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Workplace of the future: business best practices and what is needed from government

As of June 6, 2021

*Note - this document is presented in a consolidated format for discussion purposes. It will likely be externally communicated in its constituent parts.

Introduction

While getting through the immediate phase of the pandemic is top of mind for businesses and government, it is critical to start to plan now for the workplace of the future. Planning now will mean companies are better placed to accelerate a return to normal operations, which will ultimately generate business activity.

Although it is acknowledged that COVID-19 will change how companies and their staff operate, how this manifests itself will differ based on the company, its sector, and operational needs. However, the common thread is the need for workplaces to operate safely, ensure employees can work productively in the office or remotely, and support the conditions for the workplace to be a hub for employees to bond and professionally develop.

The Canadian Chamber, through this Workplace of Future document, is acting as a catalyst to accelerate the journey towards the new normal. Getting Canadian businesses there will require taking action now.

This document covers four areas where businesses and government need to act:

- Health & safety
- Teleworking
- Workplace skills and training
- Future of customer engagement



Section I - Health & Safety

Business Best Practice

The Canadian Chamber's [COVID-19 Workplace Recovery Toolkit](#) provides detailed guidance to companies on the tactics to safely manage their workplace during the pandemic. How public health rules will operate in the new normal once the pandemic is over remains to be seen. However, there are numerous considerations that companies should start to think through now to be able to react quickly, particularly as employers will need to manage a workforce that may not be entirely vaccinated. Additionally, while public health measures provide a baseline, business operators may want to go beyond those minimum requirements to bolster their employees' confidence that the workplace is ready for a safe return.

Although vaccination and herd immunity will be the long-term solutions to the pandemic, a suite of complementary measures will need to be used by businesses to rebuild trust that the workplace is safe to return to.

- **Rapid screening** – Proactive deployment of rapid screening will continue to be an option companies may decide to use in order to screen possible asymptomatic positives before they come into the workplace. Rapid test kits are becoming more available and more provinces are shifting administration rules to not require a medical professional.
- **Workplace layouts** – Many businesses that had staff coming into the workplace implemented changes to their physical office space to comply with physical distancing requirements. Although it remains unclear how and when social distancing rules will be relaxed, by maintaining modified workplace layout rules, companies will be able to instill greater levels of confidence to encourage staff to return. For example, this includes leaving plexiglass in place and limiting the number of individuals allowed in meeting rooms or commons areas such as staff lunch rooms.
- **Ventilation** – COVID-19 has underscored the need for workplaces to maintain adequate ventilation given the risk of aerosol virus spread. This can include continuous cycling of HVAC systems, opening windows, and regular changing of filters.
- **Sanitization** – Despite increasing evidence that COVID-19's transmission via surfaces is comparatively low, employees are likely to have a heightened sensitivity around touching physical surfaces. This particularly includes surfaces in common areas, such as printers and door handles. Business operators should ensure regular cleaning of high-touch surfaces and equipment and may wish to consider air sanitation and pathogen monitoring systems (see below).



- **Pathogen Monitoring** – In addition to heightened sensitivities around surfaces, some staff will have heightened awareness of the air environment. Providing regularly scheduled collections of pathogens based on air sampling to determine the presence of pathogens - including COVID-19 – will help evaluate the effectiveness of infection prevention and control protocols and provide up to seven days earlier warning of a possible outbreak. By making the invisible visible, business operators can provide confidence to staff and customers.
- **Masking** – The guidance around masking will continue to evolve and it is critical for business operators to set clear expectations for their employees. Given that not every member of the workforce will be vaccinated, employers will need to ensure that, as long as unvaccinated persons are required by public health authorities to wear masks, that they do not face stigmatization in the workplace. As a result, some employers may want to consider extending mask mandates in the office even if public health authorities decide to follow the US approach of eliminating indoor masking for vaccinated persons.
- **Positive case protocols** – Employers will need protocols in place to support contact tracing when positive cases do occur. To support this, employers will need to maintain electronic or written logs of staff and visitors that come into the workplace to enable them to take on responsibility for contact tracing rather than solely relying on public health.

