



Returning to the Office: A GUIDE FOR ATTORNEYS

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As stay-at-home and similar restrictions are being lightened or lifted across the country, you are likely wondering what going back to the office will look like for your firm, your staff, and your clients as you adapt to this “new normal.” In this piece, we’re digging into some things that law firms will want to keep top of mind as they consider re-opening and start getting back to business as usual, with the strong caveat that “usual” is going to be a relative term in the coming months.

WE’LL COVER



Safety First!



Who Comes Back and When?



Don’t Drop the Ball on Serving Your Clients



Safety First!

When thinking about returning to the office, safety is the thing that most people are concerned about, and so it needs to be your primary focus. What does that look like practically in your physical space, though? Here are a few tangible examples of what you can do to alleviate fears and make your workspace safer for everyone.



Allow for social distancing

Most people have been conditioned recently to maintain at least 6 feet of separation between themselves and someone else to help limit the spread of germs. Many of your staff will feel most comfortable maintaining this same separation in your office. If you can, move workspaces or stagger your staff so that people can remain 6 feet apart while working.



Clean, clean, clean

Make sure that you are well-stocked with cleaning supplies throughout your office. In addition to providing antibacterial hand soap in the restrooms and hand sanitizer throughout the office, you'll want to disinfect surfaces with products that meet the [EPA criteria for use against SARS-COV-2](#). You might also want to consider a professional cleaning crew who can come and give your office a thorough cleaning at intervals of your choosing. Also, have a plan ready for how you are going to restock your cleaning supplies.

