

# Reopening Strategies Recognize Many Will Keep Working Remotely

Most business leaders don't expect to return to a model where everyone is onsite

By Stephen Miller, CEBS

May 12, 2021

**M**ore businesses are planning to reopen their offices and worksites, but not everyone is returning to work there. As part of a new normal, many organizations plan to allow sizable numbers of employees to continue working remotely rather than risk seeing them hired away by a more accommodating employer.

A Work from Home Policies and Practices (<https://www.pearlmeyer.com/knowledge-share/research-report/work-from-home-policies-and-practices>) survey by executive compensation firm Pearl Meyer, conducted in February and March with participation from 349 companies, showed that:

- 33 percent of responding companies' total U.S.-based workforces will work remotely post-pandemic.
- More than 80 percent said their organization's shift to remote work during the pandemic had been successful, and nearly 40 percent reported an increase in productivity.

Perhaps recognizing an opportunity for cost savings, 36 percent of surveyed organizations have made the decision to reduce the number or size of their offices or facilities.

"We know there's been some level of worker migration" away from their employer's worksite, said Bill Dixon, managing director at Pearl Meyer and lead for the survey. "At this juncture, when companies are allowing—or encouraging—remote work and it is going well, it appears there is some hesitancy to disrupt the talent pool."

*[Related SHRM article: As Offices Reopen, Hybrid Onsite and Remote Work Becomes Routine ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/offices-may-operate-differently-than-before-the-pandemic.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/offices-may-operate-differently-than-before-the-pandemic.aspx))]*

## A Split Workforce

National staffing firm LaSalle Network's latest Office Re-Entry Index (<https://www.thelasallenetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/LaSalle-Network-Office-Re-Entry-Index.pdf>) polled 350 CEOs, chief operating officers, and HR and finance leaders on their sentiments and plans for returning to the office. A majority of respondents planned to have employees back in the office by fall 2021 with most (70 percent) stating they plan to phase employees back in gradually.

When asked how they believe their workforces will be modeled 12 months from now, 77 percent said it will be a hybrid model with a portion working in the office and a portion working from home.

Among companies that have begun reopening their offices, a majority said their top obstacle has been managing employees' fears surrounding commuting to work, especially when workers rely on mass transit.

For those planning office reopenings, "Communication from leadership on any and all re-entry status updates should be communicated to staff regularly," said Tom Gimbel, founder and CEO of LaSalle Network. "Employees want transparency now more than ever because it is directly tied to their health, safety and mental well-being. With frequent communication and updates, it helps lower anxiety levels and gives

employees ample time to ask questions and mentally prepare."

Of companies that have not yet begun bringing workers back onsite, 34 percent foresee conflicts between executives and staff over return-to-work policies. The top-listed conflict they expect is employees wanting to continue working remotely.

"Employees need time to reacclimate, regardless of how long they've been with the organization," Gimbel said. "Good communication between employees and leaders will be key to smoothly returning to the office."

[Related SHRM article: *Rethinking Employee Benefits for Permanently Remote Workers* ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/rethinking-employee-benefits-for-permanently-remote-workers.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/rethinking-employee-benefits-for-permanently-remote-workers.aspx))]

## Introverts and Extroverts

In April, global market research firm The Martec Group surveyed 1,214 employees across different industries, demographics and seniority levels. "Some employees felt isolated working remotely, while others basked in the newfound free time and flexibility," the survey found. Responses strongly—although not perfectly—correlated with employees' identification as introverts or extroverts.

Introverts, who generally prefer to work in solitary environments and feel drained by too much social interaction, were more likely to prefer working from home. Extroverts, who are energized by social interaction, may be eager to return to their worksites.

Generally speaking, The Martec Group found four types of employees that companies should consider (<https://www.martecgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-Martec-Group-WFH-COVID19-Summary.pdf>) when making plans for a return to the office: thriving, hopeful, discouraged and trapped.

Each group will require unique considerations, according to Chuck Bean, a partner at The Martec Group. Employers developing return-to-work policies should consider how each group will react if or when they are brought back to an office environment:

- **Thriving remote workers** (16 percent of respondents), the most introverted group, said that their job satisfaction, motivation and company satisfaction improved during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their comments included, "I love working from home and think my company is doing just fine handling things."

*Tip:* These workers "may see a drop in productivity and morale" if brought back to offices and worksites, Bean said, and employers should consider long-term work-from-home options for them, if feasible. For knowledge workers who must return to open offices with many distractions, consider providing noise-cancelling headphones.

