

Return-to-Campus Workplace Strategies: Workforce, Prioritizing a Human Centered Return

OVERVIEW

As our Northwestern community looks to return-to-campus, we want to provide guidance that will enable schools/units to effectively plan. The Return to Campus Plan Introduction and [Office Space Guidelines](#) outline key planning considerations that should be used when assessing what work should be prioritized for a physical campus presence as well as workplace considerations related to physical distancing and physical space requirements. This document outlines key considerations for managers and supervisors to use as you plan and prepare your team(s) to reenter the workplace.

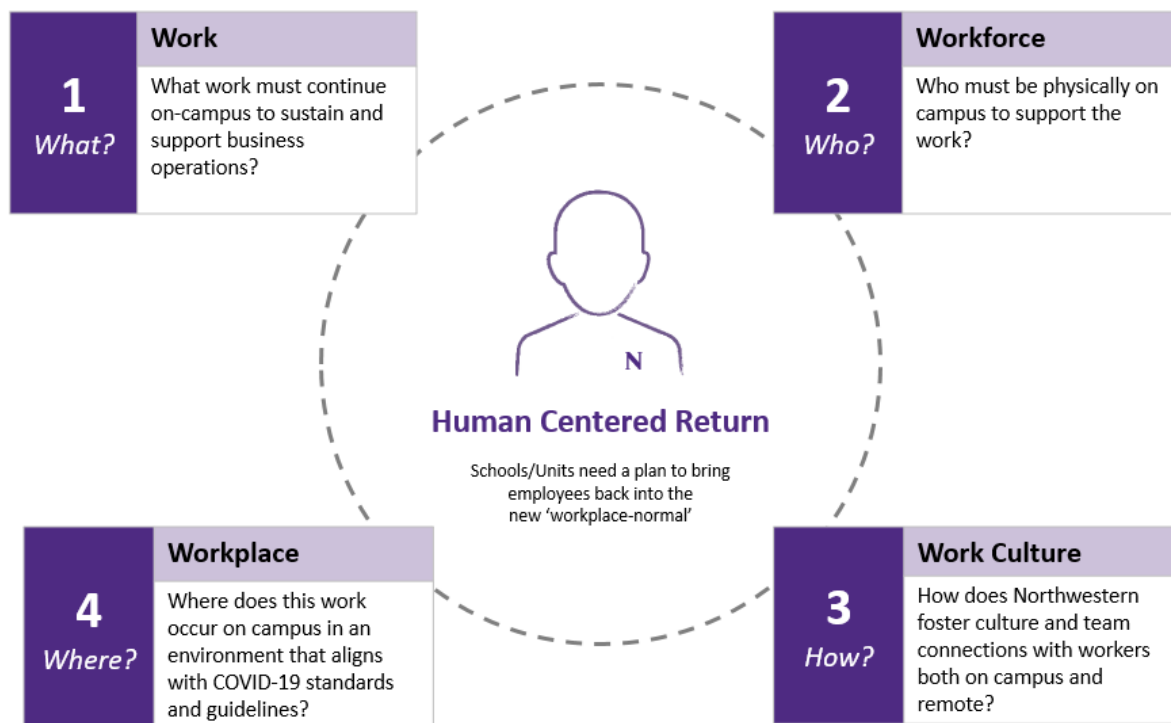
Units should begin planning with their staff now to have a fall operations model implemented by August 24. This will ensure that there is time to make adjustments before students return on September 4.

CONTEXT AND KEY CONSIDERATION

While we must return to campus, we must also adhere to guidelines provided at the federal, state, and municipal levels. This is a dynamic situation for our community; our guidance is grounded in the most recent public health information and will be updated continuously on Northwestern's [COVID-19 webpage](#). We will also take the specific challenges that teams face as they transition back into the workplace into consideration.

HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACH IN YOUR TEAM PLANNING

While the Northwestern community has been remarkable in its collective response to the COVID-19 challenge, our situation has taken a toll on each individual member. Prioritizing a human-centered approach throughout this transition will help ensure a successful return for all.



WORKPLACE STRATEGIES

To align with current guidelines, one critical component in safely navigating the return to campus is prioritizing/assessing who physically needs to be present and how this aligns with density and physical distancing requirements.

Recommendations:

- Remain flexible in models of work thinking outside of the ‘traditional’, on-campus model.
- Stagger work schedules (times, workday, work needs) and creating a rotational system as needed.
- Discourage visitors unless necessary. [See Northwestern’s Visitor Policy](#).

