

A CEO's Guide to Planning a Return to the Office

by Dan Ciampa

February 25, 2021



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Summary. As more people are vaccinated against Covid-19, CEOs are facing pressure to make decisions about when and how professionals will return to office work. In making these decisions, leaders should keep six principles in mind. Among them is resisting the urge to make the decision too early, or over-relying on employee surveys as the most important source of data. [close](#)

Nearly a year after the Covid-19 pandemic closed most offices, we're beginning to see reasons for optimism. The population of vaccinated people is growing, and the number of new Covid cases is declining from winter peaks. By mid-summer, a good portion of the working-age population should be vaccinated.

Because of such hopeful signs, CEOs at companies that remain all-remote are starting to think seriously about how and how much to bring their employees back to the office, and how to best answer questions about policies and timelines their boards will soon ask. They realize that given all that has happened over the last year, more employees than ever before will work remotely, and for tasks that can be done more efficiently that way, investments in technology are necessary.

Less clear are answers to other types of questions that only the CEO can address because they're more strategic and fundamental to the nature of the organization, such as: How to handle tasks and decisions which are best done face-to-face even if many employees today say they prefer to work remotely? What will be the longer-term impact on the culture of dividing the work force? When do I have to make these choices? Whom should I listen to, and when?

While specific answers to such questions depend on the unique situation each leader faces, the guidelines below may help.

First, wise leaders will resist pressure to define a policy or make final decisions until it's necessary to do so. We are getting nearer to the end of the pandemic each day, but we are not there yet. With uncertainty about what lies ahead, it is important to avoid steps that will either create unrealistic expectations or limit options. For such big, consequential decisions, one key success factor is to buy time to gather more information and leave options open as long as possible.

Second, in discussing return-to-work options and scenarios, leaders should keep their personal preferences close to the vest. In government, top-level leaders are taught to never reveal their policy

preference to military or intelligence advisors too early to avoid influencing the kinds and quality of analysis. Likewise, at this stage, CEOs should ask questions and refrain from making declarative statements for as long as possible.

Third, don't put too much stock in data gleaned from employee surveys. Many companies have asked workers how many days (if any) they want to spend in the office post-pandemic. Some HR departments treat these surveys as gospel. Much of the current public commentary on this question assumes that after it's safe to return to the office, many employees will prefer to remain working at home for much of the workweek. However, wise CEOs recognize such opinions often change. What people say after a year of sheltering in place may not be meaningful this fall, particularly if by then they've had several months of living with fewer restrictions. In the same way that political leaders should not base decisions solely on public opinion polls, leaders must look at employee surveys as one data point.

They should also distinguish the views of their employees by polling managers separately. Many managers I talk with have found working remotely more frustrating than satisfying because their job involves tasks that are most difficult to do remotely. They must ensure collaboration across department lines, coach employees, deal with people and relationship problems, and read the subtle signs of everyday interactions for barriers to communication. If they are not done well, morale and teamwork decline, and ultimately, innovation suffers. Managing people is always more difficult when working remotely. So what managers think about the return-to-work plan should carry special weight, and count for more than the views of people who report to them.

Fourth, leaders should recognize that company size is an important variable in these choices. Even well-run startups tend to be chaotic because the business is finding its way — it's not yet clear what works and doesn't. But a large company can't survive like that; without some predictability and routine, the risks and consequences of failure are higher. Larger organizations also need to rely more on formal

policies and perceptions of fairness, limiting their ability to make decisions on a person-by-person basis, as smaller organizations might do.

Fifth, leaders should not get transfixed by technological solutions to the problem of remote work when making this decision. In some organizations, the return-to-work discussions are happening alongside plans for technology upgrades that facilitate remote work. But when it comes to return-to-work decisions, the essential question is not “How can we use technology to make remote work more efficient?” Rather, the big questions should be: “What will we not be able to do well if we go too far in that direction?” and “What does going ‘too far’ mean?”

CEOs must factor in the costs to the culture of over-reliance on remote work. Real teams (versus ones in name only) cannot be built online. Creativity depends on spontaneity and repeated unplanned iterations. Loyalty and dedication to bigger purpose requires that people go through good and bad times together, shoulder to shoulder. Indeed, there are certain themes that appear after listening to people describe their experiences of a year of working remotely. One is that the nature of the conversations is more transactional than happens in the office. Similarly, discussions tend toward brevity, with less depth and fewer exploration of consequences, and there is little time to think and reflect.

Finally, CEOs should avoid being influenced by high-profile companies (like Google, Twitter, Facebook, Adobe, and Oracle) that quickly announced plans to permanently embrace remote work. The most active advocates for expanded remote work are in industries that have the most to gain financially: software development technology companies. Remote workers use tech products and social media more than people do in offices. This gives tech industries a rooting interest in what other companies decide. They aren’t necessarily the model for setting policy. Wise leaders will cautiously assess sources (and self-interests) of advocates of new, remote ways of working.

Policies about the mix of remote and in-office work have ramifications beyond short term cost and efficiency. Because of what we've gone through over the past year, we are about to enter a new era in the evolution of organizations. Decisions that CEOs make over the next few months will set the tone for how work will be done in the future, impacting the relationships employees have formed and their emotional connection with the company. They should be made carefully.

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Dan Ciampa (DC@danciampa.com) is a former CEO, an adviser to boards and chief executives, and the author of five books, including *Transitions at the Top: What Organizations Must Do to Make Sure New Leaders Succeed* (with David L. Dotlich, Wiley, 2015) and *Right from the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role* (with Michael Watkins, Harvard Business Review Press, 1999).