



THE CANADIAN  
BAR ASSOCIATION  
Alberta Branch

# RETURNING TO THE OFFICE

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR LAW FIRMS

*With thanks to the CBA British Columbia Branch for their assistance in drafting this document.*



## Returning to the Office: Considerations for Law Firms

Updated: May 5, 2020

CBA developed this resource to help law firms transition back to in-office operations when the province/territory where you practice proceeds through re-opening. The health and safety of your people and your clients remain paramount. You should continue to refer to your region's Health Officer and governments for the latest protections, contact restrictions, and re-opening plans, and adapt your return to the office plan accordingly.

The information provided in this document assumes that physical distancing requirements of 2 metres remain in place and that gatherings of up to 10-15 people are permitted in the first phase of re-opening.

The resource was developed with contributions from CBA members and firms, human resources professionals, and leading Canadian and international organizations. We will update it as new information becomes available.

### Your People

The people in your firm are your most important asset. So, let's start with them.

### What to ask

Your plan needs to work for your people. If you know their individual circumstances and create a plan to incorporate them, you'll be rewarded with enduring loyalty and increased participation in following the continuing restrictions.

Through individual or department meetings or surveys, find out:

- Any health considerations or high-risk factors that need consideration when returning to the office. You can anticipate that your 70+-year old partners and anyone with an auto-immune condition will need a different plan as will younger people who live with higher-risk individuals.
- What caregiver/parenting responsibilities does anyone have and what do they need? Continuing to work from home or adjusting in-office hours might work for those whose children aren't in school.
- How do your people get to the office? Mass public transit? Could they drive if they had access to parking?
- What would help people get their work done? Some need to be back in the office earlier in order to increase and improve their work product, which would also improve their mental health.

- Who are the key people who need to return to the office as soon as possible? A high-performing lawyer who works most effectively in the office? A bookkeeper whose operations rely on paper?
- What happens if your leadership team is affected by the virus? Consider keeping key partners isolated from one other to reduce the risk of having them affected by the virus at the same time.

With this information, you can now move on to other considerations to support your people in their return to the office.

## In-office schedules

- Many have worked from home effectively. Can this be a “new normal” for some staff?
- Consider shifts: (6am – 2pm, 10am – 6; 2pm – 10pm)
- Consider alternating schedules (Group One: Monday, Wednesday, Friday; Group Two: Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday)
- Considered staggered arrivals to minimize the number of people needing the elevator.

## Communicating the changes

Clearly communicating your protocols about physical distancing and office cleaning will establish a sense of trust with your staff. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Develop clear communications such as “Frequently Asked Questions,” safety etiquette guides, office protocols, etc. in posters, e-mail or webpages. There are available resources from [Health Canada](#), [Alberta Health](#) or the [Center for Disease Control](#).
- Assign back-to-the-office ambassadors who can conduct tours and instructions for using the newly re-configured office space.
- Be clear about your expectations. Let your staff know that some of these measures are temporary and to be prepared for adjustments.
- Create a COVID-19 taskforce with some key personnel that can keep researching and updating your firm’s protocols.

## Health policies and protocols

- How will you adjust policies to address the following:
  - Employees with children at home because there is no school or daycare available?
  - Conscientious Objectors who don't feel comfortable coming to the office?
  - Employees with family members/close friends that are diagnosed?
  - Employees who are caregivers or have family members who are immunocompromised?
  - Employees who are showing signs of infection but could be a common cold or allergies?

- Do you have contractors who are not covered by your policies? What happens if they start showing symptoms, have close family members who have tested positive, are immunocompromised, etc.?
- What is your protocol if one of your people tests positive? Communicate the procedure so they are ready to comply immediately.
- Do you have the ability to contact trace clients and suppliers that have been in contact with one of your people who tests positive?
- Identify an area where your people/clients can be isolated if they show symptoms at the office.
- Do you have other supports to manage the emotional health of your people such as increased accessibility to a human resources lead, office manager, student or associate director, managing partner?
- Do you have an Employee Assistance Program in place to address COVID19 related issues?

