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The 30% Rule

Planning Your Team's Return to the Office



As vaccination rates accelerate this spring, you are likely tasked with determining the purpose your workplace should serve and how best you can support your employees. For many companies, the first phase is to solve for a hybrid approach — that is, one that allows for a combination of remote and in-office work.

This guide is intended to help support your transition from fully-remote to a hybrid workforce by offering a simple starting point and the iterative, repeatable steps that can help you find the longer-term path for your company.

While there have been strong proclamations from some companies about how they will use the workplace — such as [Twitter, allowing employees to work from home permanently](#), or [JP Morgan, mandating a specific date](#) for senior managers to return to the office, with a few exceptions — most companies are in the process of determining the best workplace solution for them in response to a diverse set of employee and team needs in a dynamic, uncertain environment.

This hybrid setup is unfamiliar territory for many. Generally, employers' position on employees' in-person attendance has been pretty conservative — perhaps an extension from our school or college days when not being present in a class was understood as a tacit admission that you weren't studying or doing the work. [The pandemic has shown that we are doing the work¹](#). Many organizations are reporting that productivity has been at par or higher than it was pre-COVID-19. [However, social connection and collaboration, the work culture that bonds us around a mission, and the advancement of common goals have suffered²](#).

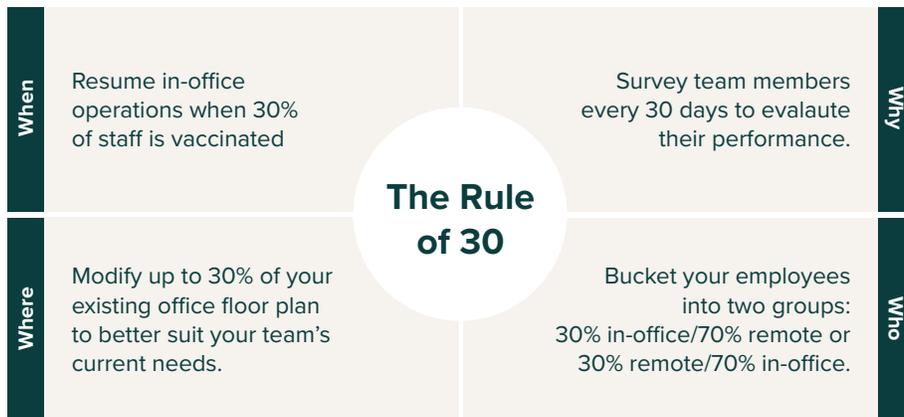
As a result, the office we return to should be less like a classroom with neatly lined rows of desks and more like a student center — a magnet of social activity, connection, and collaboration. This type of workplace serves multiple purposes. It is a center for institutional, top-down, very intentional programming and activities (e.g. all-hands meetings or new hire training); it is the hub for self-organized meetings among departments (e.g. team meetings); and it is a place where serendipitous, ad hoc interactions happen between employees (e.g. those water cooler moments).

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¹Cagler, D., et al. PwC. (2021) [US Remote Work Survey](#). ²Gensler Research Institute. (2020) [U.S. Work From Home Survey 2020](#)

How should your company approach transitioning to a hybrid workplace?

Given where we are today, here are the main questions and themes organizations must work through:



Workplace strategies should be frequently reevaluated so that companies can achieve outcomes centered on employee choice and satisfaction.