Specific delivery tactics on all of the above are outlined in more detail in the [Canadian Chamber's Workplace Recovery Toolkit](#). Businesses will need to keep an active understanding of public health guidance as it evolves throughout the summer and autumn of 2021.

This is a [Safest Office Model](#) created by Get Ready, Niagara Innovation, and the consortium called Safe Site Group. It provides a visual walkthrough of an office environment implementing various safety measures.

Although vaccination remains a personal choice, employers should continue to take an active role in encouraging their employees to be vaccinated in order to create a healthy workplace for all. Employers should remain empathetic to employees' concerns and focus on conveying science-based evidence around the benefits of vaccines. The Canadian Chamber's [Vaccine Resource Hub](#) provides resources for companies on how to engage their employees through the countless interaction points they have in a given day.



What Business Needs from Government

In addition to the measures that businesses can undertake to instill employee confidence that the workplace is safe to return to, governments have an integral role to play in providing clarity and incentives and setting public health regulations. Governments need to deliver in a number of areas to prepare the workplace of the future.

- **Provide clarity on vaccine status information rules** – As [50% of Canadians](#) who want to return to a physical workspace would not be comfortable doing so if some of their colleagues are not vaccinated, governments should clarify the information employers can require or voluntarily request from their employees about vaccination status. Without government guidance, employers will implement a patchwork approach and expose themselves to legal issues. Should employers be allowed to collect information, there must be implementable privacy safeguards to ensure data is protected to meet requirements noted in [recent comments](#) by federal and provincial privacy commissioners.
- **Provide clarity on criteria for safe business re-opening** – To move forward with a safe re-opening, federal and provincial governments should provide clear forward guidance on what rules to anticipate when we reach the population thresholds of 75% one-dose/20% two-dose and 75% two-dose. Alongside the above point on clarity for what employers can ask of their employees in regards to vaccination status, governments should actively support rapid screening as a complementary measure to ensure safe environments for employees and customers.
- **Make accessible the lists of certified products for safe workplaces** – As companies bring staff back into office, it is critical for them to be able to easily understand what products are legitimate and approved by Health Canada. Health Canada should ensure lists of approved products are easily accessible for buyers to verify that they are investing in items which fulfill their advertised purpose. Explaining how products are certified would also help to build confidence with purchasing companies.



- **Provide guidance on workplace infectious control and prevention** – The federal government must develop clear national guidance on workplace infectious prevention and control plans and the suite of measures needed to keep people safe. Air sanitizers and disinfection, pathogen monitoring systems, and rapid testing are important to keep people safe and build trust between employers and employees. Governments need to develop clear guidance that enables businesses of all sizes to stay open while protecting employees and customers. The guidance needs to be forward-looking and adaptable to ensure it is agile enough to deal with a spectrum of future pandemics rather than fighting the last war. Governments should also provide a standard for sanitation technology to give the public confidence about the products used to provide safety in the workplace and make this user friendly.
- **Harmonize vaccine credential systems** – As discussions continue domestically and internationally, it is critical that companies do not face an avalanche of vaccine credential systems. Canada needs to prioritize interoperability for our systems domestically and internationally.

Section II - Teleworking and Business Operations

Business Best Practices

Social distancing and health and safety protocols imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic forced firms to introduce telework on a large scale, accelerating the move to remote working in a wide range of industries. Once the pandemic is over, many of these changes are anticipated to remain in the form of a hybrid work cycle for numerous companies.

According to surveys conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, employees in office roles have expressed a desire to telework two to three days per week. A [survey of Canadians](#) found three-quarters preferred a hybrid model of some form.

The experience of business operators and employees with respect to teleworking during the pandemic has been mixed. Some have seen advantages in terms of increased efficiency, improved talent recruitment by having a wider pool of workers, better work-life balance due to no commuting, and potential savings on office spaces. However, business management and employees have reported lower employee engagement, greater difficulty in communication, and less efficiency in telework due to solitude and distractions at home for some.