- **Hopeful remote workers** (25 percent) had the highest company satisfaction but still experienced focus and productivity issues and looked forward to the social aspects of working in an office. "Working from home is not for me, but I have complete faith in my company's management," was a typical comment.

*Tip:* While they're working remotely, "target these employees with more frequent outreach from management and colleagues," Bean suggested.

- **Discouraged remote workers** (27 percent), the most extroverted group, had the most significant declines in mental health and job satisfaction. Their view was often, "I really do not like working from home, but I think my company is doing the best it can."

*Tip:* If employees in this group continue working from home on a part- or full-time basis, "deem if a home office budget is appropriate, and include them in meetings virtually with video," Bean recommended.

- **Trapped remote workers** (32 percent) miss socializing in the office and had the lowest company satisfaction and mental health of all four groups. "I strongly dislike working from home, and I don't think my company is handling the situation well," was a typical sentiment.

*Tip:* If discouraged and trapped remote workers' return to the worksite isn't imminent, then "address their emotions head-on," Bean advised.

[*Related SHRM article: Remote Workers Expect Pay to Reflect Their Locations* ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/compensation/Pages/remote-workers-expect-pay-to-reflect-their-locations.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/compensation/Pages/remote-workers-expect-pay-to-reflect-their-locations.aspx))]

### Eager to Return vs. Never Want to Go Back

With over 100 million Americans fully vaccinated, evidence is mounting that some employees are eager to return to the workplace after operating remotely for over a year, and others not so much.

In April, health insurance marketplace HealthCareInsider.com surveyed 1,664 U.S. adults to gauge their comfort with resuming various activities of daily life. Among the sentiments expressed by remote workers (<https://healthcareinsider.com/americans-eager-to-resume-some-activities-less-so-others-survey-354483>) about heading back to the office:

- **47 percent** said they were comfortable returning to their workplace now.
- **27 percent** won't be comfortable with returning to their workplace until fall 2021 or later.
- **17 percent** said they would never feel comfortable.
- **11 percent** said 2022 or later.

Law firm Littler Mendelson's 9th Annual Employer Survey

([https://www.littler.com/files/2021\\_littler\\_employer\\_survey\\_report.pdf](https://www.littler.com/files/2021_littler_employer_survey_report.pdf))—completed in March by 1,160 HR professionals, in-house attorneys and C-suite executives—reveals that the percentage of employees who prefer remote or hybrid work is higher than the employers planning to offer it.

Only 4 percent of the employers surveyed believe that most of their employees who can work remotely would like to return to full-time in-person work and 71 percent believe most would prefer a hybrid model, mixing remote and in-person work. However, 28 percent of those employers plan to have most employees return full time and in person, and 55 percent are planning to offer a hybrid model.

This disconnect may be attributed to the unique set of challenges associated with hybrid working models—from scheduling obstacles to ensuring employees working from home don't feel left out or passed over for opportunities.

"Employers are eager to bring their teams back together in person but are hearing from employees and applicants who value the option to work remotely and feel they have shown they can be productive while doing so," said Devjani Mishra, a leader of Littler's COVID-19 task force and return-to-work team.

"Addressing this tension raises a host of legal and practical considerations, including how to accommodate those who are concerned about coming to the office [and acknowledging] that many do not have reliable access to childcare or transportation," Mishra said.

Remote work app firm Range posted a breakdown of U.S. tech companies' differing reopening strategies (<https://www.range.co/blog/post-covid-reopening-plans>), from a strong preference to bring workers back onsite, to hybrid arrangements, to going fully remote.

**🔒 SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT**

Return to Work ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Return-to-Work.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Return-to-Work.aspx))

## HR DAILY NEWSLETTER

News, trends and analysis, as well as breaking news alerts, to help HR professionals do their jobs better each business day.

Email Address

Feedback

**CONTACT US ([WWW.SHRM.ORG/ABOUT-SHRM/PAGES/CONTACT-US.ASPX](http://WWW.SHRM.ORG/ABOUT-SHRM/PAGES/CONTACT-US.ASPX)) | 800.283.SHRM  
(7476)**

© 2021 SHRM. All Rights Reserved

SHRM provides content as a service to its readers and members. It does not offer legal advice, and cannot guarantee the accuracy or suitability of its content for a particular purpose.

[Disclaimer \(www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer\)](http://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer)