



Getting ready to re-enter the world of people? Consider these tips for transitioning your business back to in-person work.

Many months may have passed since you last saw your favourite clients and your staff in person. What are the new rules of engagement? People who were up close and personal may no longer be huggers or hand-shakers, greetings and goodbyes may be fraught with awkwardness, and meetings might need to happen outdoors. There are things we may want to save from our seemingly endless WFH days, and things we want to quickly toss out the window. Here's how to navigate the new normal.

MAKE IT SAFE

Rule number one when welcoming anyone back into the office or meeting in person: make it safe. Consult the government website for the latest health and safety recommendations where you're doing business – and then communicate out the safety protocols you've instituted to staff and clients alike.

Tip: Do a quick Google survey with staff to learn what they would feel comfortable with in the office and how they want to engage. Some may want to remain remote for a percentage of the workweek, others may want to return full time. Make accommodations for staff who want to distance their workspace from others, or those who want to be near a window they can open. Collaboration is the key here, so gather your info and have an all-hands-on-deck Zoom meeting before re-entering the office. Buy-in is important, and you want everyone to feel they have input and will be completely safe coming to the office, even if it's just for a meeting once a week.

Tip: A direct email to clients announcing you're reopening the office, with bullet points of all the safety steps you have taken, will go miles in assuring them they will feel comfortable coming

into the office. Offer digital or hybrid options for those who still don't feel comfortable.

TRIED AND TRUE

We're all bound to be more than a little awkward when coming face-to-face again. Stick with the tried and true – be genuine, look people in the eye, ask questions, stay off your phone and focus on the interaction at hand. Catch up on latest achievements, wins and life events, and ask about people's priorities now that the pandemic has shifted.

Do staff want to keep some of their pandemic work schedules going? Many of us have learned new things in the past year and are placing value on different areas of our lives as a result – find out more about changing values or new norms from those you serve and work with.

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Tip: Communicate your safety preferences up front and ask what theirs are so you can set the stage for a comfortable interaction.

Tip: Get people to open up with three simple words – tell me more. These words can open up conversations you never knew you'd have.

Tip: If you started obsessively baking homemade sourdough bread during the pandemic, share that with your staff or your clients. Ask what habits they developed and even swap recipes.

GET OUTSIDE

As the days get longer and warmer, meeting and working outdoors may become a standard. Many restaurants have

doubled their seating outdoors, a trend that will continue through the autumn. And with more people enjoying being outside, consider new ways to connect with your staff. Instead of indoor meetings to set strategy for the next year, why not try an outdoor activity? Can client meetings be moved to outdoor venues as well?

Tip: Explore walking meetings – these have been proven to not just get the ideas flowing, but may even extend your lifespan.

KEEP OR TOSS?

The pandemic changed a lot about the way we do business, the way we interact and even the way we dress – WFH joggers, anyone? We had to adapt, and quickly, to new technologies, new protocols and new ways of being. Digital everything propelled to the forefront at lightning speed. Pickup and delivery replaced in-person shopping. The challenge is to identify the habits we want to keep and to throw out the ones we don't.

Tip: Make a list of all the things that made life better or worked well during the pandemic. Contactless pickup? The ability to get more delivered? Share your list with your staff – which pandemic working and living habits would they like to keep, and which would they like to throw away?

As we return to life in the office and in-person client meetings, tune in to those you are interacting with, eliminate awkwardness by genuinely connecting, and continue to build those all-important client and staff relationships.

NEXT STEPS

- Consider making your next staff meeting a walking meeting – plot a short course around the office as a test run
- Establish a safety protocol for your office following government guidelines
- Think about new places to connect with clients, and consider outdoor meetings

Sources: pwc.com; crainsdetroit.com; shrm.org; esquire.com; cnet.com; huffpost.com; youtube.com