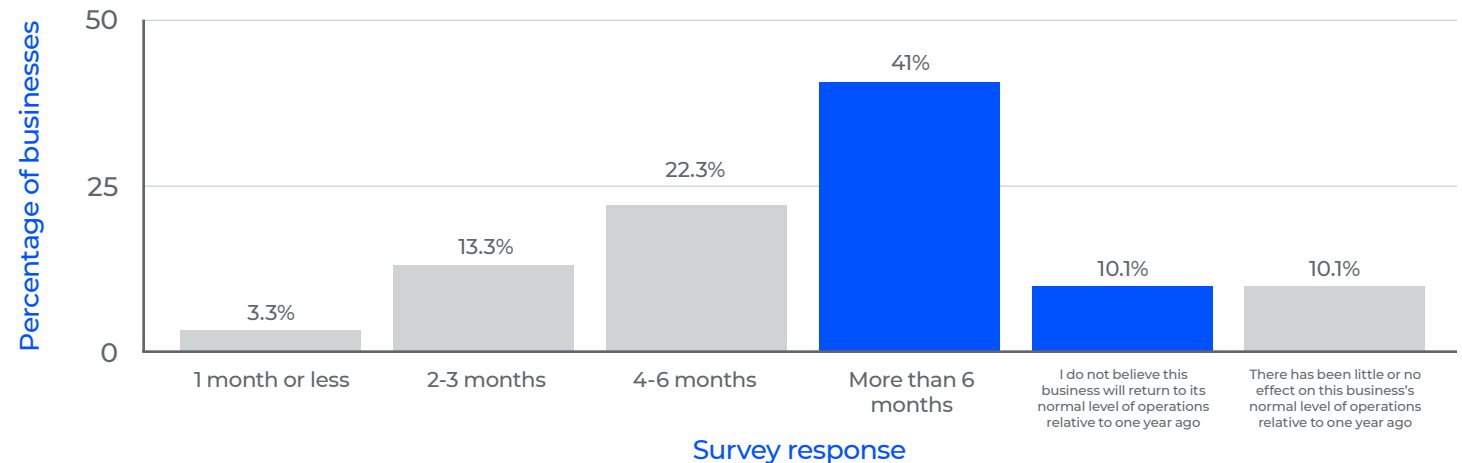
## Overall, how has this business been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Data collected 5/31 to 6/6\*



## In your opinion, how much time do you think will pass before this business returns to its normal level of operations relative to one year ago?

Data collected 5/31 to 6/6\*



A woman with long dark hair and bangs, wearing a patterned face mask, is seated at a desk and typing on a laptop. The scene is dimly lit and has a strong blue color cast. In the background, other people are blurred, suggesting an office or public workspace. The text '03 You've reopened — now it's time to develop a strategy to restore' is overlaid on the left side of the image in white.

03 You've reopened — now it's time to develop a strategy to restore

# You've reopened — now it's time to develop a strategy to restore

Once you reopen, you're stepping into a new reality. So how can you truly find stable footing in such a changed environment?

There are five fundamental areas leaders need to assess as they transition out of emergency operations and into the new normal.

## 1. Develop a flexible strategy

Before the global health emergency, strategy development was an annual type of activity, focused on developing one-, three- or five-year goals. COVID-19 changed how far and how long we can plan into the future. Now leaders need to be able to strategize and adapt in near real time, making [strategic planning](#) a more fluid and frequent occurrence.

In this environment, strategies are relevant only within 30-, 60- or 90-day time frames – and even those require flexibility. Tactical plans need to be developed quickly, and execution and accountability should be measured weekly or even daily.

Leaders need to figure out which metrics are most important (or even relevant) in this new environment. The right metrics will help companies identify the right operational levers to pull.

If you have a board of directors, they will continue to have governance over and oversight of strategy, but it's the [day-to-day leaders who should be taking charge](#). The boots-on-the-ground view is more meaningful and responsive in times of constant change. To keep the board apprised, the cadence of meetings or amount of information exchanged may increase to match the new pace of business.

## 2. Assess your business model

If you build it ... they might not come.

How do people want to be served now? What do your customers care about? Their priorities before, during and after the pandemic may be drastically different.

