



What Return to Office might look like—and when

U.S. organizations continue to adapt
one year into a global pandemic

We've learned in the last 12 months that anything and everything can change in a global pandemic.

Including hypotheses.

In January, we set out to write a special report on America's return to the office. Today, we're hearing that most business leaders and employees have mixed feelings about the idea.



87%

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61%

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an office space

SOURCE: PwC,
JANUARY 2021

While 87% of employees say the office is important for collaboration and relationships, according to [PwC's survey](#) of 1,200 American office workers, just 61% say they expect to spend half their time there by July 2021. At global data analytics firm Appriss — one of several companies we interviewed for this report — the majority of employees don't want to return to the office five days a week. Coming to work for brainstorms or specific projects, and returning home afterward, is a possible scenario, says Matt Moore, HR director of Appriss Health.

As vaccinations roll out across the land, U.S. workers continue to adapt.

A year after sending their employees home and setting up organizational Zoom accounts, executives are using a plethora of tools to keep their teams motivated, informed and healthy — physically, mentally and emotionally. Yes, they are making plans for a return to the office, but it will be a hybrid approach.

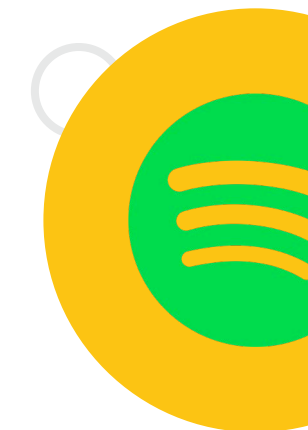
Many such plans are in the wait-and-see stage — unless you're Spotify.

The company on Feb. 12 announced its "work from anywhere" policy, granting employees the ability to choose whether they work from home, at a Spotify office, or at a coworking space.

Joe Maglio, CEO of ad agency McKinney, puts Spotify's decision into context.

"When we shut down in March 2020, everybody was doing the exact same thing. That was the 'easy' part, in quote," Maglio says. "Now, everyone's reading what Spotify is doing and asking, 'Why are we or aren't we doing that?' That's been the biggest challenge; what do we, as a leadership and executive team, think is best for our people and our clients?"

In this report, we lay out how companies in an array of industries, from small creative agencies to billion-dollar biotech firms, are tackling that question.





‘Making It Through’ on Slack

A mere 13 months ago, GoDaddy’s customer care teams took calls from “big, beautiful offices” with cafeterias and other onsite perks, says Head of Internal Communications Carolyn Clark. Today, they are fielding calls from home. Sales professionals miss the collaboration that typically fuels momentum.

Watching for signs of burn-out — and assisting employees who feel it — are top priorities for executives at the Scottsdale, Arizona-based website hosting company, which has 8,000 employees worldwide, two-thirds of whom are in the United States.

“We have over-indexed on communicating and on varying the communications,” Clark says. “We’ve been saying the same message multiple ways and multiple times. Our CEO [Aman Bhutani] puts humans first.”

One of GoDaddy’s internal comms strategies is its Making It Through channel on Slack, which features curated content for managers (defined as anyone with at least one direct report.) Here, managers will find tips for recognizing when employees feel overwhelmed, resources such as Harvard Business Review articles on pandemic-era management and leadership, and reminders to check in with HR for more personalized support and insight.

The Making It Through channel also provides advice — in blunt, honest talk — for handling sensitive topics. “What our employees are going through is tough,” a Slack posting says. “What you’re trying to do is actually show that you want to know what their life is like and how they’re experiencing their circumstances.”

GoDaddy advises team leaders to be open-minded and avoid judgment, noting “when asking someone if they’re OK, the other person may reflexively reply they’re fine, which shuts the conversation down.” Team managers are advised to ask questions such as, “What’s the most difficult thing you’ve experienced lately?”

VR: Fueling a culture of curiosity

At a far smaller company, Fort Lauderdale, Florida-based ad agency Starmark, 45 employees use Facebook’s Oculus Quest 2 virtual reality headset for meetings. President Jacqui Hartnett and her leadership team provided the headsets to employees as a holiday 2020 gift, along with a six-page, how-to booklet.

