A GUIDANCE TO REOPENING YOUR OFFICE
The Coronavirus Pandemic continues to shape aspects of daily life for businesses, communities and individuals around the world. While many states, including Illinois, are beginning to reopen businesses, going back to work will be anything but business-as-usual. Both human resources and executive teams need to be vigilant in implementing changes to keep their staff and members safe. Many of the changes to business operations—such as virtual events, remote work, and more—can be maintained even after local governments give the green light to reopen offices. So how do you begin to reopen the office and what considerations should be weighed as you do so?

Association Forum created an Office Reopen Advisory Council of experts to address this very question. We are sharing the work of the Advisory Council to help our members weigh the many aspects of reopening their spaces. Every association’s situation will be different, so this guide is meant to walk you through key considerations.

Disclaimer
Our intent is to share information to help others make decisions during this time. This guide is not intended as legal advice. Association Forum cannot ensure safety and disclaims all liability arising from the use of this guide. Ultimately, you must make your own decisions regarding the reopening of your facilities—and we hope to be a resource for you.

It is strongly recommended that associations abide by the guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), state and local government restrictions. Association Forum’s decisions have been based around the phasing approach set by the State of Illinois and the City of Chicago. We will continue to monitor these guidelines throughout the reopening process and update this guide as appropriate.

There are seven sections to this guide:
1. Preparing the Office for Reopen
2. Communicate Your Plan to Stakeholders
3. Preparing the Physical Office Space
4. Creating Guidelines for Staff
5. Legal Issues and Liability
6. Opening the Office
7. Moving Forward and Adapting

PREPARING THE OFFICE FOR REOPEN
According to the Institute of Real Estate Management (IREM), preparation before reopening is critical. Key areas of preparation include:

- Determining your role and liability in preventing the spread of disease
- Participating in planning with your stakeholders
- Coordinating with staff and service providers on an operating plan
- Establish a cleaning, disinfection and infection prevention regimen
• Stocking enough cleaning, sanitization, disinfection and hygiene products
• Adding signage, barriers, hand sanitization stations and floor markings for social distancing
• Taking care of any deferred maintenance
• Performing preventative maintenance
• Readying equipment for startup
• Adjusting equipment for new operating conditions
• Making sure building systems support good indoor air quality (IAQ) and do not promote the spread of the disease. Some may consider upgrading HVAC filters.
• Planning for proper and safe waste management practices
• IREM: Pandemic Guide for Real Estate Managers: Resources for Reopening Your Property

It is important to put the health and safety of your stakeholders first. According to Gregg Witt, MBA, senior vice president at CBRE, “there are many outside factors that impact your workforce. These include public transportation, childcare needs, and concerns from populations that are high-risk if they contract the virus.” While you can’t control these factors, Witt suggests looking at each staff position and determining how essential it is for them to physically be in the office.
COMMUNICATE YOUR PLAN TO STAKEHOLDERS

Communicating to staff and members about the pandemic and your organizational response should be ongoing and consistent. It is important to communicate your organization’s response after each phase whenever possible. This is a novel pandemic and fluid process. It is important to maintain agility and flexibility as there are circumstances outside your control.

According to Sara Curtis, Director of Human Resources at the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA), the ASA “has significantly increased its communications with stakeholders during the pandemic. Daily conference calls are convened with the CEO Team to ensure they are aligned during this crisis. Biweekly all staff meetings are designed to keep everyone updated and engaged in the process. The meeting times can be only 30 minutes long, however, the transparency is key to engagement, confidence and trust.”

For example, to effectively communicate with members, Association Forum developed a COVID-19 digital newsletter titled, Ignite the Restart, and resource page to aggregate content to be a clearinghouse for information relevant to staff and members as they navigate the pandemic. The CEO convenes regular meetings with members of the management team individually and twice per week as a team. Monthly town hall meetings are convened with the entire staff. As developments are confirmed, staff will receive a written communication.

Thomas C. Dolan, PhD, FACHE, FASAE, President Emeritus, American College of Healthcare Executives, suggests defining expectations for your members. Inform them via a newsletter and a message on your website how operations will differ during this time. “Members have to know how you will continue to service them and that you are keeping the staff safe,” he says. But that doesn’t mean you should suspend services. Dolan notes that “members still have a right to expect someone to pick up the phone when they call. It would be unacceptable for no one to answer.”