## Other policies

As you make your plan, don't forget to update your documented policies:

- Working from Home
- Care days/sick leave
- Vacations from Work (any changes to "carry-over" policies or approval procedure?)
- Travel for Work

Be upfront and communicate delays or changes in normal processes:

- Recruiting/hiring
- Performance management
  - Recruiting/hiring
  - Performance appraisals
  - Awards & recognition

## Your Office

The biggest impact to your physical space will be increased sanitizing and disinfecting procedures, and complying with physical distancing requirements. Your plan will vary depending on the directions and support of your landlord or facilities manager.

## Cleaning and sanitizing

- Once you've established an updated cleaning policy, clearly and transparently communicate it to your people, clients and visitors. Pre-meeting calls/emails/texts to clients, signs in reception or on the office door, and communications to your people will provide knowledge and assurance.

- Consider hiring full-time custodial staff to perform constant cleaning or increase the cleaning frequency. In this “new normal,” it is acceptable and even comforting to see cleaners during the workday.
- Implement a “clean desk policy” to avoid accumulation of memorabilia and allow for thorough night-time surface cleaning.
- Clean shared office equipment like phones, copiers and printers, expense recovery systems coders, fax machines and postage machines frequently and visibly. Keep disinfecting wipes near that equipment to allow people to disinfect before using it.
- Establish a protocol for cleaning meeting rooms immediately after meetings and allow time between bookings for that cleaning.
- Reconsider “hotelling” or rotating space where people share phones, headsets, computers keyboards, pens, staplers or any other desk items. If you continue, provide disinfecting wipes for people to clean before using the equipment.
- Centralize trash and recycling bins to increase the frequency of disposal and free up time for custodial staff to complete additional cleaning protocols.
- Can you adjust air circulation to avoid certain high traffic areas or keep air circulation to separate “wings” to reduce droplet transmission?
- Can you order additional supplies prior to returning to the office? In some places there may be an insufficient supply of hand soap, dishwasher detergent, hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, and paper products: tissues, paper towels and toilet paper. Be sure you have enough before you return to the office.
- Discuss what is the best way to handle incoming mail and other deliveries. e.g., designate one person to open mail, wearing PPE, once a day. According to the New England Journal of Medicine, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 has a lifespan of about 24 hours on cardboard. So, if it’s not urgent, let the items sit for 24 hours.
- As a longer-term initiative, consider changing fixtures to “hands-free”: faucets, soap and paper towel dispensers, automatic doors, badge readers and garbage/recycling bins.

## Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

PPE includes face masks, gloves and potentially goggles or a face shield. Follow the guidelines of Health Canada and your provincial/territorial Health Officer about recommended practices before you implement any practices in your office. Be sure to explain to your people and clients what you are following and why and provide instructions on how to properly put on and remove PPE.

Regardless of your firm’s new practices, some of your people may choose to wear PPE when returning to the office to protect them from the transmission of germs through contact and droplet routes.

To support law firms providing masks to their people and clients, CBA has sourced non-surgical supplies of cloth and disposable masks for bulk purchase. Contact your local branch to order.

## Lunchroom and food supply

The lunchroom or kitchen, with common touchpoints such as a faucet, fridge, dishwasher, cutlery and dishes, presents challenges for sanitizing and physical distancing. Approaches to this issue will vary and could include:

- Close the lunchroom entirely.
- Eliminate seating but permit the use of the fridge.
- Ask your people to bring their own cutlery/cups or switch to disposable utensils/cups.
- Consider setting staggered lunch hours for people to use the lunchroom.
- Make disinfecting wipes available to clean fridge handle, microwave, faucets, etc.
- For clients, do you have disposable cups brought in or tell them that you are not providing beverages at this time? Could you provide an individual bottled water station?

If your office routinely hosts business meals or provides food to staff, consider eliminating buffets or self-serve and instead arrange for pre-packed individual food. Be sure to let providers know how you are receiving those deliveries.