In January, the Starmark team donned their headsets to gather in a software-generated amphitheater to review work for clients, such as



STARMARK
BIG IDEAS



Amelia Island Convention & Visitors Bureau; hear about the company's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion; and learn about strategies for driving profit.

In a simulated Starbar, designed to look like the actual bar in the company's lobby, Hartnett led a discussion on wellness and bringing one's "best self" and "entrepreneurial spirit" to work each day.

"If I walked up to you in a virtual world, I could pat you on the back, and you would feel it in your [Oculus] hand controls," Hartnett says. "I'm not a psych major by any stretch, but there was joy."

Agility and resilience

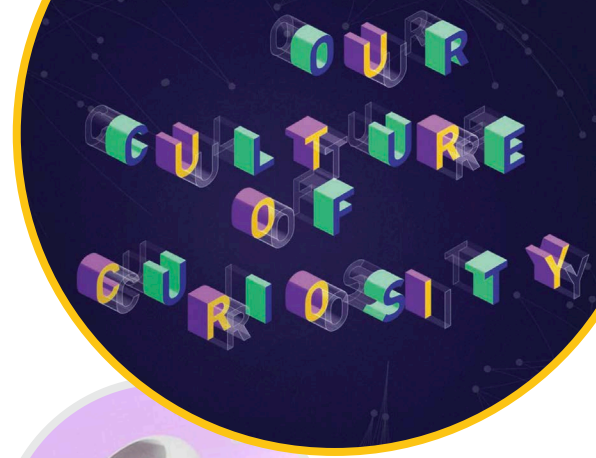
VR supports Starmark's agile working principles, which prioritize the ability to respond to change over following a plan — a critical, pandemic-era business skill.

When people used to gather at the office, Starmark held device-free meetings, another agile principle. Such forums ensured that employees focused on each other — agile companies value individuals and interactions over processes and tools.

While technically a device, Oculus keeps people engaged, and that's the goal. "You can't see your texts, you can't read emails, you can't see chat, because with your goggles on, you are 100% focused on the virtual world you're in," Hartnett says.

In September, Melbourne, Australia-based CSL Limited, the world's third-largest biotech company, adopted a global agile working policy for its 27,000 employees, about half of whom are in the U.S. The goal is to enable employees to collaborate more flexibly, says Chief Communications & Brand Officer Anthony Farina, typically based out of the company's U.S. headquarters in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.

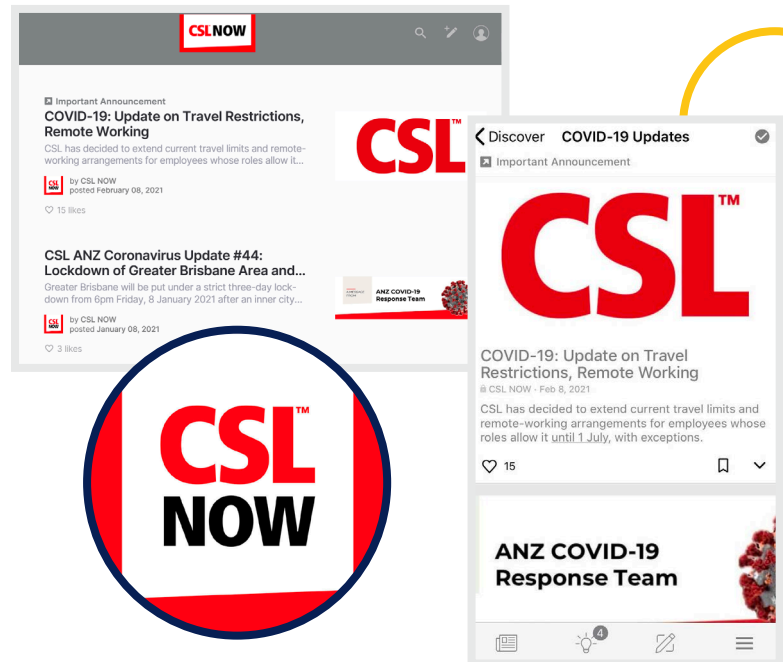
The company is not planning a mass migration back to the office. Thousands of scientists, researchers and technical professionals have been working this past year at the company's 280 plasma-collection centers, R&D labs and manufacturing sites around the world. Still, thousands of knowledge workers — people in communications, marketing, sales, HR, finance, legal — have been working from home.