The Rule of 30: A Rule of Thumb for Transitioning to a Hybrid Workplace

While the outcome for each organization will be different, our Rule of 30 can be a good starting point from which to iterate. Consider these guidelines to get started:

- **Reevaluate Every 30 Days:** Start by measuring team performance very frequently to understand what is working, what isn't, and what challenges must be addressed. This frequency is important as new needs will emerge quickly.
- **Sort Employees Into 30% Remote/30% In-Office:** Begin by mapping your team members to different workstyles. These workstyles will help you understand who will work mostly in the office (30% remote) and who will work mostly at home (30% in-office)
- **Update 30% of Your Floor Plan:** Plan to revise up to 30% of your office's floor plan to support social engagement and collaboration. Identify those areas upfront and then begin to execute changes as team members return and you gather more feedback on their needs.
- **Resume In-Office Operations When 30% of Staff Is Vaccinated:** When 30% of employees are vaccinated and feel safe returning to the office, consider managing an in-office workplace experience again. While planning should begin before this point, and many employees may have already been using the office, this is the time to actively cultivate a new in-office experience for employees. ■



Team Performance

Key Questions:

- How frequently do you plan to capture feedback from employees about their performance and needs?
- How well has your team worked remotely?
- What have been the biggest pain points of working remotely?
- How has company, team, or individual performance changed since you last checked-in?
- What is the workstyle of each team and individual employee?
- How have these workstyles changed as a result of the pandemic?
- Ask each employees if she or he fits into the mostly remote or mostly in-office camp once the vaccine has been distributed?

The first step in evaluating the right approach to the workplace for your company is to understand how your team members have weathered the COVID-19 pandemic — what's worked, what hasn't — and let their feedback inform your approach to returning to the office.

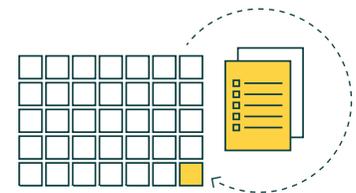
Performance:

We recommend soliciting team feedback through a combination of surveys, one-on-one interviews between employees and their managers, employee focus groups, and team meetings. The purpose of these activities is to gather thoughts from every individual at the company about what working from home has been like.

Get a regular pulse on employee sentiment. Surveying your employees frequently over the next few months is key. We recommend doing so every 30 days. If you already use Gallup or Culture Amp, that's great — keep going, and pay close attention to responses in these categories:

- Enablement
- Collaboration
- Alignment
- Engagement

Understand how your team members have weathered the COVID-19 pandemic ... and let their feedback inform your approach to returning to the office.



Survey Frequently

Every 30 days, survey your team members to understand how they are performing, what their needs are, and what purpose the office should serve moving forward.

For companies that don't already measure employee engagement, an eNPS (employee net promoter score) survey can help you get an overall company pulse. Check in regularly with these four questions:

- **Enablement:** Do you have access to the things you need to do your job well?
- **Collaboration:** Do you believe you have honest and open two-way communication with colleagues?
- **Alignment:** Do you know how your work contributes to the goals of the company?
- **Engagement:** Would you recommend this company as a place to work?

Grade your organization's remote work performance. Discover what capabilities your organization has in terms of the tools and processes needed to support working from home effectively. Focus on understanding every employee's perspective on how working from home has impacted her or his ability to:

- Contribute individually
- Collaborate and brainstorm with others
- Communicate with others
- Mentor or be mentored
- Develop a sense of community and team culture

Understand your employees' preferences and intentions after the pandemic.

Employees likely have a vision of how and where they would prefer to work moving forward. Understanding their preferences is key to determining how your team should expect to use the office. Also, take note of the concerns and risks that employees may have about possible changes to their workplace.

Ascribe workstyles to each individual role. Then, use a workstyle framework to help make decisions about your team's workforce distribution and office layout over time. This framing can also help with decision-making about the trade-offs that may need to be made across different employee needs within the organization.