## Physical distancing

- To help everyone follow a two-meter distancing requirement, physically mark it on the floor:
  - from the seat in an office or workstation
  - in reception
  - in the boardroom and meeting rooms
  - in front of an elevator
  - in the elevator
  - in the kitchen
  - wherever there could be a line (photocopier, elevator, washroom).
- In the case of narrow hallways, consider marking one-way directional routes or establish a one-person-only in a hallway.
- Consider the provincial/territorial restrictions about numbers of people in a space. How many people can you, therefore, have on a floor or in a wing?
- Identify areas that won't be in use in order to maintain the requirements. Remove chairs from workstations, reception or the boardroom (this also helps the custodial staff clean only what is necessary), place signs, indicate it on a floor plan and circulate it to your people.
- If you don't have space to store unused furniture, ask your landlord or co-tenants if they have any unoccupied space. Some offices may not be returning to work yet. Otherwise, look into getting monthly storage space off-site.
- Consider installing shields between workstations or re-orient workstations, so employees do not face one another.

- Consider which doors could be left open, while still maintaining security and confidentiality and adhering to fire code.

## Parking

When you know about the changing needs of your people, reconsider parking allotments:

- Do you have enough staff parking to accommodate those who need to drive?
- Are there people who would give up their spot to benefit others who need it?
- Consider alternating days for staff to come into the office to free up parking spots.
- Can you lease more parking spots in the building? In nearby parking facilities?

## Communications

When you know how you are returning to the office and have communicated with your staff, be sure to also inform:

- clients
- suppliers
- landlord
- other tenants – important to communicate and share protocols and expectations if you share office space or building floors with other tenants
- contractors -such as janitorial staff and IT support
- insurer(s)
- Canada Post and other couriers – implement a designated drop-off area

## Your Clients

Your clients are crucial to your business, so it is critical to re-introduce in-person meetings safely.

Think about if, when and how you re-introduce in-office client meetings. Some considerations:

- Meeting Clients
  - Can you meet by phone or video instead?
  - By appointment only or may people walk in?
  - Limited hours for in-person meetings?
- Meeting Spaces
  - Consider installing a plexiglass shield at the reception desk to protect your staff and visitors?
  - Consider installing plexiglass between client and lawyer or staff meeting with the client
  - Arrange a new cleaning protocol so meetings paces (surfaces, chairs, etc.) are cleaned between use (allow for cleaning time between meetings).
  - Modified seating in reception and meeting rooms.
  - Assign seats and materials to each person for day-long sessions, to avoid multiple people touching surfaces or items.

## Communications

Once you have established your plan, let your clients know the parts of the plan that affect or protect them both in advance of attending by email or text (a basic sample is in Appendix A).

Consider including information about:

- Reduced capacity for parking.
- Cueing for elevators in the lobby.
- Clients showing specific symptoms won't be admitted.
- Restricted movement throughout the office and some bathrooms may not be available.
- Advise whether you are supplying disposable masks to clients while on-site at your premises or suggest that they provide their own.

Install signs on doors, in elevators and/or reception areas that identify the measures in place.



## Appendix A: Sample communications

E-mail to clients prior to their arrival to your office

*Dear client,*

*Regarding your appointment on XX, we want to let you know that our office is following these guidelines to ensure staff and visitors' safety.*

*The physical office is only open to the public between the hours of 10 am and 2 pm, in order to allow for staggered work schedules and physical distancing requirements.*

*We strictly observe physical distancing requirements. As such, our conference room has a reduced capacity of six people. We expect you will be attending your appointment with a maximum of two people. Please let us know if this not the case. Our elevators have a maximum capacity of two people. Please allow enough time to wait for the elevator.*

*We ask all visitors to wear a non-medical mask. If you have one, you are welcome to wear it. If you don't have one, we will provide one for you.*

*Finally, we ask that if you are not feeling well, or are showing symptoms of illness please reschedule your appointment.*