Post-COVID-19, every business, in every industry, will need to address the customer experience. Customers won't return – even if they're allowed to – if they don't feel like their needs are being met and the experience is worthwhile.

Companies will need to adjust their business and delivery models to match customers' new needs and preferences. For some, that means finding ways to deliver products and services remotely or with limited contact. Every business will need to communicate clearly and often to reassure customers and reset expectations for the new normal.

And all of this has to be done within the regulatory guardrails set by state and local governments.

### 3. Update your organizational structure

Once the strategic and business model impacts are understood, some level of reorganization must follow. Companies need to align people to the new plans, making sure staff are equipped and empowered to execute the strategic response.

Reporting structures that are based on geography, location or delivery models may become obsolete. Some teams may become geographically dispersed to ensure business continuity; others will become nimbler or more fluid. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to organizational structures in this new world, but every box on the org chart should support the new strategic direction. Look at the organization through a strategic lens, and the pieces should start to fall into place.

The people who lead and manage need to be comfortable in an agile and changing environment. They need the ability to think differently and innovate entirely new ways of doing business over short periods of time. Then, they need the leadership and communication skills to help bring people along. We cannot be successful if we leave our employees behind.

### 4. Take care of employees

When millennial employees came into the workforce, they made health and wellness a corporate priority. COVID-19 turned it mainstream.

Today, leaders and staff are openly discussing self-care. Some of the stigma around mental wellness has disappeared, since fear, anxiety and change are affecting everyone.

Those feelings won't dissipate overnight. And we can't predict all of the health impacts that employees may experience after months of heightened stress and anxiety. Companies need to decide how they will continue to support employees and their emotional well-being as part of the "new norm" and not just in response to a crisis.

### 5. Plan your comeback

Pre-COVID-19, companies could take years to plan and roll out changes. Then the pandemic threw everyone into the deep end.

Sink or swim aren't the only options. It's okay to fast-track some changes and spend more time figuring out others. Getting to the "new normal" can — and will — occur in phases.

Align reopening phases to the updated strategic priorities, customer and employee sentiment, and current guidance in your local jurisdiction (or industry or regulatory agency). Some flexibility will be required to juggle them all.

Honest, timely and transparent communication will help customers and employees adapt and thrive through each phase of change. Whenever you can, explain:

- What is being changed
- Why it is being changed (e.g., safety precautions, demand)
- How it will affect different stakeholders
- What to expect
- How long the change will be in effect (e.g., permanent, until a vaccine is available)
- When the change begins
- How it will impact the employee

Implementing new strategies and organizational structures takes an enormous amount of effort. Companies need to implement and communicate them in thoughtful phases to ensure smooth adoption.



04 A new way to measure  
+ success

# A new way to measure success

COVID-19 hasn't just changed where and how we work — it has also changed how we measure business performance.

Does that mean accountability is dead? Of course not. You just have to reset the parameters for success and how you pursue them. Take these steps to reset your performance mindset:

- **Take your pulse:** Instead of looking at key performance indicators (KPIs) as aspirational targets, start to view them as health assessments for the organization. KPIs provide a snapshot of where things are going well and where you can improve (i.e., stop the bleeding). Remember, business units may stabilize and recover at different speeds; use your health assessment to prioritize operations and plan distinct phases toward recovery.
- **Check your surroundings:** Check in regularly with staff and key stakeholders, too. Try to benchmark engagement, optimism and safety concerns. Without employees and customers, even the most brilliant business plans will fail.
- **Prioritize metrics:** Figures that were mostly footnotes in your KPI reporting, like operational surplus or cash reserves, may be taking center stage. Or previously overlooked channels could be critical to recovery. Determine which metrics are the most meaningful to your recovery and refocus measurement and reporting on those instead of your pre-COVID KPIs.
- **Dig deeper:** Don't take any metrics at face value. Dig into the numbers until you uncover the stories behind them. For example, where are the opportunities in your pipeline coming from? How well are you converting new business right now? Try to understand which actions are driving results in this environment so you know which levers to pull.
- **Reset your thresholds:** Instead of setting aspirational targets, start defining your minimally acceptable thresholds. What's a bottom line you can't fall below? How do you define "stabilization" and "recovery"? And what do those thresholds mean, in concrete terms, for the business?
- **Be transparent:** Be transparent about your new performance measures, updated targets and the consequences of missing or hitting thresholds. Help the team see where things stand and what tomorrow could look like so they can visualize their role in the recovery. Many employees are being asked to pivot; don't ask them to do it blindly.
- **Recalibrate your strategy, quickly:** As a leadership team, review the health metrics regularly – that means weekly, and sometimes daily. Focus on metrics that are important today and use the information to recalibrate priorities. In this environment, you can't wait for a quarterly or even monthly business review; things are changing entirely too fast.
- **Leverage technology:** Real-time information helps the team understand the urgency of the situation and supports better decision making. To the extent possible, collect and report new KPIs in real time, and use apps or automation technology to speed up data tasks and increase accessibility.