[Northwestern has long supported flexible work arrangements \(both occasional and formal\), where possible.](#) Such arrangements are not limited to remote work arrangements and include:

- Flex time schedules (ie. flexibility in starting and quitting work without changing the total number of work hours in a week)
- Compressed workweek
- Moving from a full-time to part-time role
- Job sharing

The main consideration in setting up an alternative work arrangement is how the work will be completed and the approval or denial of a request for an alternative work arrangement is at the **manager’s discretion** based on the business needs of the school or department. The staggering of arrival and leave times, for example, could both help staff and faculty using public transportation to ease congestion on public transport and reduce crowding at entry and exit points to buildings around campus.

Human Resources provides these general guidelines as well as this [proposal template](#) for those planning on submitting written proposals. Both managers and employees can consult with the Well-being Office to discuss effective flexible work arrangements.

POLICY ON COVID-19 ALTERNATIVE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

As it is recognized that some faculty/staff must return to campus to fulfill their job requirements, it is understood that some of our community will be unable to return immediately. For these instances, Northwestern has introduced a new COVID-19 Alternate Work Arrangement Policy which applies from July 1 – December 31, 2020.

This policy establishes a process to review requests from faculty and staff with required in-person campus work responsibilities activities who are requesting alternative work arrangements due to:

1. own or household risk of exposure
2. required care of minor and/or adult dependents
3. limited access to reasonably safe public transportation options
4. inability to secure child or elder care.

Please reference the [COVID-19 Alternate Work Arrangement Policy](#) and/or contact your HR Business Partner with additional questions.

COMMUNICATION

The transition to remote work required more frequent and more open communication among teams. The return will require the same, if not more. This is particularly true for teams in which some members will be returning to campus while some continue to work remotely.

The conversation regarding the return should take place well in advance of the actual return date and should involve the entire team. Sharing the protocols and policies outlined here and discussing the required training will give you an opportunity to have open and transparent discussion with your team. Communication is key but also more challenging when team members are largely remote and under stress. While technology allows us to stay connected, it does not allow for the casual, informal connections we had prior to the lockdown, introducing a level of formality to our current scheduled, physically distant interactions. Video-based meetings also entail constant stimulation, making them cognitively draining.

Building trust among colleagues and between leaders and teams is essential for effective communication, particularly in this current environment. Human Resources provides support for leaders in this area through the recently launched [Managing Distributed Teams certificate training](#), which includes a session on [Building Trust From Where You Are](#).

COLLABORATION

Research shows that autonomy is key to employee engagement and well-being. The current crisis has left many feeling a greater lack of autonomy in all areas of their lives than before, making the need for autonomy wherever possible more acute. Utilizing a collaborative approach in transitioning teams back to campus will allow for a more inclusive, empowering and trustworthy process.

We recommend that you engage your team members in planning your return, soliciting not only their concerns but also their ideas and solutions. Such a process will mitigate the potential fears and anxieties that our community may have related to the return, promoting the trust and sense of responsibility necessary to ensure compliance with the safety protocols outlined above.

ESTABLISHING TRUST AND ACKNOWLEDGING THE RETURN TO CAMPUS

Leaders should proactively acknowledge that the prospect of returning to campus may elicit a variety of valid reactions, both positive and negative. Leaders should anticipate and plan for questions before faculty/staff return, during their return as they settle back into the workplace and after the return as the workplace continues to change.

These reactions may include – but are not limited to – any of the following questions and concerns:

New Campus Practices

- What PPE availability will there be? What are the requirements for wearing PPE?
- Are we taking temperatures? Will testing be required?
- How do we manage physical distancing and equipment practices (i.e. using a printer/copier, mailboxes, bathroom, going into someone's office, break/lunch room, etc.)?
- What are our bereavement policies now? Are those going to be enhanced?
- Is it ok for me to interact with people from other labs/buildings?
- Is it ok for me to go into downtown Evanston/Chicago and then back to work?
- How often will the bathrooms and offices be cleaned?

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- Will we be able to engage in work-related travel again?
- Who will be sanitizing lactation rooms upon our return? How frequently?
- What if the timeline for getting necessary supplies is delayed?
- I am compliant with Northwestern's COVID-19 best practices but my co-worker is not. How do I correct their behavior without causing conflict?