Your organization may have a workstyle framework in place, but if not, the below framework can help bucket employees into one of four workstyles which will inform how much time employees will spend in the office. For some roles, being in-office may need to be mandated, but where flexibility is possible, start by dividing employees into one of two categories (30% in-office, 30% remote) and then iterate over time. ■

Source: PwC³

 <p>Collaborators Work in teams, but not necessarily in an office space: <i>Interactive, Cross-functional, Collaborative, Internal-facing</i></p>	 <p>Connectors Work individually, but frequently interact with other teams: <i>Cross-functional, Internal-facing</i></p>	<p>Group-Oriented Work</p>	
 <p>Residents Work alone frequently, but may require a specific space and specific tools; mobility for this group is more limited: <i>Desk-bound, Focused on individual and independent work.</i></p>	 <p>Nomads Work alone frequently and can work anywhere: <i>Interactive, External-facing</i></p>		<p>Individual Work</p>
<p>Static: Requires resources in the office and in-office interactions; is generally more productive when in-office</p>		<p>Mobile: Often moves between workspaces and requires dedicated space types</p>	

What to Ask Employees

If you don't currently conduct employee surveys, design yours to focus on these four areas:

-  **Enablement**
-  **Collaboration**
-  **Alignment**
-  **Engagement**

Employees likely have a vision of how and where they would prefer to work moving forward.

³Cagler, D., Faccio, E., and Ryback, E. PwC. Employee group infographic. Strategy + Business



Office Purpose and Layout

Key Questions:

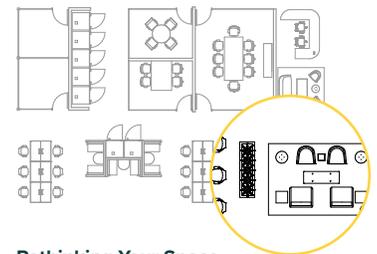
- What function should your office serve moving forward?
- Is your office designed to serve a new purpose?
- Which parts of your office's floor plan should be reorganized to better support collaboration and social engagement?
- How might you create greater privacy for employees doing independent, desk-bound work?
- How might you maximize the effectiveness of meetings that are a combination of in-person and remote participation?
- What kind of event programming could you host to foster social connection?

Once they've gathered feedback from employees, leaders need to articulate what purpose the office should serve going forward. Address the performance criteria laid out above and communicate when you believe being physically present adds value to the organization. Then, set expectations while allowing for change. Communicate that this is the starting point of your return plan and that you will review feedback on a 30-day cycle, adjusting as needed.

Organizations moving to a hybrid approach should not immediately plan on downsizing their square footage. Instead, the first step is to redistribute space-use from individual workspaces to collaborative work settings. This shift will likely be in the order of up to a 30% redistribution from individual to shared, collaborative settings.

What types of spaces does your company need?

Before the pandemic, workplaces were predominantly composed of open-plan desks and individual work settings, which accounted for 55 – 70% of a typical floor plan. The biggest revision to the workspace as teams return to the office will be a shift away from a design oriented around individual work and towards one oriented around mentorship, in-person collaboration, socializing, and team culture. This shift will require redesigning the workspace by dialing up social, collaboration, and amenity space by about 30% and reducing individual workspace by the same factor.



Rethinking Your Space

Since employees will primarily be coming into the office to work together, identify 30% of your floor plan that could shift to become a more collaborative and social workspace.



Flexible Workplace Solutions

If you are currently in a lease renewal phase and have a team of less than 200 people, consider shifting to a flexible workplace provider, which will give you the ability to scale your real estate up or down on short notice. [Returning to the Flexible Office: A Guide for Preparing Your Space and Your Team](#) can help you determine if a flexible workplace is the right solution for your company's return to the office.

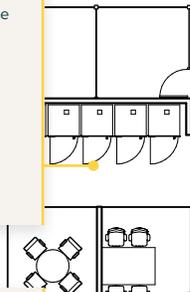
Office Layout: Quick Wins

To prepare for your early returners, here are some immediate work settings you can provide to support the mix of workstyles within your organization. By prioritizing these settings — and placing a particular focus on supporting collaboration and connection among in-person and remote employees — you will have a good baseline on which to build.