COVID-19 shifted business priorities, at least in the short term. We have to change how we measure and evaluate our response. If you keep a constant pulse on the business and measure what matters today, you can strategize a speedier recovery.



05

How to manage employees — and their goals — while meeting your organization's changing needs

# How to manage employees — and their goals — while meeting your organization's changing needs

Many businesses and organizations have reopened in the past few months, but the COVID-19 pandemic continues to create uncertainty.

Will the U.S. experience another economic downturn that will require you to make yet more rapid and unanticipated changes? How can you balance meeting the different needs of employees — whether they're working remotely or in the office — with the needs of your organization? How do you set and measure employee goals that are ambitious yet achievable?

When it comes to managing goals, as well as meeting employee needs, the following tips can help your organization adapt to the new normal and any changes that come your way.

## 1. Adopt a more personalized management style

Your organization likely has already reacted to the pandemic by adjusting individual employee and organizational goals, but continual change highlights the importance of being agile and adaptive. The COVID-19 pandemic is requiring organizations to navigate an ever-changing landscape. All paths forward must be agile enough to respond to further uncertainty.

One way to adapt is for managers to adjust their management style based on the employee, which can help them navigate change and be able to adjust their goals on a more frequent basis based on continual change.

Many employees have been working from home for months now, but that doesn't mean they've completely adjusted to doing so. The most productive work is fostered by a stable work environment.

Some employees might have found their homes are quieter and allow them to work for longer uninterrupted periods. But others may grapple with the demands of family and miss the consistency of a regular workday in the office. They may be working longer hours and taking more breaks throughout the day to deal with these competing demands. And still others may find it hard to unplug and walk away from their computer at the end of the day.

To successfully manage employees in this unique business environment, you must modify your approach to best meet their needs, as well as help them continue to best meet the needs of the organization. Consider how you can help employees strike more of a balance between their work and personal lives and how you can help teams better collaborate when members may be in different situations.

It's all about meeting employees where they are and creating a path forward for them to work successfully and achieve their goals. Regularly meet with employees to determine whether you need to reset goals based on changing organizational needs, customer needs or market needs. Recognize when employees achieve soft goals alongside hard goals. It's just as important to build infrastructure that will help your organization continue to survive the pandemic as it is to focus on measurable productivity. A more personalized management style adapts to employee needs to help them contribute to the success of the business.





## 2. Continue creating virtual ways teams can stay connected

It's critical to stay connected right now. As we become more acclimated to the new normal and how we need to operate in this changed world, let's not forget the humanity of our employees and how important it is to build and maintain relationships. When people feel disconnected from the business, they're more vulnerable to being recruited away. They need to feel engaged, part of a larger team and vital to the organization. When most employees can no longer talk to one another face to face, they need to be able to nurture their relationships with team members.

Here are two ways you can accomplish this.

The first is to have a weekly morning call that allows everyone to speak about what's on their plate for the week, what's important to accomplish and who has capacity to support someone else on a project they need help with. Then recognize team members for their accomplishments and encourage the team to celebrate personal and professional successes.

The second is to build some virtual fun into the week. You could do a wind-down meeting later on in the week, discussing any outstanding items before transitioning the meeting to more of a virtual happy hour or a game night.

Both of these get-togethers manage to meet the needs of the business while enabling employees to build comradery and feel connected to the organization.

At the end of the day, to meet their goals, your employees need to feel connected to your organization and each other, know where and how they've thrived, and especially know why they've thrived. Keep track of what's been effective in achieving outcomes so you can continue to make adjustments — whether goal-related or not — that meet the needs of both employees and the organization.



