



---

## COVID-19 RETURN TO WORK – AGENCY ROUNDTABLE

### SUMMARY:

In early May, AAF Buffalo facilitated a Zoom conference among several small and large WNY advertising agencies to discuss returning to work following the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this discussion was to promote idea sharing across WNY's advertising leaders so that we all can implement the most effective return to work policies possible in a post-COVID-19 world.

The following represents ideas where consensus was reached that agencies should consider implementing, if resources allow.

### THIS REPORT CONTAINS:

1. Staff Communication & Safety
2. Return to Office
3. Company Policy
4. Industry & Community Support
5. Facilities
6. Additional Resources & Disclaimers

---

## 1. STAFF COMMUNICATION & SAFETY

- **Agencies should strongly consider evaluating how their people feel about returning to the office individually.**
  - Anonymously survey your staff:
    - Leadership learns how your staff is truly feeling about returning once work from home orders are lifted.
    - Employees feel heard and empowered to be part of the decision-making process.
    - At a minimum, the survey may include: if employees feel comfortable returning to work, if they would prefer continuing to work from home, and what their comfort levels are regarding tentative office policy revisions.
  - Hold one-on-one calls between leadership and staff:
    - Agency partners and/or C-Suite divvy up the total staff equally so there are multiple people communicating with team members.
    - Calls are to check in on how the employee is functioning from a home office.
    - Offer to deliver office supplies should employees need them.
    - Leadership is there to listen. Allows employee to open up about concerns or challenges that they are facing either at home or upon the office reopening.
- **Implement company-wide communications from partners and/or C-Suite.**
  - Formal and transparent: Hold a State of the Agency (or a variation of it) as much as necessary. Once a month was discussed until a new normal is established.
  - Frequent and available: A little from leadership goes a long way.
    - Quick hitting weekly emails and/or videos from at least one member of agency leadership has been widely applauded throughout WNY.
  - Informal and funny: Lighthearted communications from agency leadership shows of humanity and connection.
- **Get personal.**
  - Employees have expressed gratitude for leadership checking in during these times.
  - Reach out to employees to see how they are doing beyond work related items.
    - Ask how things are with their families, kids, pets, life in general, etc.
  - Create a buddy system where employees are responsible for checking in on two to three colleagues throughout the week.
    - This added point of contact helps remove an item from leadership's plate, but keeps communication flowing within an agency.
  - Hold virtual happy hours.
    - A simplistic solution that boosts morale, gives people something to look forward to, and helps people avoid social isolation.

## 2. RETURN TO OFFICE

- Professional services are in Phase 2 of New York’s reopening priority.
- Agencies should strongly consider waved or staggered returns to the office, as well as added flexibility for employees who are uneasy about returning.
  - Strongly consider delaying return to office beyond the state’s reopening.
    - Allows staff to ease into a new normal post-COVID without feeling they are the guinea pigs.
    - Allows leadership to gauge how reopening goes across the state and country, while providing added safety for their staff.
  - Once office is open, provide employees with the flexibility to return as they are comfortable or as they need to for client work.
  - Designate individuals and/or teams who have expressed desire to return to the office as soon as possible to return earlier than others (e.g. those struggling working from home with a family or those with limited exposure to high-risk groups).
  - Take special consideration for those who work in close proximity to one another at the office (e.g. many production teams could be facing this challenge).
- **Go the extra mile for anyone not returning to the office as quickly as others.**
  - Emphasize that there is safety in this decision and as long as quality of work and productivity does not suffer, there will not be any repercussions for remaining home longer than others.
  - Emphasize the continued use of video conferencing in all meetings so that those not in the office may easily join.
  - Provide IT setup at home if possible for those who may not return for a long period (e.g. if they are caring for somebody high-risk or are high-risk themselves).
  - If possible, provide stipends for employees’ home office needs.
- **Seek legal counsel before enacting invasive COVID-related policies like taking temperatures before entering the workplace.**
  - Agencies should consider questions like: Who can administer tests? How are these people trained? How is information stored? What government organizations need to be involved?
  - Generally, it is thought invasive policies like taking temperatures will likely not effect our industry in our market.

---

### 3. COMPANY POLICY

- All revisions to policies and procedures should be explicitly detailed to staff and documented by agency leadership.
- Revised policies specifically relating to COVID should strive to mitigate as much risk as possible for employees and the organization, and should be extensively researched before being implemented.
- Reevaluate WFH policies to be more available to staff in the future.
  - Productivity levels and quality of work have generally surpassed expectations as entire workforces migrated to home offices.
  - Plans should be put in place to expand this policy in some capacity going forward.
  - Video conferencing should be set up for every meeting so that attendees are prepared to participate regardless of physical location.
  - Virtual camaraderie should be emphasized throughout an organization to assure those working from home are not disadvantaged in any way.
  - WFH should be encouraged and policy strictly enforced for anyone who has virus symptoms.
- **Vacation and personal time should be addressed in some capacity by leadership.**
  - Encourage employees to take time off if they wish to while offices are shut down.
  - Some employees could use extra time to catch up on their mental health and value hearing there is no risk of being punished for taking time off.
  - If possible, agencies may consider extending paid time off that would normally expire December 2020 into 2021.
    - Benefits the employee if they do not wish to take time currently or had to cancel vacations.
    - Benefits the company so everyone is not trying to take off all at once in November and December.
- **Create and document policy surrounding employee travel and return to work.**
  - Policy should include details surrounding personal and client travel.
  - Stay up to date on local, state, and federal guidelines pertaining to travel.
  - Use local industry experts, such as Visit Buffalo Niagara, as resources.
- **Policies concerning the health of employees upon returning should be strictly enforced, and violators should be reprimanded immediately.**

#### 4. INDUSTRY & COMMUNITY SUPPORT

- Agencies are actively trying to continue to support community organizations as much as they possibly can.
- Support local COVID-related non-profits that are leading the charge against the virus in our community.
- Encourage employees to remain active in industry community groups that they have grown accustomed to.
  - Continue to contribute to ticket costs as long as resources allow.
- Turn any extra employee downtime to training or educational opportunities.
  - Support employees learning new skills via an online course, webinar, or virtual conference, and encourage idea-sharing throughout teams.
  - Include staff on client calls for training purposes where they normally would not be. Express that they are non-billable and it will not negatively impact the client.
  - Keep an eye out for free or highly discounted virtual conferences and events.

## 5. FACILITIES

- **Implement as many of the following safety measures as possible:**
  - Enhance building air filtration systems.
  - Limit use of common areas and conference rooms.
  - Use disposable materials for as much object contact as possible (e.g. Q-Tips).
  - Provide signage logs for when rooms were last cleaned.
  - Install sanitizing stations at appropriate areas around office.
  - Arrange for office to be deep cleaned more frequently.
- **Establish an office flow where pathways are noted one ways and traffic around the building is mostly moving in one direction as much as possible.**
  - Consider allowing creative teams to have fun with the new office signage, and ask them to create fun signage to align with culture.

## 6. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & DISCLAIMERS

- NY STATE COVID-19 HOMEPAGE: <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/home>
- AAF Buffalo encourages continuous monitoring and policing of government updates detailed in Governor Cuomo's briefings and updated on the above website.
- Disclaimers:
  - The information contained within this document is a recommendation for consideration only. It is not the advice of legal counsel, and AAF Buffalo encourages companies to seek out counsel if necessary.
  - The information discussed is general and for consideration to implement. Participating agencies reserve the right to implement policies as they see appropriate, and are not inclined to implement everything discussed here.