Add Modular Meeting and Phone Rooms

These spaces are likely best served to support communication between in-office and remote team members. Consider:

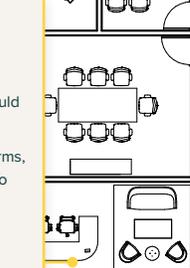
- Replacing open desks with modular enclosed spaces
- Adding technology to support video conferencing
- Accommodating both scheduled reservations and drop-in use



Engage Employees at Entries

These are the critical points to keep employees consistently informed and to reset expectations of how the office should operate moving forward. Consider:

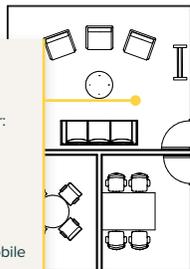
- Revising signage reinforcing new norms, best practices, and guide to more info
- Revising check-in process with appropriate safety protocols
- Installing a digital dashboard to communicate workspace and resource availability and to notify team members of planned social activities



Alter Conference Rooms

These areas are likely the best spaces to support in-person collaboration. Consider:

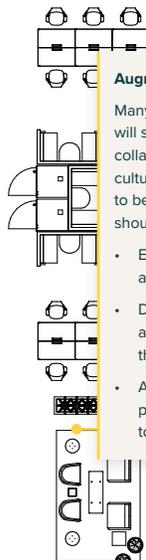
- Revising the layout to support more collaborative functions vs. formal meetings
- Revising your technology to support collaboration, such as by adding a mobile TV or a digital whiteboard
- Adding new accessories such as soft seating or mobile whiteboard to support different activities



Augment the Social Space

Many companies' physical workspace will shift to become more social and collaborative to help foster a shared culture. The office as a destination needs to be worth the commute, and employees should be excited to come in. Consider:

- Expanding the overall social workspace as a fraction of the office layout
- Designing the social programming alongside the social space so that the two complement each other
- Adding furniture and accessories that provoke engagement and are movable to support a variety of activities



Level-Up Individual Workspace

As the office shifts to become more collaborative and social, these spaces can best support a higher degree of privacy and focus for individual employee work. Consider:

- Replacing open desk layouts with more modular, enclosed individual spaces
- Controlling use by team or consider dedicated and on-demand spaces
- Adding sound masking and other sound attenuation specs to aid acoustic privacy
- Adding adjacent locker storage and plant walls to increase visual privacy and separation



In general, use thresholds between spaces and common transitional or interactive areas in the office to communicate changes. It's also critical to provide employees with new guidelines on how to use different spaces in the office. ■



COVID-19 Vaccines and the Workplace

Looking for more information on how to revise your office floor plan? [Rethinking Your Office Layout: A how-to guide on keeping your team safe — and productive](#) can help you determine which spatial arrangements are right for your team.

Return Timing

Key Questions:

- When is it safe for employees to return to the office?
- What safety guidelines should be in place?
- Should we ask that employees be vaccinated before returning?
- When will there be enough people in the office to make reopening it worthwhile?

Vaccine distribution is quickly ramping up. At time of publication, President Biden committed to the U.S. having enough vaccines for every adult who wants one by the end of May. [Around 8% of Americans age 18 years or older have already been vaccinated as of early March.](#) Israel, a leader in vaccine distribution, may provide early guidance on restriction requirements relative to vaccination rates. [Israel has administered at least one dose to close to 50% of the population. This has translated to an easing of restrictions in large gathering spaces \(e.g. sport and concert venues\) which are now able to operate at 75% capacity.](#)

Companies should strongly encourage employees to get vaccinated. Vaccinations not only help protect the employees receiving them (studies are exploring how well they will protect against transmission), but also will position companies much better for their teams' return to the office, in whatever form that takes.

The rollout of vaccines doesn't mean everyone returns to the office right away; ensuring employees' safety should be the first priority. Even after vaccination, efforts to reduce transmission will need to remain in place. OSHA guidelines should be reviewed frequently to make sure your office and employees are adhering to best practices. As employees are vaccinated, companies will reach a threshold at which enough people can come into the office safely and really benefit from in-person interactions. This threshold is going to be company and location specific, so frequently monitoring your team feedback as well as local guidelines will help you determine a suitable time to return to the office. As more members of their teams get vaccinated, companies can build up their in-office schedules over time.

