

When staff remains remote: Navigating the dynamics of a split office



As states begin allowing employers to bring office workers back into the physical workplace, employers are running into conflicting guidelines from local, state, and federal authorities. Redesigning workplaces for social distancing, virus containment and general safety is proving daunting and expensive.

No wonder some employers are rethinking whether to reopen—especially if their employees worked effectively from home during mandatory lockdowns. Bringing staff back to the physical workplace requires careful thinking about safety, costs and operational issues. Face the fact that at least some of your employees are likely to continue working remotely.

Safety and capacity

We are still in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Employers still must follow specific requirements for social distancing, cleaning, and workplace capacity.

Examples: Facilities with open-plan offices and large common areas may need new walls and partitions to maintain social distancing. Centers for Disease Control guidelines call for removing high-touch objects such as coffee pots and snack bins from break rooms and conference rooms. Even elevator capacity must be restricted.

To spread out workers, employers may have to stagger office shifts, change arrival and departure times or reduce operating hours.

A mix of onsite and remote work may be the most practical approach for many employers. Employers may need to accommodate workers with health conditions that make them vulnerable to covid-19 by offering ongoing telework, if that is feasible.

Potential cost savings

The mass move to working remotely has made it clear that renting or owning commercial office space may be unnecessary. Nationwide Insurance, for example, decided it could afford to permanently shutter regional offices in five states after concluding employees were just as productive working from home as they were in their cubicles.

The cost-saving factor may weigh heavily in the return-to-work equation if the current mini-recession stretches late into the year. Consult your accountants and lawyers to determine the best way forward from a financial perspective, especially if abandoning space means breaking a lease or selling a facility during a slack commercial real estate market.

Permanent telecommuting rules

When you sent employees home in March, you probably did not have a detailed, formal plan for large-scale teleworking. Now is the time to prepare one, based at least in part on the policies and procedures you created on the fly.

Remote work policies should address:

- Positions eligible for continued telework. Include a disclaimer that telework is at the discretion of the employer and that continued telework is not guaranteed.
- Eligibility to continue working remotely, based on hitting productivity and other goals. State that failure to meet goals can result in termination, not just having to return to the office.
- A clear policy on time-tracking. Require employees to track all hours worked; this is absolutely essential for nonexempt employees. Establish procedures for auditing time records.

Finally, create a standard telework agreement that covers all the details.

Online resource Download our free sample telework agreement in Microsoft Word format at <https://tinyurl.com/telework-agreement>.

How to set up a split office

Matt Martin, CEO and co-founder of Clockwise, a San Francisco-based software company, offers these tips for keeping workers safer, happier and more productive as companies transition into a split office setup.

Get everyone on the same page

Now is the ideal time to invest in project management software, which serves as your team's source of truth when it comes to each project's updates, statuses, assignees, due dates, files and more. Examples include Asana, Notion, Trello, Monday and Basecamp. A tool that offers visibility into others' schedules, tasks and workloads can be especially helpful for partially remote teams.

Get chatting

Good chat software lets you send and thread instant messages to individuals and groups. Examples include Slack, Hangouts, Glip and Twist. The ability to start a video call inside the chat app is nice, as is time zone awareness if your team is distributed. Some apps allow you to set your status so colleagues know when you're busy or free, in a meeting, or it's outside your work hours. If you're a Slack user, get the most out of it by syncing your Slack status with your Google Calendar.

Set up video conferencing

Videoconferencing software is obviously a must. It facilitates on-demand or pre-scheduled videoconferencing among two or more people simultaneously. Generally, it integrates with your calendar system and provides built-in screen sharing and chat functionality. Examples include Skype, Zoom, WebEx, Rooms, and GoToMeeting. It's nice to have videoconferencing software that allows workers to call into the meeting toll-free from their phones.

Videoconferencing can also bring employees together for fun and camaraderie. At Clockwise we do lunch Zooms where our Office Manager Czar divides employees into smaller groups where we eat and catch up.

Share everyone's status

It's a good idea to have everyone set their working hours and add WFH (working from home) or OOO (out of office) to their calendars. Clockwise streamlines status sharing by adding everyone's individual WFH or OOO to their team's calendar automatically.

Upgrade workers' work-from-home setup

Have everyone use services like fast.com or Speedtest to measure their home internet connection speeds. If they're slow, or they're running out of data, consider offering cash to upgrade and/or invest in a mesh network or wifi extender.

Then offer them a little money to upgrade their desk, monitor, mouse and keyboard. If they have equipment at the office, let them bring it home. At the start of WFH, Clockwise gave employees \$100 for a new chair and let us bring our stuff from the office home.

Going forward

Staggering your comeback to the office can be a great way to balance the benefits of an in-office environment while still keeping employees reasonably safe.

The trick is to make sure no one feels left out and everyone is able to work productively. Making sure you have the right technology and equipment makes all the difference.