

Using alternative scheduling to help your business reopen

The ability to reopen your company does not immediately translate into resuming workplace life as it existed before the COVID-19 pandemic. With people's health remaining the primary concern, organizations need to find ways to bring staff back on-site as safely as possible. Alternative scheduling can be a good option for some employers.

What is alternative scheduling?

Prior to the crisis, a large number of companies operated on a standard schedule of employees working 9 to 5 (or something quite similar) from Monday through Friday. An alternative schedule deviates from this set-up by changing the hours and/or days people come in.

This expanded way of utilizing your workforce creates a wealth of potential scenarios. A few arrangement possibilities include:

- Staggering employee start and end times by opening earlier and closing later (working in shifts)
- Assigning individuals specific days of the week to come in and specific ones on which to stay home (combining with remote work, if possible)
- Staying open on weekends

While not necessarily appealing to all companies, there's even exploration of more unconventional set-ups. This *Fast Company* [article](#) presents the idea of four days on followed by 10 days off, based on the following premise:

"After someone is infected, it takes an average of three days before they can infect someone else. That means that people can theoretically work or attend school together for a short time if they then spend another stretch of time on lockdown—four days of work followed by 10 days at home. If they have gotten sick during their time at work, it will show up during their 10 days off and they won't come into work for their next 4-day shift."

How alternative scheduling contributes to a safer workplace

Fewer people in a building at any given time promotes social distancing. Employers can arrange desks and other furniture in ways that allow greater space between them. Emptier hallways, bathrooms, kitchens, and other common areas mean fewer encounters with fellow employees. Added "roominess" likewise contributes to the psychological well-being of returning employees who have dutifully limited contact with others over the past few months and are anxious over leaving the safety of home.

Alternate scheduling also can help with a company's precautionary efforts. Dividing workers into shifts allows time for thorough office cleaning before the next group of employees arrives. If measures such as taking temperatures and distributing masks are part of the new daily routine, keeping a handle on the number of people entering the building at a given time eases the burden and promotes orderly conduct.

Cane Bay Partners, a financial services firm, is one of many companies implementing alternative scheduling to help dwindle traffic as employees come into the building. According to co-founder David Johnson, “We have spent the last several weeks carefully planning and strategizing a safe return with our employees’ wellbeing at the forefront. As we adjust to our new normal, it is only right to consider the full needs of the employee so that they can work at their best. The new schedule will ensure time to administer safety screenings prior to the employees entering the building.”

Other potential benefits of alternative scheduling

With public transportation in many regions not operating at full power, riders may be forced into catching busses or trains at only certain times. A work schedule that shifts a person’s hours may be able to accommodate these leaner running times and prevent hassles such as needlessly waiting around an office or a station.

Alternative scheduling also can prove advantageous for parents who are still dealing with school closure and other childcare issues. Providing a mixture of on-site days and remote work, or perhaps allowing employees to come in on the weekend when a spouse is available to handle home concerns, can lighten some of the load.

Ann Nihil, operations and culture manager at Fracture, notes that alternative scheduling has become important for her company as employees continue to navigate their workdays. “Many parents who were able to work our core hours to accommodate school schedules and after school activities have had to make modifications as their families are now home 24/7. This might mean taking out additional time to fix lunch, creating access to activities outside for school projects, and working hours that could be earlier or later in the day to accommodate helping younger ones with technology.”

Some companies are pleasantly finding that adopting an alternative schedule offers an interesting business advantage.

“When it comes to customer service, staggering working times has actually helped us to provide better coverage,” says John Moss, CEO of English Blinds. “While previously we only took calls/responded to emails and chat requests until 5pm, we now run a shift until 9pm that can reply to queries from earlier in the day from callers who said a later call back would be ok, and to respond to emails that came in during the day that were not handled in normal business hours.”

Considerations when implementing alternative scheduling

Factors such as the size of your facility, the number of people on staff, who really needs to be on site, and the nature of your business will influence how your organization goes about creating alternative schedules – if at all. Places operating relatively well remotely may not see the need to get creative on figuring out how to bring more people back to the physical workplace.

Sometimes, solutions prove relatively straightforward. For example, Jennifer Barnes, CEO of Optima Office, notes that some of the offices at her company were previously shared by two employees. These people now alternate which one comes in on certain days.

Especially at large places, however, logistics can be complex. Leaders may want to seek out the services of firms devoted to developing alternate schedules that reduce the density of the office while maintaining productivity.

Alternative scheduling is not a panacea. Companies likely will need to experiment and make adjustments as they see fit as well as respond to changes in the world around them. But while life may not feel normal for quite some time, progress offers hope and puts organizations on the right track toward success.

As Sean Nguyen, director of Internet Advisor, aptly states regarding his company's decision to try an alternate schedule that reduces the number of people on the premises on a given day, "The pros are obviously that we're limiting exposure and the number of people that may get sick. The downside is that it can take longer to get something done if we're not all present. People have voiced concerns and discontent about having to switch from remote to in-office to remote, and that it interrupts workflow. I agree, and we're still working on finding a better solution, but for now, this is the best we can do."