

Is a post-COVID remote work policy right for you?

With COVID restrictions easing up and vaccines now readily available, many business owners are planning for the return to the office. Others are wondering if they'll even really need an office at all after two years of their team working remotely without a loss of productivity. Deciding on the best course policy for your workplace can be tricky. There are a lot of pros and cons to weigh with each possible working arrangement, and newly empowered employees might have a lot to say.

If you're still debating what your remote work policy should look like, you're not alone. There are a number of policies to consider. Let's take a look at the three major options and the factors that you should weigh as you create your post-COVID remote work policy.

Possible work arrangements

Fully remote work

Some business owners are eschewing the office completely and transitioning to fully remote work arrangements for all staff. Others are approving some positions as fully remote.

Remote work arrangements do have some unique benefits:

- Offering fully remote roles can help improve your recruiting outcomes. Companies advertising remote jobs can access a wider pool of talent and remote work is often seen as a big perk that may help you beat out the competition for the top candidates.
- Remote work can improve employee well-being and work-life balance by eliminating commuting. A lengthy commute in traffic can add a lot of time and stress to someone's workday and speed up burnout.
- Remote work can increase productivity. [FlexJobs' survey](#) of more than 2,100 employees who worked from home during the pandemic found that 51% reported being more productive while working remotely. 95% reported that productivity was higher or the same while working remotely.
- Many employees simply prefer remote work. Thus, allowing them to work remotely can improve employee satisfaction and retention.
- It can save money for employers. Employers switching to a fully remote staffing model can save on costs related to office space, in-office perks, equipment, and even salaries.

However, that's not to say that a fully remote workforce will be right for every business. In fact, a partially remote workforce is often more appropriate. You want to allow employees to work in their preferred work environment, but some job duties will require employees to go to a physical worksite to interact with clients, co-workers, or use specialized equipment at times. Thus, the hybrid work model is also a strong option.

Hybrid work model

A hybrid work model is a mix between a full work-from-home policy and an in-person work policy where teleworking is allowed for part of the workweek. This often looks like 3 days remote and two days in office, or vice versa. However, the split is up to the company's leadership. Some hybrid roles only require employees to work from the office one day a week or to simply come in for in-person client or staff meetings as needed.

Hybrid work offers many of the same benefits as remote work, including increased employee satisfaction, retention, and cost savings. [Global Workplace Analytics](#) estimates that an employer can save \$11,000 on average per year for each half-time telecommuter.

Hybrid work models are also sometimes used to describe working arrangements in which part of the workforce is remote and part of the staff goes to work in-person. This can be a good way to handle remote work when some departments or job roles cannot work remotely due to their job responsibilities, but others have roles that can be completed successfully from home.

Hybrid policies can also help you onboard and train employees more effectively. Many employers have new hires work in-person with a trainer or mentor for a few weeks and gradually start working partially or fully remotely as they learn the ropes and become more independent.

In-person only

Some major companies such as Microsoft and Google plan to put an end to their remote work policies and have all staff return to the office to work together in-person again. Many companies, particularly in the tech space, invested a lot of resources into their physical workspaces and used this to attract candidates and promote their company culture. It can be hard to commit to a fully remote work policy when the office was previously such an integral part of your business. This isn't just true for tech giants, many start-ups also embraced the open concept offices with ping pong tables, fully stocked fridges, and frequent in-person team-bonding activities.

While the office perks themselves aren't necessarily a reason to return to the office, the teamwork and company culture may be. Some businesses do hands-on collaboration or more sporadic brainstorming sessions to elicit innovation. While virtual meetings can be highly interactive, it can be difficult to replicate the energy of an in-person meeting when it comes to sharing ideas to spark creativity and innovation.

Some employees also simply prefer the office. Working from home can come with a lot of distractions or interruptions, especially if other family members will be home during the workday. The office can also give employees more direct access to management, which may be preferable for employees that need more support or who want to make sure that their efforts are noticed.

It is also true that while remote work can provide greater work-life balance, some employees find that the lack of separation between their workspace and their home can cause problems when trying to disconnect. [65% of remote workers](#) report working more hours than they had while working in the office. Remote workers tend to be more likely to stay late or answer emails after work hours as they don't get the physical act of leaving the office like in-person workers do.

How to pick the right policy for your business

Consider your business needs

Do employees need to be in a physical worksite to collaborate or complete their tasks? If employees have successfully maintained productivity while working from their home offices for the past two years, the answer may be no. Many of the meetings and collaborative efforts that previously required a physical presence in the office have been able to take place over virtual meetings.

However, some businesses may have needs that do not suit telecommuting. These are likely to be the businesses that operated on a partially remote or socially distanced basis during the peak of covid rather than going fully remote. On the other hand, some businesses have taken it a bit further and come to the decision that there is no longer a valid business need for a large office. If the investment in the building space is no longer practical or necessary, it may be time to permanently shift everyone to remote work.

You'll also want to examine your business needs to determine the best type of remote work policy, if that is the direction that you plan to take. Will everyone need to maintain the same work schedule? Or will you allow some flexibility around work hours for remote workers? Asynchronous remote work is gaining some traction, and you will also need to consider time zone differences if you plan to hire outside of your region or allow employees to move to other states and take their jobs with them.

Know your team

While business needs will often dictate what policies are practical, it's also important to know your team and how they work. Many employees reported an increase in productivity and well-being when they shifted to remote work during the pandemic. However, particularly social and collaborative teams may be feeling a lack of connection while operating as fully remote employees. If employees want more connection or hands-on support, a hybrid policy may be a good compromise.

Conduct a survey

If you aren't sure where your employees stand on remote work options, ask them. Have human resources send out an anonymous survey, or include remote work questions on their employee engagement survey.

If employees truly do not want to return to the office full-time, it's a bad idea to force them to. In the [Qualtrics 2022 Employee Experience](#) survey, 35% of employees reported that they would look for a new job if they were forced to work from the office full-time. With the current labor shortages and competitive recruiting environment, most businesses can't afford to lose over a third of their workforce.

Be flexible

Regardless of the policy that you choose, it's important to be flexible, especially during the initial transition period if you are returning to the office full or part-time. The coronavirus pandemic is not completely over, so even as restrictions ease, it's important for employers to be understanding of temporary changes or setbacks. Employees may run into childcare difficulties if there is a covid outbreak at their child's school or daycare center that requires a quarantine period or closure. Flexible working arrangements, including remote work, may also qualify as disability accommodations under the ADA in some circumstances.

If your policy is that employees need to be in office for a certain number of days, include a line in the policy that exceptions will be considered by human resources or management on a case-by-case basis. Have a clear approval system in place to make that process fair and transparent for everyone.

Weighing your options

Each policy has its own benefits and drawbacks. Hybrid work policies are becoming the most popular choice for employers because they offer a good middle ground. A [Mercer study](#) found that 70% of companies said that they planned to adopt the hybrid model long-term. This can be a great option for employers that are looking to leverage the benefits of both remote and in-person work arrangements.

As you consider your options, try to get a variety of opinions from staff and management. If you have access to data on productivity and performance, you can also use that to weigh your options and evaluate what work format works best for your individual team.

Regardless of what policy you choose, be sure to put it in writing and be clear about your expectations. Be clear about how remote workers should check in, their expected schedule and hours, and how changes or special requests to working arrangements will be handled.