

Reopening Workplaces in the COVID-19 “New Normal”

Introduction

For the past few months, businesses have adapted their typical office formats to comply with restrictions made necessary by the global pandemic of COVID-19 – working from home, furloughs, layoffs, and unemployment have become commonplace. Now as the country begins to recover, workers will begin to return to their office buildings and workspaces, but what will this “new normal” look like?

Returning to the workplace will require changes to office buildings and shared common areas, as well as to individual workspaces. First and foremost, this is not a transition that can happen overnight. It will be a step-by-step process that will ultimately reshape the traditional work environment into a new and revitalized form.

Office building employers and building owners and managers will need to work together to create a safe and healthy workplace and protect workers and visitors. It will require changes to both people and places, and communication and teamwork will be more important than ever before.

While the rules may differ from state to state, county to county, or even city to city, it is clear the main goal will be to protect employees’ health, safety, and well-being. The information below will provide some directional guidance for your business going forward.

Building Policies & Practices: Office Buildings & Common Areas

With a multitude of federal mandates, CDC guidelines, and state and local requirements employers and building owners need to collaborate on a suitable plan for implementing safety protocols and best practices, with periodic reviews to keep up to date with changing rules and regulations.

Entranceways & Hallways

- Consider staggering arrival and departure times to avoid crowded parking facilities, entrances, and doorways
- Consider using one-way entrances and exits, as well as hallways. Can you make entrances/exits touch-free?
- Establish procedures for both tenants and visitors:
 1. Will there be separate entrances for tenants and visitors?
 2. Will personal protective equipment (PPE), such as face coverings or rubber gloves, be required in common areas?
 3. Will there be screenings for tenants and/or visitors, such as temperature monitoring, questions about potential symptoms, contact with infected individuals, or travel history?
- Install and maintain dispensers for hand sanitizer immediately inside the entrance ways for use by both tenants and visitors
- Increase frequency of cleaning and sanitization in high-traffic spaces and areas where frequent touch contact occurs

Elevators

- Limit the number of passengers to comply with social distancing guidelines and consider adding signage or floor stickers to indicate where passengers should stand
- Establish social distancing protocols for the elevator waiting area
- Increase cleaning and sanitization of frequently touched elevator surfaces such as keypads and buttons

Restrooms

- Install touch-free equipment such as motion-activated soap and paper towel dispensers
- Install and maintain dispensers for hand sanitizer
- Increase frequency of cleaning and sanitization

HVAC & Air Sanitation Systems

- Building HVAC equipment should be checked to ensure that it meets the minimum standards for ventilation rate and air quality
- Install high-efficiency air filters
- Consider running the building ventilation system even during unoccupied times to maximize dilution ventilation
- Consider portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fan/filtration systems to enhance air cleaning

Employee Work Areas

- Avoid having employees share workspaces whenever possible
- Reconfigure offices, desks, and cubicles to meet social distancing guidelines (6 feet apart)
 - Increase space between individual workstations, for example create a checkerboard pattern wherein only alternate cubicles are occupied. Disable or remove unneeded workstations
- To increase available workstation space, reconfigure common areas including conference rooms, training rooms, and cafeterias to accommodate additional desks and cubicles
- Add plexiglass barriers or increase the height of existing office cubicles
- Provide sanitizers and cleaning materials for employees to disinfect their personal space
- Provide employees with their own individual space to store personal items, including coats
- Eliminate sharing of office equipment and supplies, including computer keyboards and mice, telephones, writing utensils (pens, pencils, white board markers), and other work tools (scissors and staplers)
- Maintain regular housekeeping practices, including cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and equipment (desktops, computers, and telephones)

Meeting Rooms

- Reduce the number of in-person meetings
- Reduce seating capacity by removing every other chair
- Disinfect tables and chairs between uses
- Consider removing upholstered chairs or replacing them with others that can be more easily disinfected
- If possible, eliminate meeting rooms or repurpose them as space for additional desks or cubicles

