

7 STEPS FOR A SAFE RETURN TO THE OFFICE

As the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be entering the endemic phase, organizations are turning their attention to onsite collaboration and physical interaction among staff members, many of whom have been working remotely for nearly two years. At the same time, cities across the U.S. are experiencing record increases in violent crime, including carjackings and assaults on public transit, while the country faces surging gasoline costs. The timing for a physical return to office could not come at a more complicated and stressful time for both organizations and individuals. How then do organizations encourage employees to return onsite while also fostering a safe and secure environment?



7 Steps for a Safe Return to the Office

- 1** Conduct a Safety + Security Risk Assessment of Your Office
- 2** Update Emergency Management Plans + Security Protocols
- 3** Check Access Control Credentials
- 4** Train Staff in Security and Emergency Management Plans and Conduct Drills
- 5** Assess How People Are Transitioning to the Office + Provide Support
- 6** Remind Employees of EAP Services
- 7** Check in with Employees to Assess Their Safety + Security Needs

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Here are seven steps to assist organizations in providing a safe return to offices and tools to make employees feel more comfortable coming back onsite.

1. Conduct a Safety + Security Risk Assessment of Your Office

For many organizations, particularly those located in large urban areas, the security environment today is much different from the start of the pandemic. A number of reasons account for this transition, including economic strain, decrease in mental health resources, and increase in unhoused populations, among others.

The principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) remind us that a lack of foot traffic (as experienced in downtown urban areas during the pandemic) results in fewer legitimate users of public and private spaces and fewer eyes and ears to ward off illicit activities. If the crime environment surrounding an organization's facility has changed, the security measures should also be adjusted to ensure they are appropriate to the level of risk.

In addition to the main lobby and office facilities, this assessment should include the parking garage, gym, cafeteria, rooftop spaces, all entrances to the facility, loading dock, etc. For organizations who are in multi-tenant facilities, ask building management if a comprehensive safety and security assessment has been completed recently and ask what additional measures have been put in place in response.

2. Update Emergency Management Plans + Security Protocols

Most of the Emergency Management Plans and Emergency Action Plans in place at the start of the pandemic have not been updated. In this time, people have likely left or joined the organization, operations could have changed, and different work practices might be in place. It is essential that these plans accurately reflect the new realities for organizations and are updated with current rosters for fire wardens, incident command teams, and safety committees. These individuals will also need to be trained in their roles and responsibilities in the event of an emergency. Providing specific training and tabletop simulations helps to prepare these teams to guide other employees in the event of an emergency.

3. Check Access Control Credentials to Ensure Only Authorized Persons Still Have Site Access

Consider that most people have interacted exclusively through virtual meeting tools and often in small groups. In the past people from different departments might have interacted in common areas, such as the quintessential water cooler, printer, or cafeteria, but for many this has not occurred. Even for those who returned onsite earlier than others, many of these common spaces were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions. As a consequence, many employees might not recognize all employees or contractors onsite, particularly for new joiners.

This means that the access control credentials, which should be continually updated, must be audited in advance of a major return to make sure no one retains access following a termination, resignation, retirement, or contract conclusion. The same should be done for physical keys.

4. Train Staff in Security and Emergency Management Plans and Conduct Drills

Most office employees have not engaged in physical security or emergency management training since the start of the pandemic. This means that they are out of practice in emergency procedures for an onsite work environment. In addition, it is highly likely that new people have joined the organization during the pandemic. With summer approaching, interns are also likely to start their work assignments.

Organizations cannot assume that employees and contractors will remember or be able to catch on to emergency procedures. Instead, they need to provide security and emergency management training and conduct relevant drills based on the organization's risk environment. The muscle memory developed from these drills is key.

We also recommend engaging in workplace violence prevention and intervention training. The stress of current conditions can create a more challenging work environment and a space where some employees might not remember the expectations of working onsite. People need to know that behavior that interferes with the organization's mission, negatively impacts colleagues, or creates a safety or security issue will not be tolerated. In addition, employees need to be able to recognize indicators of workplace violence, which is a spectrum of conduct that can range from abusive communication to aggressive body language to physical altercations. Empower employees to recognize these behaviors early and report them immediately to avoid a more serious security situation.

5. Assess How People Are Transiting to the Office + Provide Support

During the pandemic, an organization had Guidepost examine the walking path of an employee in a large urban area to go from a central train station to the organization's proposed new office. The office was promoted as being extremely modern with excellent amenities and security technology. The employee raised concerns about the walk to the office, which prior to the pandemic would not have been a concern. During the assessment, our team saw significant hazards as the employee would need to walk past a large homeless encampment, traverse a construction zone with limited pedestrian access, and enter an area of town that had stopped development during the pandemic. In addition, the path had poor lighting conditions, compounding the safety issues. This employee had legitimate safety concerns that needed to be addressed.

As a measure of duty of care, and as a recruitment and retention measure, we encourage organizations to survey staff to understand how they are coming to the facility. Are they driving, using public transit or rideshares, riding their bikes, or walking? A great tool is to provide baseline training on security in transit to remind employees to practice situational awareness, gain strategies for avoiding security challenges, and learn security techniques.

Continual reminders and training opportunities on what to do in emergency situations while in transit, how to respond to an attempted carjacking, and how to deal with harassment on public transportation all provide excellent topics to explore. Also consider setting up opportunities for transit friends by linking up interested employees with others coming from a similar geographic area to the office. Another option is to provide security escorts to help employees safely get to their vehicles when leaving at the end of the day.

6. Remind Employees of EAP Services + Ensure They Know How to Communicate Security Concerns

Keep in mind that transition back to a physical environment following the last two years of pandemic alone is very intimidating for many staff members. Combining this with the stress of economic conditions, family requirements, complex political conditions, and the many security challenges at home and abroad is a recipe for significant stress.

Work with employees to create a flexible environment where possible, remind them of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services, and make sure that they have easy access to the EAP contact information, the company's plan number, and any additional requirements. This is also a good opportunity for Security to reach out to employees and contractors to ensure they know how to communicate security concerns or incidents.

7. Check in with Employees to Assess Their Safety + Security Needs

Check in with employees to obtain their thoughts on safety and security needs for the workplace. I recommend providing employees with multiple methods to provide this information, for instance:

- an anonymous speak-up line
- security incident reporting website portal
- online security perception survey
- HR

An online security perceptions survey can quickly take the temperature of the organization and identify security needs, often in a proactive fashion. This sends the message that the organization cares about employee safety and security and provides another means for the organization to identify safety and security issues.

You may want to consider bringing in an independent third-party consultant for an objective viewpoint into the process. This can ensure you are benchmarking against peer organizations and that all security measures are

addressed to make a safe return to the office while giving employees, who are back onsite, peace of mind.



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