06

Checklists: How to recruit,  
manage and retain virtual  
team members

# Checklists: How to recruit, manage and retain virtual team members

Before COVID-19 was even a whisper in the news, it was projected that [73% of all departments would have remote workers by 2028](#). It's just 2020, and we made quite the leap overnight. And now that the work-from-home wrinkles have largely been ironed out, it's likely that not all organizations will have their employees return to work in an office.

Having productive virtual teams involves more than technology. For virtual employment models to be effective, human resource and talent management practices need to shift to accommodate a different employee life cycle.

These checklists will help you manage key HR practices remotely, whether you choose to operate that way on an ongoing basis or whether it is based on preference of the company or the employee, or even out of necessity.

## Recruitment

- **Create the job description:** Before you recruit, dial in the job description. Be very specific about the responsibilities and accountabilities of the job and how it aligns to the overall organization.
- **Define the ideal candidate:** Think about not only knowledge, skills and abilities but also behavioral styles, interpersonal skills and other soft skills that align with the culture of the organization.
- **Use an agency and develop referral programs:** In a virtual recruiting environment, the candidate pool is bigger and more geographically dispersed. Use recruitment agencies that specialize in your industry and develop employee referral programs to reward employees who bring forward strong candidates. Think outside your normal processes when hiring remote employees to accelerate the sourcing process.
- **Be more strategic in where you post jobs:** Employees who want to work remotely may not be looking for work on traditional job sites. Instead, post openings on role-specific user groups or job boards that cater to remote candidates (think gig employee).
- **Keep your social media accounts and website up to date, relevant and true to your brand:** According to LinkedIn, a strong corporate brand can help lower hiring costs and attract top talent.



## Selection

- **Hold effective interviews:** Plan a series of interviews and tests to evaluate candidates' technical skills, communication, past experience and cultural fit. While technical skills determine whether the candidate will be able to do the job, evaluating the cultural fit helps determine how the candidate will do the job.
- **Evaluate cultural fit:** To evaluate cultural fit, some companies use personality and/or behavioral assessments or ask behavioral-based, open-ended questions. Ask every candidate the same questions in the same order to draw a fair comparison.
- **Evaluate critical abilities:** Remember, you are not evaluating just skills and abilities. It's important to also evaluate candidates' ability to work with different types of technology, work independently, collaborate in a virtual format, surface issues and concerns that can be barriers to success and deliver results.
- **Use different technology:** Use a variety of technologies and communications tools during the selection process so you can assess how candidates communicate by email to evaluate their ability to use the written word, phone to evaluate their ability to express thoughts and ideas effectively, and video to observe their body language, which conveys such an important part of messaging.
- **Test their skills:** Incorporate an exercise representative of the work to be performed to assess candidates' technical skills and how they approach assignments. Consider the extension of contract work for a particular project to assess skill and fit prior to extending an offer of employment.



## Onboarding

- **Make onboarding easy and even fun:** Carefully plan the onboarding process so it's a positive, engaging experience. Equipment should be shipped to their home or work location before their official first day. Take it one step further and accelerate the acculturation process by also sending them swag, such as a coffee mug, t-shirt and other gear with the company logo. It's the small touches that go a long way in building relationships and solidifying your brand and commitment to employees.
- **Let onboarding take time:** Plan your onboard process in advance so it is ready to go when the employee joins the team. Don't try to cram the onboarding process into a few days. It typically unfolds over the course of three months or longer, depending on the level of role and responsibility.
- **Keep track of paperwork:** Use checklists, online tracking systems or onboarding tools to keep track of paperwork. Try to limit the amount of running around or rework that has to be done. For example, combine forms or use technology to intelligently apply details to future forms after it's been entered once. If your state doesn't permit online verification of contracts or documents, dispatch a notary to the new employee. If you don't have a system with a self-serve portal, consider investing in one. Well worth it.
- **Hold virtual introductions:** Schedule introduction meetings and team calls for employees' first few days and hold initial meetings via video to make the interactions more personal.
- **Create immediate belonging:** Start assigning work or pulling the new employee into projects immediately, even if it's just research or shadowing another team member. This creates immediate engagement and a sense of belonging with the team.