Common Areas

- Use signs, tape marks, or other visual cues such as decals or colored tape on the floor, placed 6 feet apart, to indicate where to stand when physical barriers are not possible
- Increase frequency of cleaning and sanitization
- Provide hand sanitizer dispensers and/or disinfecting wipes
- Leave lights on during the day or consider installing motion-sensitive lighting
- Leave doors and cabinets open where possible to avoid employees having to touch knobs and handles
- Rearrange or remove furniture to comply with social distancing requirements
- Install and maintain dispensers for hand sanitizer near copiers and common areas
- Replace high-touch communal items, such as coffee pots, water coolers, and bulk snacks, with alternatives such as pre-packaged, single-serving items
- If there is a designated reception area, install protective barriers to reduce contact with visitors

Employer Policies & Practices: Working in the Office

In addition to the space and safety considerations that employers will face as they reopen, there is also the human element that must be factored into policies and practices. Employers will need to ensure that employees feel safe and secure in returning to the workplace and have a defined process for concerns.

Developing an Infection Disease Preparedness Plan

- Create an infectious disease and preparedness response plan if one does not already exist
- Will personal protective equipment (PPE), such as face coverings or gloves, be required in workplace common areas?
- Review guidance from federal, state, and local government and health agencies on a continuing basis and incorporate new guidelines and recommended practices into existing preparedness plans
- Preparedness plans should include contingencies in the event of a future outbreak
- Ensure that preparedness plans are properly communicated to employees
- Include all employees in the workplace in communication plans — for example management, staff, utility employees, relief employees, janitorial staff, maintenance staff, and supervisory staff

Ensure that Employees Use Proper Safety Protocols

- Install and maintain dispensers for hand sanitizer and provide disinfecting wipes and surface cleaners
- Provide personal protective equipment (PPE), including face coverings and rubber gloves, when necessary
- Establish a procedure for employee health monitoring (temperature screening, travel history, and questions about potential symptoms or contact with infected individuals)

Workday Policies

- Consider using staggered starting and ending times or even alternating days or weeks the individual employees are in the office (for example, an office could be divided into two teams and each team could be in the office on alternate days or even alternate weeks)
- Remind employees to wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, they should use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol
- Actively encourage employees who have symptoms of COVID-19 or who have a sick family member at home with COVID-19 to notify their supervisor and stay home
- Ensure that sick leave policies are flexible and that employees are aware of them
- Employees who appear to have symptoms upon arrival at work or who become sick during the day should immediately be separated from others, provided a face mask if they are not using one, and sent home with instructions and guidance on how to follow-up with their health care professional
- Sick employees should not return to work until the criteria to discontinue home isolation are met, in consultation with their healthcare provider
- Perform enhanced cleaning and disinfection after anyone suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 has been in the workplace

Establish Guidelines for Office Visitors

- Establish guidelines for office visitors, including delivery people, clients/customers, and vendors. Will they be required to wear face coverings? Will there be screenings and what will they include (such as temperature monitoring, questions about potential symptoms, contact with infected individuals, or travel history?)
- Minimize contact with clients and customers by replacing face-to-face meetings with telephone and video conferencing
- Restrict visitor access within the office to designated areas
- Designate a location for deliveries and establish a procedure for disinfecting items received

Working from Home: Ensuring that Employees Have the Tools Needed to be Successful

- Provide guidance to employees continuing to work from home including tips for managing workload, avoiding distractions, and maintaining motivation
- Provide employees with continued training, mentoring, and feedback
- Continue to hold office meetings and one-on-one check-ins using telephone and video conferencing

Conclusion

The above outline is not an exhaustive list of the steps that will need to be taken in the coming weeks, months, and possibly years. It is intended to provide you with a starting point for your journey and BellCornerstone would like to help you along the way. Whether your commercial real estate portfolio includes property ownership, leased space, or a combination of both, BellCornerstone can help you adapt to these uncertain times. Let BellCornerstone partner with you to meet your workplace needs in this “new normal.”