For companies that are exploring hybrid work models, it is important to proactively evaluate how employees can be categorized based on business needs. The first category are employees that are able to effectively execute their job function fully away from the company's establishment; the second category are employees that can effectively fulfill their role by teleworking a few days a week; and the third category are employees that must be in the office every day to meet their job mandate. Given managers are best placed to assess operational needs at a strategic level, it should be a top-down approach for managers to lead the process of identifying which category each role fits into. This should then cascade down to employees in order to ensure clarity and consistency of application.

In implementing a hybrid working model that has employees in all three of those categories, it is important to be vigilant about the adverse effects of teleworking: reduced communication, innovation chilling, or potential long-term costs of worker isolation. Employers also need to be particularly vigilant in onboarding new employees who will not benefit from in-person engagement to develop relationships with co-workers. The ability to build an inclusive workforce may also suffer with managers unable to regularly engage with their employees and understand the challenges facing staff.

There are also critical cybersecurity considerations for teleworking that companies will need to take into account. A [survey of Canadian CEOs](#) found that 80% of CEOs say cybersecurity is a threat to their company's growth prospects and 90% said the complexity of cyber threats is impacting their ability to shape a strategy.

There are several actions businesses can take to build a future workplace that aims to incorporate the positive aspects of teleworking and limits the risks.

- **Build an effective and synchronized hybrid workplace** – In the future workplace, where many workers are teleworking and several are in the office, managers will need to build equitable relationships with all employees to ensure they have sufficient supervision and support. It is important to reduce the risk of developing an office in-group and home out-group, where teleworking employees feel isolated and are [passed up for promotion](#). Management of remote and in-office employees should include setting clear expectations, clarifying which days can be used for teleworking, establishing daily check-ins, setting communication preferences, and building a hybrid model for social interactions to maintain office cohesion. Social interactions can include everything from starting meetings with icebreakers to having virtual icebreakers.

Additionally, synchronization of teleworking and in-office work patterns should be tackled through effective management of electronic collaboration tools and standardized practices of engagement. Businesses can provide training around the use of video technology and collaboration tools as well as set expectations for when and how people can collaborate.



This is particularly critical to ensure that employees are able to fully utilize the tools built into software applications such as Sharepoint, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom.

As noted earlier, employers should lead the conversation about the degree to which a role can be performed effectively by teleworking. Managers should also make decisions in the context of the broader team to ensure that staff are physically present at the office when dictated by operational needs. Setting clear parameters up front will be valuable for managing employees' expectations later on and also mitigate tension within teams that could otherwise exist if employees have discretion over their own teleworking pattern.

- **Evaluate the role of the physical office** – Companies will also need to consider the role of the office itself and make decisions on real estate and workplace design. A well-located and tech-enabled physical space will ensure there is good engagement and productivity in the physical office. If companies make teleworking a permanent fixture of their operations, they will need to ensure sufficient space exists for staff to connect for videoconferencing with their coworkers in a manner that does not disrupt others. This means business operators should consider how breakout rooms, shared work stations, and other private call spaces can be adapted into the physical layout of the office. Physical office infrastructure should remain secure to facilitate hot-desking arrangements and be optimized for employees with accessibility challenges.

As companies make decisions about the role of the physical office space, there are also the health and safety aspects of remote working. Companies should consider how their budgets on office furniture can be redeployed to ensure employees have ergonomic arrangements when working from their home office.

- **Adopt agile business processes, practices, and technology** – Businesses will need to adopt agile practices and virtual collaboration networks, supported by the right technological infrastructure, including audiovisual connectivity, in order to better synchronize teleworkers and on-site workers in a hybrid workplace. A key part of those agile practices is setting clear expectations around employee KPIs, and having clear measurements of expected outputs and outcomes rather than focusing on the number of hours spent in a physical space. Additionally, managers will need to take into account the amount of time spent on accomplishing tasks.