Added/New Need Support Areas

- Finding/managing dependent care
- Work/life integration and fears of bringing the virus back to one's households.
- I am having trouble focusing at home/back at the office because of my anxiety/fear. . .
- I lost a colleague to COVID-19, what supports are in place for me, our team?
- My pets are struggling to adjust to the new routine - is there support for this?
- I can't manage all of this; is it possible for me to voluntarily move to part-time? To a job share?
- Concerns re. various aspects of one's own and one's loved ones' well-being, not just physical, social and emotional but also vocational and financial.
- Recognize that your team members may have specific individual needs, whether health-related, family-related, faith-based, etc.

These examples showcase the variety of concerns that team members may have. It is important to recognize that such concerns are highly individual, whether health-related, family-related, faith-based, etc. Some will have few concerns and actively welcome the return to campus. In addition, we must openly acknowledge that marginalized and underrepresented communities have been disproportionately affected by this crisis, and team members from these communities thus may have additional concerns and questions and may be experiencing stress related to these disparities.

This crisis has entailed a high degree of ongoing uncertainty about the future, a state that is particularly detrimental to well-being and takes a toll physically, cognitively and emotionally. It is important that we reassure teams that the health and well-being of our community is paramount in navigating our return to campus and that we openly recognize both the challenges and the opportunities that the return offers us. Listening and seeking to understand our community members' concerns and questions and providing as much information as possible is key.

In many cases, making time for open and honest conversation alone will reassure people, even if there is no specific answer readily available for the questions raised. When finding a solution is necessary, again, engage the team in considering options. In particular, you might consider the following in conversation with both individuals and your team:

- Providing "safe rooms" for prayer, lactation, etc. in lieu of depending on shared, public spaces
- Providing safety protocols for mealtimes
- Ensuring breaks throughout the day
- Regular touch-base meetings to understand and address workplace concerns or anxieties
- A tailored, phased return for individuals (ie. 1-2 days on campus the first week, then gradually increasing each week)

Setting Clear and Realistic Expectations

Setting clear and realistic expectations regarding the transition back to being on campus is crucial. Many may be expecting to return to familiar conditions when the reality is the way we work and interact with

one another back on campus will be markedly different. Preparing teams for that difference and planning for an adjustment period will aid in the transition.

Our shift to remote work entailed a focus on establishing agreed-upon priorities and results rather than number of hours/specific hours worked. Continuing such a focus will allow teams and units to be more engaged and more productive during this transition. Again, flexibility and autonomy are key.

Team members who are caregivers require additional support and flexibility. [These tips and resources are available to assist in these conversations.](#)

Maintaining Social Connectedness and Well-being

Maintaining one's well-being and understanding and supporting others' well-being - particularly emotional and social well-being - are both crucial to navigating this unprecedented moment. Many of our longstanding strategies and mental models are not sufficient to help us cope with the range of conflicting reactions and emotions we may be experiencing.

Leaders can support their team's well-being in a number of ways:

- Make sure you stay up-to-date on safety and public health COVID-19 responses relevant to your team/unit and regularly inform your team/unit of any related changes to activities and priorities
- Proactively develop awareness of and disseminate well-being resources and openly encourage teams to utilize such resources and engage in well-being activities
- Take team members' emotional temperature in addition to physical temperature daily
- Allow individuals to have flexibility and autonomy not only in managing their work but also in building in break time for meals, exercise, social connection and other forms of well-being
- Consider ways of decreasing additional non-essential demands on your teams so that they can focus more on critical priorities
- [Burnout is an occupational phenomenon](#), characterized by chronic workplace stress; be on the lookout for changes among team members such as signs of distress, poor performance, and social withdrawal
- Show appreciation for the ways that people are adapting to the new policies. Stress the ways in which abiding by these new protocols supports the health and safety of our entire community.
- Celebrate successes
- Remind people to take PTO for their well-being (physical, emotional, social and the like)
- Create opportunities for social connection. Some examples include
 - Setting up an ongoing water cooler Zoom space
 - Organizing a physically distant meal in a conference room or outdoors (weather permitting).
 - Scheduling a virtual gathering.
 - Interact with other colleagues and/or travel from each campus, as needed, while practicing distancing guidelines
- Model utilizing the strategies and resources above in addition to other available well-being resources

Since individuals have different well-being needs, support should be both individualized and tailored to the overall team as part of an ongoing conversation with team members.

[Well-being in Human Resources](#) is available for individual, manager and team well-being consultations.