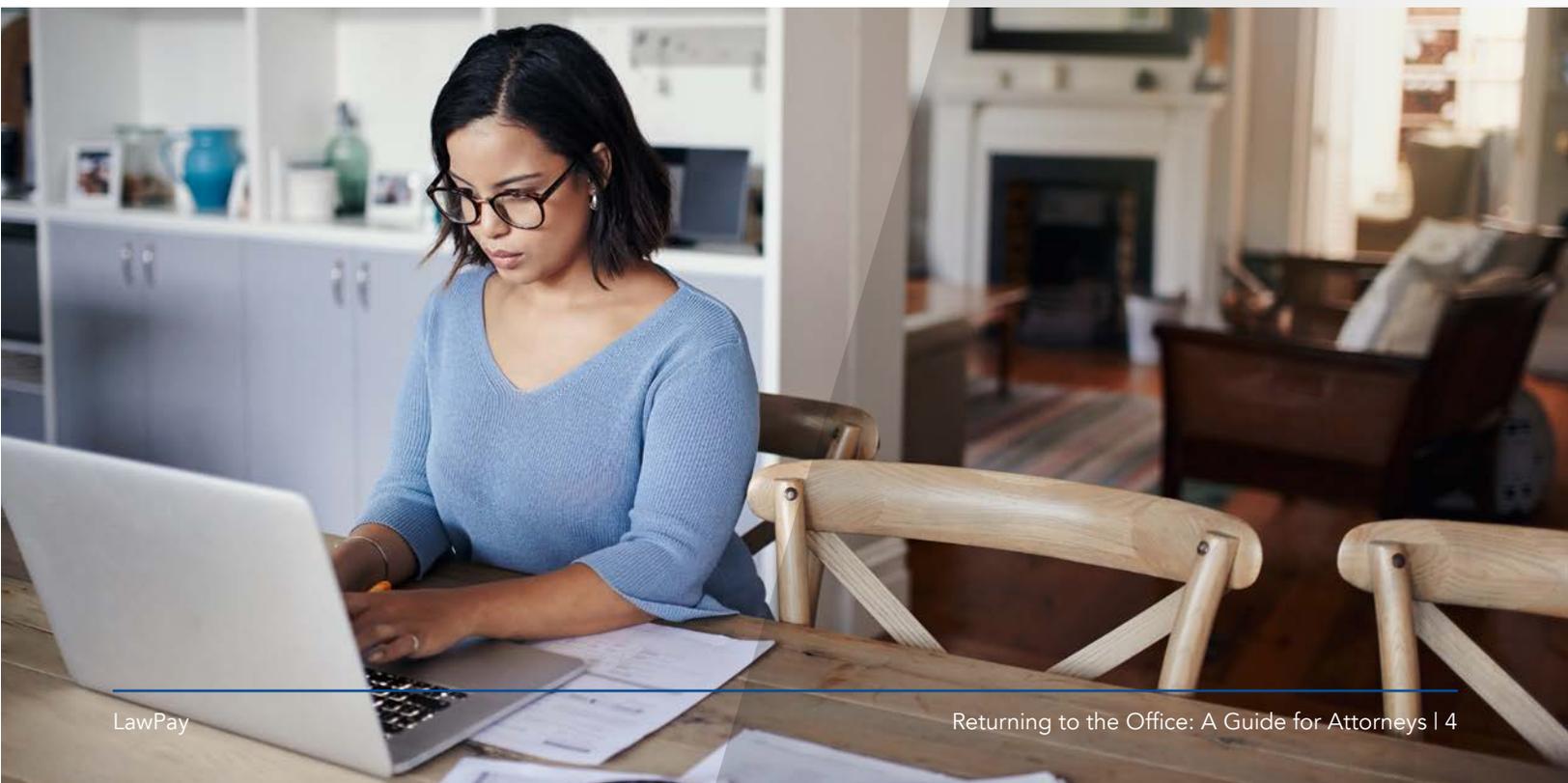


Overplan

Don't wait for chaos to come to you—be proactive in how you'll deal with a potential breach in your safety protocols. The moments and days after something bad happens probably isn't the best time to start thinking about what the right course of action is. What happens if someone who is working in the office tests positive for COVID-19? What if someone's immediate family member tests positive? Your team is likely to have all of these questions and more, so prepare in advance and make sure you have plans and backup plans for a variety of health-crisis scenarios. How you respond to these variables will likely depend on the size of your office and your staff's flexibility to work from home and the office. Much grace will need to be given over the coming months as we adapt to the fluctuations that accompany COVID-19.



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Who Comes Back and When?

Once you've made the decision to re-open your office and you have all necessary cleaning supplies and plans/procedures in place, you're ready to start thinking about opening the doors and letting people come back. However, you're not simply flipping a switch, throwing open the doors, and returning to the way things were in early 2020. Here are a few things to keep in mind when sending out the signal for folks to come back to the office.



Stagger re-reentry

In order to maintain proper social distancing, consider staggering your staff's return to the office so that people have plenty of room to do their job while still staying a safe distance apart. There are a few ways you can do this; one option is to kick off a voluntary return to the office. This way, people who are more productive and successful in the office can put their names down first, while those who are successfully working from home or who have mitigating circumstances can continue to work remotely. A voluntary return also gives your staff more personal autonomy to make a choice with which they are comfortable.

If you have more people who volunteer to return than you can accommodate whilst maintaining social distancing, consider a rotating schedule so that a set max number of people can enjoy working in the office each day. Keep in mind, you will likely have a "hybrid setup," where some, but not all, of your team is present in the office. Expect to have this hybrid system for a few weeks to months while situations progress and slowly normalize.

YES!

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Be accommodating where you can

Some members of your team are going to have a harder time returning to the office than others. This could be parents whose child care is no longer available, those caring for elderly or immuno-compromised relatives, or those with health concerns themselves. It's important to be as accommodating as you can for these individuals. While the rest of your staff might be eager to be back in the office, be understanding of the very real dangers and hardships these individuals are dealing with and how that could influence their decision to come back to the office or continue working remotely. In addition, liability for employers in relation to COVID-19 is still up in the air, and great care should be taken if you are considering a blanket "everyone returns to the office" mandate.





Don't Drop the Ball on Serving Your Clients

At this time, it's not just the needs of your colleagues you need to consider, but also the needs of your clients. While much lawyering has been done face to face in recent years, the last few months have shown that providing exceptional client support and superior legal services are possible, even in remote working scenarios. With this in mind, know that one of the most impactful things you can do to impress your existing clients and bring in new clients is to be accommodating.

All the circumstances we mentioned above regarding your colleagues will likely apply to your clients, and prospective clients, as well. Some will have limited to no child care. Some will be caring for sick family members, or dealing with illness themselves. The more you can be flexible and accommodate their preferred communication, meeting, and payment preferences, the better.

Let your clients set the tone for how you interact, and give them multiple options. Let them call in for a meeting in lieu of an in-person conference, or set up a Zoom call if you want to be able to video chat. Allow clients to pay their retainers and invoices online through a legal payment solution like LawPay so that paying for your services is fast, simple, and convenient. You'd be hard-pressed to find someone who wants to pay with cash at this point in the pandemic.



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The more accommodating you can be with your clients now, and in the months and years to come, the more likely they will be to come back to you and recommend your services to others. Doing everything you can to delight your clients now and exceed their expectations will set you up for future success in the post-COVID-19 world to come. The challenges aren't going away any time soon, but it is still possible for your firm to rise to the occasion and thrive, even in uncertain times.

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