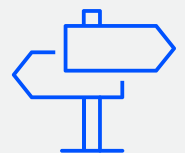
## Management

- **Set expectations:** Set very clear expectations with remote employees so they know what you expect and what they can expect from you. Explain which decisions they can make independently and when you want to be consulted. How often do you want project updates? And in what format?
- **Commit to clarity:** Clarity will help remote employees get productive faster. It can also prevent managers from micromanaging work they can't see. Convey to remote employees that they must take ownership of their work, processes and tools.
- **Establish goals and performance metrics upfront:** Tie them to the big-picture goals of the company. Ensure the employee understands the impact of what they do on other team members and strategic objectives to build connectedness to something bigger than themselves and reinforce the sense of team.
- **Ask remote employees how they like to be managed:** Agree on a cadence for checking in to make up for missed water cooler chats or chance meetings. Establish a consistent schedule and stick with it. Dedicate part of your check-ins to non-work-related topics so you can get to know your team members better.
- **Give remote employees feedback often, both positive and negative:** Be specific and tie your feedback to objective performance metrics to build context.



## Retention

- **Make people feel connected:** Make it easy for remote workers to connect with coworkers, either through collaboration tools or occasional in-person retreats. Include remote employees in corporate initiatives and events and welcome them as part of the greater team.
- **Help remote employees build a career path:** Understand their long-term goals and match those with the needs and direction of the company. Remote workers may need extra help building connections across the company.
- **Ask for feedback:** Working remotely, you may miss important visual cues that someone is frustrated or confused. Ask employees what they think, how they feel and whether they have everything they need.
- **Make sure the remote work experience is living up to employees' expectations, too:** People choose remote work because it fits their personality or lifestyle; make sure they're getting the work-life balance, social interaction and challenges they need to be happy at work, at home.



A woman with long dark hair and bangs, wearing a patterned face mask, is seated at a desk and typing on a laptop. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong blue color cast over the entire image. In the background, another person is visible but out of focus. The overall atmosphere is professional and focused on technology.

# 07 Rethinking real estate and technology needs

# Rethinking real estate and technology needs

Office buildings sat empty for weeks to help limit the spread of COVID-19.

Now, as stay-at-home restrictions are easing, many companies are re-evaluating their real estate needs.

In fact, some leaders may wonder whether they can divest of real estate altogether and continue to operate virtually. Just imagine: no more lease, property insurance, security contracts, housekeeping, office supplies ....

Unfortunately, it's not that easy to ditch an expense on the balance sheet. Every decision is a tradeoff — and usually comes with a replacement cost. As you evaluate your space strategy moving forward, here are three scenarios and considerations:

## 1. Go virtual

Virtual companies could save money on real estate and related costs, especially if they are located in expensive urban settings. But that money will need to be reinvested in other areas, like [IT security measures](#) to ensure company and customer data are secure outside a corporate network.

If work and home are synonymous for an entire company, the business may bear some financial responsibility for ensuring business tools, [connectivity](#), [data speeds](#) or phone plans are sufficient in employees' homes. Companies could also put into place requirements regarding private or dedicated spaces in employees' homes that aren't attainable for every employee, causing them to lose high-performing or high-potential employees.

Virtual companies have to be comfortable letting go. When work isn't performed on site, companies lose some control over the process and possibly the output. And to successfully lead a virtual company, leaders need strong relationships with their staff to connect people to the company and to one another.

## 2. Downsize

Some companies are considering downsizing their physical spaces and adopting a hybrid workstyle, where some work continues virtually and only essential meetings and services still occur on site. Or they may rotate employees through a workspace to limit the amount of physical contact between workers.

In theory, fewer people do take up less space. But business executive and facility managers need to consider how spaces are currently configured and how they will need to be configured in the future. Open-format offices or agile workstations may not satisfy new social distancing standards and safety needs.

Employees may need to be spread out differently to maintain social distancing standards — or simply to rebuild employees' confidence in the workplace. You may need the same square footage you have today to safely support fewer people.

### 3. Adjust to new standards

Even companies that plan to keep their real estate strategy “as is” will need to make accommodations to keep employees safe and confident at work. That may mean enhanced cleaning schedules, raising the height of cubicle walls or changing cafeteria and kitchen layouts.

Some of the technologies that kept companies running during the height of the pandemic may continue once employees have returned to the office. Companies can keep the tools and virtual processes that worked well, like video conferencing, and reserve conference rooms and in-person meetings for topics that warrant it.