With facilities in Wuhan, China, where the coronavirus first appeared, CSL foresaw the crisis and acted fast. The company launched a COVID-19 news channel on its “CSL Now” employee app in February 2020, when only 14 cases had been diagnosed in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This month, the company is hosting its first Global Development Days, a virtual week-long event.

Via a bespoke portal, employees can visit a variety of “booths” on topics such as career-building, diversity and inclusion, mentorship, work/life balance, resiliency, and elements of CSL’s growth strategy. The company is also producing interactive content, including live sessions based on time zones, Q&A chats with leaders, and videos.



One year later: Still OK to not be OK

“After a year working in this way, it’s really important to acknowledge it’s OK to not feel OK,” Farina says. “There’s pressure to deliver at work, pressure at home, family members in school, spouses at home. It can really drain your energy and take a toll on your well-being. But one thing we can control is how we respond — by showing agility and resiliency.”

CSL and Apriss have been using Microsoft Teams to host live events and webinars. “The technology has been extremely well-received; we’ve received more participation and Q&A’s than we have ever done at in-person events,” Farina says.

Microsoft is reacting to market demand with its spring 2021 launch of Viva, a major advancement in employee communications, says Jonathan Phillips, head of consultancy at London-based Simply Communicate, an internal communications and technology advisory firm.

Microsoft Viva

“Viva brings engagement, well-being and communication into Teams,” Phillips says. “Hitherto, we’ve been relying on employees to come to us — you have to rely on folks to want to go to the intranet and their inbox. The best and most pragmatic approach is bringing content to where they are working — in the flow of work.”

One feature is Viva Topics. Let’s say you’re writing an Outlook email to your colleague about vaccines. A “topic card” will appear in your email, directing you to subject matter experts in your company. “Companies used to have librarians,” Phillips says. “Viva Topics is a modern-day incarnation of that.”

Vaccines change everything

Vaccinations are the biggest driver of decisions regarding America’s return to the office. In fact, the U.S. is exceeding President Biden’s goal of administering 100 million vaccine doses in his first 100 days in office. Earlier this month, he said America would return to a more normal semblance of life by July 4.



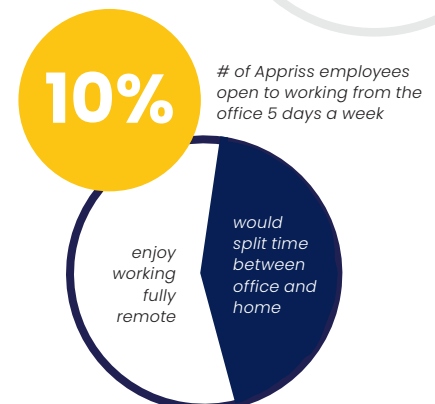
“We’re actually on track to reach this goal of 100 million shots in arms on my 60th day in office,” Biden said March 11 in his first prime time address. “All adult Americans will be eligible to get a vaccine no later than May 1.”

In interviews with Ragan Consulting Group before the president made his remarks, GoDaddy’s Clark and CSL’s Farina said their companies were aiming to reopen their offices on July 1.

“This is all theory,” Clark says. “We are a technology company, and have a lot of ability to work remotely. We don’t want everyone remote forever, but the safety of our people and their families is the priority. We’re planning, of course, but it’s really difficult to plan when it’s unclear what’s going to happen.”

At Louisville-based Appriss, where 1,000 employees “seamlessly transitioned” to remote work, executives expect to “have a phased-in approach sometime later in 2021,” Moore says.

Of the 700 employees who participated in a November internal survey, only about 10% wanted to work from an office five days a week. More than half of respondents said they enjoy working fully remote, while almost half said they would like to split their time between office and home, Moore says.