As companies consider normalizing greater degrees of remote working, the issues around the “right to disconnect” will become even more critical. Although many jobs by their nature require staff attention outside core business hours, employers will need to be more acutely aware of ensuring the appropriate work-life balance. This can be achieved by taking several actions:

- Setting clear expectations around tasking in terms of substance and deadlines.
 - Ensuring that managers have daily check-ins with their teleworking staff to understand how employees are managing their workloads.
 - Avoid sending tasks to staff outside core hours, or when sending them outside core hours to ensure that staff understand when responses are needed.
 - Manage onboarding effectively for new remote employees
- **Reframe the office as a hub for engagement and innovation** – One understandable concern of businesses with a remote workforce is whether employees are sufficiently engaged and connected to company culture. Furthermore, innovation in the workplace depends on knowledge sharing, which is more easily obtained through in-person interactions. In the post-pandemic world where employees have increased expectations in relation to remote working, companies will need to reframe the office as the hub that will support their innovation, interaction, and growth. Employers can help in reframing the office as a hub for engagement by ensuring that employees understand how their individual activities align with their manager’s goals and those of their teammates. This will buttress the role of the office as the connectivity point for individuals with the broader company.
 - **Maintain vigilance on cybersecurity issues** – As employees work from home, they utilize home Wi-Fi, virtual private networks (VPN), and many also use bring-your-own-device (BYOD) configurations. Companies should set clear ground rules for staff on what sort of non-company purchased equipment can be used for business purposes either as a peripheral into a company computer or as a device that will interact with company data/networks. This is critical to ensure adequate protection of a company’s IT systems.

What Business Needs from Government

Governments should ensure that employers have the ability to determine what teleworking models are most appropriate. However, government has a key role to play in providing the infrastructure and supports for the varying approaches that companies will take.



- **Improve infrastructure that facilitates remote work** – As a hybrid workspace is likely, many employees will be working from home and require access to technology and high-quality internet. Governments should improve and expand upon existing internet infrastructure, including through the Universal Broadband Fund, to support access to high-speed internet which enable remote workforce models. Governments should support the cybersecurity of businesses by making available through broader communication channels the resources developed by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security
- **Provide fiscal incentives for home office spending, secure IT infrastructure, and training for remote employees** – Businesses need to ensure that remote workers have access to an effective workspace in their home that is secure from cyber threats. This requires computers, supporting peripherals and cybersecurity tools. However, IT investments are large costs for SMEs to provide their employees, and many of these expenses are not tax-deductible.
 - Governments should provide fiscal incentives for businesses and employees to have the equipment they need to work remotely in a way that is effective and secure.
 - The government should change the rules for home office deductions to allow salaried employees to claim the same list of deductions as commissioned workers, ensuring they can also claim home insurance, property taxes, and leased technology.
 - The Canada Revenue Agency should consult businesses on the future of the T2200 form given the increased percent working from home.
 - Expand the Canada Digital Adoption Program announced in Budget 2021 with grants primarily targeted at SMEs to offset the costs of cybersecurity adoption in order teleworking and hybrid arrangements that are secure.
- **Establish national cybersecurity standards** – Currently there is no baseline security standard for the development of software products sold the government or to businesses. In a recently released [Executive Order](#), President Biden mandated a review of cybersecurity labelling on products to enable consumers to make more informed choices about the products they are purchasing. Canada should undertake a similar process to help businesses and consumers – including those teleworking – ensure they are adequately protected to meet their cybersecurity needs.

Section III - Workforce Skills

Business Best Practices

Developing enduring workforce skills and talent pipelines is critical to building the resilience of companies and workers in order to grow in the post-pandemic economy. Although this has always been important for businesses, it takes on an added importance given the pandemic has accelerated digital adoption, automation, and other technologies. There are key actions companies should implement to improve workforce upskilling and reskilling, build a culture of lifelong learning, and better utilize their existing workforce.