Of course, even with the latest news from the White House, it's hard to predict when your team will be vaccinated. The CDC has issued guidance prioritizing those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 and those who are in the most critical, frontline positions. States have been translating those guidelines into detailed requirements and phases for their own populations. Vaccine timing continues to depend on the speed of vaccine supply, release to individual states, and on-the-ground distribution. In addition, consider the nature of your workforce; employers with healthcare or other frontline employees may already be largely vaccinated, while those whose employees will be eligible for the vaccine later on may not be largely vaccinated until later in the year. ■



COVID-19 Vaccines and the Workplace

If you're looking to learn more about how the COVID-19 vaccines might impact your workplace over the coming months, [Rolling Return: How a COVID-19 vaccine could affect your back-to-office plans](#) examines this topic in-depth.



When to Kick Off Your Return

When 30% of your employees are vaccinated and feel safe returning to the office, then there is a critical mass of employees who will require a fully-managed in-office workplace experience once again.



Team Distribution

Key Questions:

- How frequently do your team members expect to use the office once they've been vaccinated?
- How much of your team do you expect to work mostly in the office (30% remote) and mostly from home (30% in-office)?
- Should you require certain employees to work in the office?
- Should you mandate any required in-office days for specific teams and employees?
- Are employees adequately set up for effective remote work? What expectations have been communicated to them?
- What new resources may be needed to support teams and employees?
- What are managers most concerned about solving for?
- How does your hiring plan address employee distribution and expectations going forward?

The pandemic has promoted a generational shift in thinking about remote work and is accelerating many organizations to move towards a hybrid workforce.

As companies begin returning teams to office, there may be some friction between employer expectations and employee preference. Most (73%) of employees would like to work remotely at least two days a week, while nearly half (43%) of executives would prefer either limited schedules or to be fully back in the office as soon as is feasible.⁴

⁴Cagler, D., et al. PwC. (2021) *US Remote Work Survey*.

Most employees will pencil out at either 30% remote or 30% in-office.

Categorizing Employees

Determine whether each employee or team should primarily be in the office (30% remote/70% in-office) or remote (30% in-office/70% remote). This simplified categorization will help frame your workplace strategy decisions moving forward.



If you are moving forward with a hybrid workforce, a good starting point is instituting three to four days of remote work and one to two in the office — that is, having teams spend about 30% of their time in the office — as a phase one. There are a number of other factors managers should also consider when determining the schedules for their teams, including the workstyles outlined previously and individual employee:

- Personality and personal circumstances
- Type of work
- Team culture and management
- Employee experience and tenure
- Mentorship needs
- Access to technology
- Commute
- Ergonomics of home setup

While this hybrid plan will give employees a higher degree of flexibility to start with and help them prioritize office-use for the right activities, it's also important to make sure that there is sufficient in-office interaction to support mentorship, team engagement, and company culture.

[A recent study by Cushman and Wakefield⁵](#) looked at employee in-office interactions for given remote work policies. The results showed that for a three-day remote work schedule there is a 12% chance that any two employees are in the office at the same time. Allowing unrestricted remote work makes it nearly impossible that the whole team, or even half of a 49-member team, is in the office on a given day.

The key takeaway is that employee-to-employee interaction needs to be actively managed. Adopting a 30% in-office requirement and mandating scheduled in-office days for team, business unit, or company-related activities allows for significant flexibility for employees while ensuring there is also healthy employee interaction. All-hands calls, quarterly planning sessions, cross-functional team updates, and new hire training sessions are all types of meetings that can benefit from in-person social interaction. ■

The key takeaway is that employee-to-employee interaction needs to be actively managed.



⁵Katsikakis, D., et al. Cushman & Wakefield, Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at the George Washington University. (2020) [Workplace Ecosystems of the Future](#).



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