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Cover Story

# Offices, reassembled: A primer for bringing employees back to the workplace

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Working from home is, by and large, working out just fine, according to Lee Geiger, employment law partner with Cincinnati's Graydon, who has hundreds of clients dealing with all things Covid-19. Many, especially in professional services, are realizing employees can be productive from the kitchen table.

"There aren't a lot of businesses that say to us, 'We're going to fail if we don't get back immediately,'" Geiger said.

But the reality is this: A large majority of Greater Cincinnati white-collar workers will eventually come back to the office. Indeed, as Greater Cincinnati, and the entire nation, lurches into its fourth month of the pandemic, companies ranging from giants like Procter & Gamble to mom-and-pops have started to reopen, despite a rise in Covid-19 infections.

While the office will be different for the foreseeable future, there are benefits to being in the same space as co-workers. Shenan Murphy, CEO of Colliers International/Greater Cincinnati, said with technology, most professional service employees can do their jobs from home. But what's missing are those random interactions that spark ideas.

AMY ELISABETH SPASOFF
BHDP Architecture has redesigned its office to ensure social distancing and protect employees from potentially spreading the coronavirus.

"Having people in the office and interacting is critical to our business," Murphy said.

The logistics of bringing workers back are varied and complex. So, the *Business Courier* spoke with experts in some of the city's major white-collar industries – commercial real estate, property management, human resources and legal services – to see what they're recommending.

## How to prepare the building

According to local architects, 20% of office workers could return this month and another 20% by September. Still, John Neyer, CEO of Neyer Management, said many tenants are telling him that they will not fully occupy their space until 2021.

For single-tenant buildings, reopening is usually straightforward. But multitenant buildings, with shared lobbies, restrooms and elevators need more complicated plans.

In buildings with fewer floors, Neyer Management is working with building owners to increase lighting and the "curb appeal" of stairwells as an alternative to elevators. As many office buildings still have low numbers of employees who've returned, they haven't yet had to deal with the logistics of getting hundreds of employees on and off elevators while social distancing. Guidance on that from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is expected soon.

Patrick Donnelly, client leader with BHDP Architecture, said signs and graphics will help employees remember these new rules. Other steps, like floor markings, should help them remain socially distant.

"It sounds like first grade, but habits are hard to break," Donnelly said.

Break rooms, unless they are very large, will typically be limited to one person.

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**PATRICK DONNELLY,**
BHDP

Image: Kevin Cox | Courier



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At Colliers, Murphy plans to have his full staff in the office by mid-July, except for those with special needs or conditions. But that could change.

"Our most valuable asset is our people," Murphy said. "If they can't function, if they're not safe and healthy, it's not worth doing."

### How to prepare employees

Deirdre Bird, director of HR consulting with VonLehman CPA & Advisory Firm, is telling clients they must know their objectives with reopening. Are they looking to provide a sense of normalcy? Are there tasks that can't be done remotely? Are new hires missing out?

"This helps lay the rest of the groundwork," Bird said. "It makes such a difference in feeling safe."

Brady Mick, director of strategic design, with downtown-based architecture firm SHP, said it's crucial to know how employees will collaborate in the office under the current guidelines. Splitting workers between in-office and at-home won't accomplish much if the right people aren't together.

Another tip: Schedule office cleaning during work hours, so employees can see it taking place.

"The No. 1 requirement of the first stage is to create psychological safety," BHDP's Donnelly said.

He added that companies could give employees supplies to sanitize their own space, at the beginning and end of the day.

**How to effectively communicate**

Sarah Clay Leyshock, employment law partner with Taft Stettinius & Hollister, said having a team in charge of Covid-19 response is important. In addition, this group can be in charge of communicating any changes.

Leyshock said it's key to continually communicate the company's procedures and provide training on the changes.

"Have them go through a webinar or a recorded training so you know they saw it, and signed off on it," she said.

Communication is a two-way street. Management and business owners need feedback from employees on what's working, what isn't and how they feel. One-on-one meetings are more important than ever.

"If you don't have a feedback loop," Donnelly said, "build it now."

## How to monitor health

Bird said employers need to be careful with tracking employees' health and temperature. It's part of a personal medical record and needs to remain private. These records should be kept by the HR department or whoever handles that function. And there should only be one person's information per document, kept separate from their personnel file.

SHP requires its employees to fill out a daily health assessment on their computer before they are able to begin working.

"It's baked into what we do now," said Jeffrey Sackenheim, SHP's vice president of architecture.

How to keep the office clean and safe

Traditional office cleaning is not the same as sanitizing, Neyer said. A number of Cincinnati buildings have moved to enhanced cleaning, where elevators and door handles are wiped down and restrooms are cleaned more often.

"I don't see a time when we depart from these enhanced hygiene processes," Neyer said. "We don't want to subject ourselves to this again."

Murphy said employers need to control who comes in and out of the office, who's wearing masks and who's wiping down high-touch surfaces.

## How to set up HR policies

Murphy said employers should be flexible as to when an employee comes to the office. Employees who may be at risk themselves, who care for an at-risk person or who is struggling with child care, may find it harder to get to work.

Workers with underlying conditions present a particularly tricky area for employers. Employers should allow them to work in the office unless there is legitimate evidence it is not safe to do so.

"Treat them the same as everyone else, unless they request an accommodation," Leyshock said.

## How to prepare legally

Geiger, a partner with Graydon practicing employment law, said a big issue he's helping clients deal with is employees who are afraid to return to the office, or those making more on unemployment than they were working.

Masks present another challenge. If someone has a legitimate reason they can't wear a one, the employer has to look for ways to reasonably accommodate them. That could include having the employee work in a room by themselves, in a space away from others or requiring they wear it only while walking through common areas.

If an employee simply doesn't want to wear a mask, Geiger said an employer might have to give the worker an unpaid leave of absence. In some rare instances, this issue could result in terminating the employee.

### How to handle a positive Covid-19 test

If a workplace has an employee who has been in the office test positive for Covid-19, the Americans with Disabilities Act restricts employers from providing specifics to their colleagues. Bird said the employer needs to notify employees who may have come into contact with the person who tested positive within the 48 hours before the person started showing symptoms.

Bird doesn't think employers need to shutter if there's an infected employee.

If someone does test positive, it's important to have policies that set expectations on how long they need to stay home and what is required for them to return to work.

### When to reopen

Sackenheim said one of the top drivers for determining plans to reopen offices has been waiting to see what school districts are going to do. Some of SHP's clients are not looking to return to the office until 2021, while others are looking at September, once they understand what school will look like.

"There's no need to rush, rush, rush and throw 100 people back into the office next week," Sackenheim said.

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