Questions to consider:

• Have you communicated your plans with the Board of Directors?
• Are you clearly and consistently communicating with staff about the office closure and potential reopening?
• Have you alerted members to how you are operating during this time?
• Have you contacted vendors (as necessary) regarding changes to your office schedule?
• Have you updated company policies and procedures, Human Resource policies and waivers?

PREPARING THE PHYSICAL OFFICE SPACE

Before you can safely bring people back to work, you must consider the physical space they will be occupying. This may mean changes to entry points, limiting use of meeting rooms and common spaces, alteration of existing building materials and implementing hands-free entry.

Some offices will need to reevaluate their layouts and the spacing of workstations given the recent trend toward “open concept” workplaces. Spacing desks more than 6 feet apart or adding temporary physical barriers such as Plexiglass dividers between desks are possible options. The Advisory Council recommends making temporary changes that may become permanent as COVID-19 might be around longer than assumed. A signage system is very important because
it helps to navigate the necessary shifts in behaviors and serves as a reminder to adhere to guidelines to keep everyone safe and well. Check with your building on the HVAC system air circulation to create a safe environment. Modifications to heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems might help reduce the spread by filtering the air, improving ventilation, and managing airflows. A few inexpensive options to decrease the spread of germs throughout the office include, but are not limited to, enforcing face masks, providing hand sanitizer stations, distributing antibacterial wipes, and installing foot operated door openers.

For ASA, building modifications haven’t come into play. “We decided that no one has to go back to the office until there’s a vaccine or real treatment for this,” says Curtis.

ASA’s 70,000 square foot facility in Schaumburg, IL, reopened to staff on June 8. The building is available just two days a week and attendance is at the sole discretion of the employees. Mondays and Thursdays were chosen to align with the mailroom schedule established during quarantine, as well as to limit cleaning services required for a mostly empty building.

On average, no more than 15 of ASA’s 140 Schaumburg employees have chosen to go into the office on a given day. Staff are required to enter the building through the dock door, but these low numbers have made modifications to the physical space unnecessary.

The National Association of Personal Financial Advisors (NAPFA) leases office space near O’Hare Airport for their staff of 10. While NAPFA reopened in mid-July, attendance is completely voluntary. Geof Brown, CEO has told the staff that “working from home is your best and safest option and we strongly encourage you to do so.” In fact, Brown adds that he is trying to lead by example by going into the office only to complete tasks that can’t be done remotely.
Questions to consider:

- Do you own or rent your space?
  - If you rent, have you had meetings with your landlord regarding the safety of the building?
  - If you own, have you spoken to your facilities management team regarding the HVAC system, entrances and pathways throughout the building?
- Do you have private offices or workstations set up 6 feet apart?
- What modifications will need to be made to achieve proper social distancing?
- Which common spaces (breakrooms, reception, mailroom) need to be adapted?
- Can you create hands-free entry for the building?
- Have you purchased the adequate amount of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to support operations? For example, masks, hand sanitizers, signage, thermometers.

CREATING GUIDELINES FOR STAFF

When staff return to the office, they will likely find the atmosphere very different from when they left. Many associations have created new policies, handbook addenda and protocols for staff to follow while in the office. Jed Mandel, JD, partner, Chicago Law Partners, LLC, advises organizations to update all policies periodically, but also to adopt policies unique to COVID-19.

“I think it’s something prudent to do,” says Mandel, adding, “you should have policies specific to COVID-19 and have employees agree to them.” Mandel suggests having employees sign a form to acknowledge they are aware of the policies, but to also remind them of the policies often.

Some organizations have developed a pandemic plan that includes specific scenarios, business requirements, and policies and procedures to provide a systemic response. It also serves as a foundation to address future pandemics. It is critical to be in compliance with state and federal guidelines regarding what and how to respond.

These policies should include what personal protective equipment (PPE) is required, social distancing guidelines, hygiene requirements and wellness protocols. Some organizations have incorporated daily employee wellness checks for example temperature checks and reporting COVID-like symptoms within a designated period of time after arriving to the office. Employees should be well-informed of their responsibility in keeping the workplace safe.

“There aren’t particularly right answers,” says Mandel, “but each employer needs to determine what’s right for their own workplace to make sure they provide a reasonably safe workplace for employees.”

Questions to Consider:

- Wellness protocols
  - Will you require temperature checks?
  - Will you require a pre-entry questionnaire?
  - What are your quarantine procedures should an employee contract COVID-19 or have a known exposure?
  - Will you provide testing if a rapid test becomes available?
o Will you have a policy regarding vaccines if a vaccine becomes available?
• What is your social distancing policy?
• Will you require face coverings? Under what circumstances (ex. in common areas, but not at one’s desk)?
• What changes will be made to package and mail procedures?
• Will you serve coffee or food? What changes will be made to the kitchen area to ensure safety?
• Will you institute a clean desk policy?

LEGAL ISSUES AND LIABILITY

The law that applies to these circumstances is the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSHA). More specifically, Mandel points to the General Duty Clause, Section 5(a)(1):

Each employer shall furnish to each of his employees 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 to his employees.

Employers must take reasonable precautions so that they are not negligent. According to Mandel, this doesn’t mean an employer won’t be sued, but rather, by taking reasonable precautions, they likely won’t be held liable.

Another area to exercise caution is limiting which employees are allowed to come to work.
“In the interest of benevolence, some employers may say ‘if you are over the age of 65, have asthma, etc., don’t come in and don’t travel,’” says Mandel. But this would be a mistake given anti-discrimination laws. Instead, Mandel suggests: “make it voluntary across the board.” You may want to obligate people to come in, especially if they cannot do their job function at home. But Mandel says that it is “prudent to give people some latitude as we ramp up to the future ‘new normal.’”

If someone does get sick, you have to alert employees, but you cannot divulge who it is. Keep HIPAA identifying criteria in mind so that you don’t give away someone’s identity by specifying details such as gender or which floor they work on. You should prepare for the fact that you may need to close the office (again) if one or more employees get sick.

Finally, Mandel suggests looking at the way your team has been working for the past 90 days. “Now may be a good time to institutionalize those remote work policies,” he says. According to survey results released in April 2020 from Gallup, “Sixty-two percent of employed Americans say they have worked from home during the crisis, a number that has doubled since mid-March.” Furthermore, the survey finds that nearly sixty percent of workers would prefer to remain home even after the pandemic has ended. Employers need to think about the future and how their remote work policies will shift to meet these changing times.

Questions to Consider:

- Are you taking reasonable precautions to ensure employee safety?
- Have your employees been notified of new policies and signed off on them?
- Have you created flexible attendance policies to avoid inadvertent discrimination?
- Do you have a plan in place if an employee gets sick?
- Have you made lasting changes to your remote work policies?
- Are you using cleaning and disinfectant that are on the EPA N-List for COVID-19?

OPENING THE OFFICE

You’ve done it. You’ve set a date and you plan to allow staff back in the office. Here are some considerations as you reopen your space:

Timing

The Advisory Council offered that there is no urgency to re-open physical spaces. It should be the individual association’s decision. This is driven by not having a vaccine as well as ambiguous federal, state and local guidelines. Like Association Forum, many organizations are forming a “readiness team” to help make modifications and prepare the space for staff and members. The team should be cross functional and consist of key stakeholders.

Capacity

Some organizations will struggle with capacity limitations given social distancing rules. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC):

- Modify or adjust seats, furniture, and workstations to maintain social distancing of 6 feet between employees, where possible.
o Install transparent shields or other physical barriers where possible to separate employees and visitors where social distancing is not an option.

o Arrange chairs in reception or other communal seating areas by turning, draping (covering chair with tape or fabric so seats cannot be used), spacing, or removing chairs to maintain social distancing.

• Use methods to physically separate employees in all areas of the building, including work areas and other areas such as meeting rooms, break rooms, parking lots, entrance and exit areas, and locker rooms.

   o Use signs, tape marks, or other visual cues such as decals or colored tape on the floor, placed 6 feet apart, to show where to stand when physical barriers are not possible.

   o Replace high-touch communal items, such as coffee pots and bulk snacks, with alternatives such as pre-packaged, single-serving items. Encourage staff to bring their own water to minimize use and touching of water fountains or consider installing no-touch activation methods for water fountains.

Phasing
Staff whose jobs cannot be completed productively at home should be the first group to return. Other staff can be split into teams. Still others may choose not to return at all due to underlying health concerns, childcare needs, or other factors. Again, to prevent discrimination and demonstrate flexibility, you should make attendance optional if possible.
Staggering Workdays

Workdays may need to shift, especially if your employees use public transportation. “Associations have a responsibility to help society get essential workers back to work first. Let the public transportation systems work for those individuals to make sure they’re safe before we start adding association staff who could work from home,” says Dolan. Another way to alleviate congestion may be by shifting the workday to avoid busy commuting times or allowing staff to choose what time to come in.

Staff will need either face-to-face or online training on the new protocols. It will not be sufficient to hand them the new guidelines and expect them to successfully implement them.

Moving Forward and Adapting

Unfortunately, no one knows when the threat of COVID-19 will end because the virus is still out there and will live among us for some time. Organizations must monitor the situation and adapt using the information they have. This is a very fluid process and it changes daily.

This will mean responding to changes from employees as their needs may change. One big unknown is how or when schools will go back to in-person learning. This is a factor that will greatly impact the ability of many employees to return to an office.

You will also need to stay attune to landlord requirements and government regulations. The idea of phases means that a spike in cases could move us back down the ladder and into previous restrictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a true test of organizational agility. And while it’s been a tough time for businesses and individuals around the world, there have been some bright spots. “This isn’t a time to be rigid,” says Brown, “this is a time to be flexible and support our people not only as professionals, but also in life.”

Finally, you should consider a third-party accreditation of your facility’s cleaning, disinfection, and infection prevention measures to increase confidence among staff, customers, and other stakeholders as you prepare to reopen. Association Forum has partnered with the Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC), a Division of ISSA, on its GBAC STAR™ facility accreditation program to help members implement proper cleaning protocols, disinfection techniques, and work practices to combat biohazards and infectious disease—now and in the future. Learn more at www.associationforum.org/ignite.

As we move forward and continue to ignite the restart, we know that there will be many decisions to make regarding how to keep employees and staff safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. For association leaders, this will remain a top priority as offices reopen. Association Forum will continue to be a resource for best practices and guidance.

Visit the Association Forum’s Ignite the Restart Resource Center at AssociationForum.org/ignite.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Office Reopen Advisory Council

JOHN H. BARRETT
Executive Director, ISSA

MICHAEL BERGER
Director of Interiors, GREC Architects

GEOFFREY BROWN, CAE
Chief Executive Officer, National Association of Personal Financial Advisors

THOMAS C. DOLAN, PHD, FACHE, FASAE
Executive Coach & Consultant and President Emeritus, American College of Healthcare Executives

RAJ GUPTA
Executive Chairman, Environmental Systems Design, Inc.

JED MANDEL, JD
Partner, Chicago Law Partners LLC

PATRICK PHILBIN
General Manager, Hines

PAUL POMERANTZ, FACHE
Chief Executive Officer, American Society of Anesthesiologists

MARK RAKOCZY
Vice President, ECI

GREGG WITT
Senior Vice President, CBRE

Association Forum Staff

MICHELLE MASON, FASAE, CAE
President & CEO

CARYN ADOLPH
Manager to the Executive Office

KARA BROCKMAN, CAE, DES
Director of Education and Content

SARAH MURPHY, CAE
Director of Membership and Marketing

PHYLLIS SCOTT
Director of Business Services
EDITOR
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Office Reopen Resources:

INSTITUTE OF REAL ESTATE MANAGEMENT (IREM)
https://www.irem.org/learning/coronavirus

CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL (CDC)

CITY OF CHICAGO

STATE OF ILLINOIS
https://coronavirus.illinois.gov/s/

EPA N-LIST
https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2-covid-19

CBRE
CBRE.com/covid-19
Reopening The World’s Workplaces

OFFICE LEASE

HVAC SYSTEMS

CLEANING AND SANITIZATION
ISSA: The Worldwide Cleaning Association
https://www.issa.com/

GLOBAL BIORISK ADVISORY COUNCIL (GBAC)
www.gbac.org