At least initially, the criteria for “Do we need a meeting?” now includes the potential costs to health and safety. People may be hesitant to congregate in a conference room — especially if there’s not a process for sanitizing spaces in between meetings or they are not able to maintain appropriate social distancing.

Perks like coffee, water coolers and refrigerators may be a thing of the past; despite any grumbling, companies need to make facility changes for the health and safety of employees.



### The technology requirements of downsizing office space

Maybe, at this point, you’re seriously considering downsizing your office space and having some employees permanently on site and some employees working remotely.

Outside of considering how you can maintain social distancing requirements in a smaller office, there’s the technology factor you can’t ignore. And when talking about your organization’s technology, you have to look at the two biggest pieces of it: office technology and remote worker technology.

In general, here are the in-office technology savings to be had in downsizing office space:

- The reduced need for installing, monitoring and maintaining physical security, such as cameras and card readers
- The reduced need for maintaining as many printers and fax machines
- The potential to rely more on electronic communication than paper communication
- The reduced need for as much wireless coverage and internet speed, since you will be supporting fewer employees



If your organization is looking to move from a larger office building to a smaller office building, it's important to [answer the many IT infrastructure questions](#) that come with such a move – and answering them when you begin the planning phase, not after. Answer questions like: Do you need security card access? How many network drops and wireless coverage points do you need? Where will your fax machines and printers go? How long can your network be down during the move, or can you run both sites simultaneously?

It's also important to have conversations about the cloud.

If you're not already using cloud-based technology, there are reasons not to. If you run machinery that requires servers, or if you have legacy software running internally, you may want to consider keeping your on-premises servers.

But if you have an email server, for example, you could save significant money by moving to a cloud-based application such as Office 365. And the cloud is always going to be better for remote workers, since it allows them to access software applications and company data from anywhere, further enabling them to do their jobs effectively.

It doesn't hurt to do a cost comparison to see if it makes sense for your organization to move to the cloud. You'll have to look at licensing costs and the time and labor it will take, but when you weigh that against long-term productivity gains and cost savings in not maintaining servers, you might come out on top.

### Rethinking your remote worker technology

Before you begin planning an office-space downsize, it's important to have conversations about whether you're fully enabling your remote workforce to be successful. Have you supplied them with external monitors, the right software and any other critical technology pieces they may need?

Internet is one of the biggest concerns for remote work. Do all of your employees have stable and high-speed internet? If an employee lives in a more rural area and relies on dial-up or satellite internet, that's not very compatible with remote access software and cloud solutions. Some states actually require organizations to provide mobile internet hotspots or a stipend for employees who need them. If you want to downsize office space and encourage more employees to work from home, consider the cost of providing the technology they need to be successful versus the cost of maintaining your current office space.

Security is also a huge concern. Securing data when it leaves your organization isn't a new concept, but the long-term trend of moving from company-provided cell phones to personal mobile devices means that mobile device management is more important than ever.

From laptops to cell phones, organizations should implement encryption, the use of a secure VPN and multi-factor authentication to ensure a high level of security no matter where the employee is working. Specifically for smartphones, consider using a mobile device management application such as Microsoft Intune, which is capable of remote wiping company data from the phone, as well as preventing screenshots and prohibiting copying and pasting inside the company email application.

### Moving forward as an organization

Regardless of the real estate and technology decisions you make, employees are stepping back into a very different reality than the one they left. Many employees will welcome the routine and social aspects associated with the office – but still struggle with small changes.

To get back to full productivity, communicate changes early and often, emphasize the resulting health benefits and stay open to feedback. Use your space – or virtual work habits – to build a safe community for employees and stakeholders.

# The new normal

A crisis is a turning point. There's no going back from COVID-19. It's time to evaluate the actions your business has taken in response to the pandemic and determine what's important to navigating the new normal.

Wipfli can help your business navigate the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on your people, goals and finances. As a top 20 accounting and consulting firm in the country, we've been helping clients with everything from stimulus funding to strategic planning to cybersecurity. Let our highly experienced, specialized teams help you stabilize your business today and prepare for tomorrow.

Contact us to discuss your business's needs and how we can help you respond, recover and revitalize your people and business.

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