- **Value human and durable skills** – As technology ushers in the fourth industrial revolution and transforms the workplace, technical skills and traditional competencies are no longer sufficient for supporting future businesses. In order to address this skills gap and encourage lifelong learning, companies should focus more on recognizing human and durable skills. Skills such as critical thinking, leadership, communication, collaboration, entrepreneurship and adaptability can help employees effectively work together and thrive.
- **Hire based on skills and competencies** – Given the importance of human and durable skills, businesses should consider altering their hiring practices to focus on skills and competencies as demonstrated by experience and not only academic credentials.

Competency-based assessments that recognize both traditional and non-traditional training are critical to encouraging an environment of lifelong learning. This will enable workplace inclusivity as it will make it easier to hire underrepresented communities, who are more likely to have non-traditional credentials, and can therefore be disadvantaged by the labour market. Hence, human resources departments should tailor job descriptions, interviews, and assessments in order to acknowledge a variety of forms of experiences and demonstrations of talents.

- **Facilitate work-integrated learning and flexible learning-integrated work** – Work-integrated learning is a widely-used method for strengthening a workforce. For those seeking to gain experience, it allows for their exposure to new fields, helps balance their expectations as new entrants, and provides networking opportunities. For businesses it provides a pipeline of workers for existing entry-level positions. Businesses should develop their work-integrated learning programs such as applied research projects, apprenticeships, and co-operative education by working with post-secondary institutions in their community.



- **Plan job advancement and retention** – In order to retain and advance existing employees, learning and growth should be encouraged and facilitated at every level of the organization. Businesses should build personalized plans and train employees to help not only entry-level workers but also those below C-suite and assist them in moving up to the next level. Plans should be tailored to individuals in a way that targets skills for development and sets a clear pathway for individuals to be promoted internally. Internal on-the-job training should also be leveraged to support employees who want to pivot careers but stay within the organization.

What Business Needs from Government

In addition to business-led activities, governments need to support companies in upskilling/reskilling and facilitate a talent pipeline.

- **Identify key skills and competencies to inform both education policy and appropriate fiscal incentives** – There needs to be closer alignment of business needs, the labour market, and education programming in order to provide the workforce of the future. Statistics Canada should collect robust national data on forward-looking business needs to inform education policy decisions across the country and the potential use of financial incentives to provide flexible learning options that meet market demand.

Section IV - Customer Experiences of the Future

Business Best Practices

Consumer spending habits changed drastically during the pandemic, resulting in a considerable increase in e-commerce and curbside pickup. Although many consumers will want to revert to in-person experiences, more activity is likely to structurally shift to remain online. The pandemic has also not abated the increasing consumer desire to purchase products that have been responsibly sourced.

- **Synchronize online and physical inventory** – Businesses should ensure they have invested in inventory management systems to synchronize online purchases, in-store purchases, and physical inventory to ensure that customers can seamlessly shop in numerous ways. This will be particularly important as consumers continue to pursue omni-channel purchasing habits and companies selling physical products need to maintain adequate inventories to meeting evolving demand.



- **Watch emerging corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environment, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives** – Consumers are increasingly mindful of where the products they buy are being sourced from and e-commerce is making it easier for customers to learn about a product's origins. Initiatives are being pursued in Canada and elsewhere around the world to mandate companies to publicly disclose more about their supply chains, particularly with regards to considerations such as sustainability and whether forced labour was used. Companies need to monitor these developments to ensure compliance.

What Business Needs from Government

It is critical for the right government policies to be in place to support businesses to remain competitive in the face of more virtual activity.

- **Provide clear rules to protect customer data** – Canada's federal privacy rules are significantly out of date and there are increasingly complications with overlapping provincial rules. Canadian businesses with customers in Europe also face complications from a misalignment between Canadian and the EU privacy rules. The federal government needs to expedite the passage of legislation to update Canada's federal privacy laws to enable businesses to protect consumer data in a manner that instills confidence while also supporting business innovation.