"We want to carve out a space for those comfortable returning to the office, but that won't be the vast majority," Moore says. "Maybe folks will come in for a few hours and go back home. It's too up in the air with federal and local jurisdictions to confidently put out a date and manage to that."

"Open air" real estate

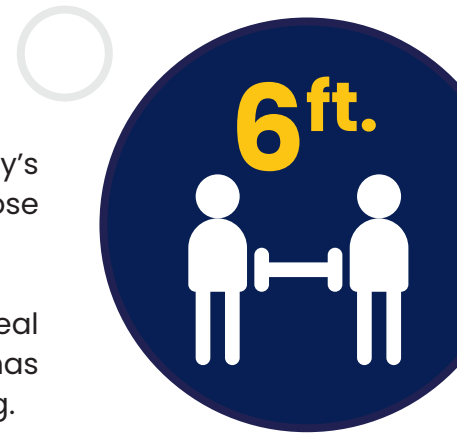
As heads of creative companies, Starmark's Hartnett and McKinney's Maglio are eager to see their teams reunite at the office, even if those addresses are changing.

Hartnett and her leadership team are looking for a smaller slice of real estate in downtown Fort Lauderdale, because the current location has private offices that won't accommodate six feet of social distancing.

"We think we need one-third of the space," she says, noting that virtual reality is helping her to imagine a new physical space that will foster collaboration among teams and with clients. "Open air, where people can sit far part, [with] plateaus and steps," she says. "But I don't want people balancing laptops on their knees. It's got to have the right desk support."

But, she adds, they are not in a rush. Teams have proven they can work virtually, even though she believes business results are better when people work face-to-face. "We're willing to sit it out as long as it takes; hopefully everyone will be vaccinated by the fall," she says.

Although he, too, is focused on employee health and safety, Maglio wonders about the "underbelly" of the advertising industry. "Some [work] cultures might encourage people to come back before others," he says. "Who's going to be the first creative ad agency to raise their hand and say, 'We're going back?'" Some agencies might rush such an announcement to lure clients away from their existing agencies, he says.



Post-vaccination vacation

Just as GoDaddy's Clark said her company does "not want to be the first making decisions," Maglio says his employees are not yet ready to leave the comfort of home.

Only one-third of McKinney's 170 employees in Durham, Los Angeles and New York City would feel safe coming back to the office now, based on existing protocols and policies, with two-thirds either not sure or not yet comfortable, according to results of a recent survey. However, 80% said they would be comfortable returning to the office after receiving the vaccine.

1/3

McKinney employees comfortable with returning to the office now

% of McKinney employees comfortable with returning post-vaccine

80%

The top two return-to-the-office concerns are inefficiencies (such as an hour-long drive in LA) and health-related concerns about the New York City subway.

Maglio foresees a nationwide post-Labor Day return to the office — a date reflecting Biden’s CNN remarks and the likelihood that many Americans will want to take post-vaccination vacations in August.

This fall, Durham employees will be able to take advantage of warm temperatures while safely distancing outside. The company is outfitting its two outdoor decks with “conference rooms” equipped with TVs, white boards, and phone lines.

Foot traffic’s revival

Maglio’s California employees are in for something new, too.

To hear him talk about his company’s new office space, in the gentrifying West Adams neighborhood of LA, is to leap into the past. Perhaps you remember life 13 months ago: You knew your morning barista by name, and the bartender at the bistro by your office knew your favorite cocktail.

Come this fall, McKinney’s LA employees will be fueling what companies with physical locations have always known to do — build local spirit and culture.

“We wanted to be in a neighborhood that isn’t fully established, to have a positive role in the community — to bring people in and bring business in,” Maglio says. “Restaurants and cafes are opening around us. When the lights go on, boom — West Adams has all these things.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Ann O’Dowd is a communications executive and writer with 20 years of international public relations and advertising experience, including seven years running PR and content production departments for Publicis Groupe agencies in Chicago and Paris. Through her company, Sally On Media, she provides marketing-communications and editorial services to small and mid-sized businesses. O’Dowd earned a master’s degree from Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. In 2017, she moved from Manhattan to Fort Lauderdale so she could swim more.

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