Considerations for Remaining at Home and Returning to Work after COVID-19 Restrictions Lift

How does commuting factor into your re-open plan?

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We at Commute.org are making it no secret that we want employees to continue to telework whenever possible even as Bay Area public health restrictions begin to ease. We have a vision to flatten and bend many curves during this next period: the spread of COVID-19, traffic congestion, air pollution - and continuing to telework has the potential to, not only to keep us safe and working, but leaves us better off in regards to traffic and air quality than we were prior to the pandemic. We have a chance at making our "new normal" a "new better."

Unfortunately, respiratory viruses don’t compartmentalize between home, transit and work – so the before, during, and after of anyone’s commute matters in possible transmission to your workplace, to your homes, and to fellow passengers in shared transit. It will feel like a "chicken-or-the egg" roundabout, but cycle yourselves through different workday possibilities to answer the first key re-opening question: Who needs to physically commute and return at all? Risk and exposure factors at a workplace and en route to work are essential when recommending what modes of transit to take in the first place – to be taken by whom, and when. If your teams can continue to telework after a re-opening, do so. We outline some commute-informed considerations for remaining at home and coming into work here
Preventing a Congested Commute

There could be a surge in traffic when driving alone means the least exposure to other passengers – but also forces drivers to contend with longer commutes and insufficient parking. The public is likely reticent to return to public transit if social distancing is not possible. For many, public or shared transit is a person’s only mode of getting to work, and these means of transit should be kept as spacious and safe for whom they are necessary. Lowest exposure on commutes of all types will decrease risk of carrying transmission to your locations as well.

Maintaining Safe Distances

Teleworking is the best option if your office or facility layout cannot be adapted for social distancing, and the employee’s function can be carried out at home. Questions that will influence your decision on which teams remain at home and to what degree: Are work stations adequately spaced and in what directions do they face? Are conference rooms and break rooms now too cramped for pandemic protocol? How often do you rely on in-person meetings and how has this shifted? How will on-site staff meet while distancing?

Pre-Existing Health Conditions

Employees with certain pre-existing health conditions are at higher risk of a severe infection if they are exposed during transit or at work. These employees should consult with their health care provider, and human resources and legal teams should be consulted regarding health privacy and disclosure – and how management may offer options for how employees get to work, where they work, and what accommodations can be made.

Safe Transit for Onsite Workers

High foot traffic, high exposure, close contact roles are at highest risk of transmission and should ideally take a mode of transport with the lowest exposure to other passengers. However, oftentimes for hourly workers, shared transit could be a person’s only means to get to work. In the same way medical-grade masks should be prioritized for medical workers, when restrictions loosen, any staff whose role does not require physical presence should continue to telecommute to keep the roads clear and transit as safe as possible for those riding.
For Teams Returning to the Worksite

Select who works onsite and for what purpose
Tasks such as production, inventory or facilities management; workspace upkeep like receiving or sending packages, opening the mail, or watering the plants; or seeing to on-site infrastructure for which a remote solution has not yet been found. Pilot small and safe and observe results. Again, you will likely rollout multiple return-to-work scenarios concurrently, have backups, and adapt or re-institute as the crisis evolves. Prepare your team for many modes of working.

Stagger and split on-site employee schedules
Stagger and split on-site employee schedules to minimize exposure, maintain distance, and avoid congested commutes and parking. Variations are possible in selecting which days and hours – as well as partial days. Permutations are many! Institute a means of communicating who will be where and when.

Not a One-Size-Fits-All
Make clear when and with whom coming into work is a requirement and/or a choice the employee can make for themselves. Employees’ emotional well-being and their “where to work” preferences promote a focused workday. Given new daily responsibilities (family and child care needs, desire for a distraction-free workspace from a full home, etc.), there will not be a one-size-fits-all. The commute and worksite may feel safe and productive for some, but completely preoccupying and anxiety-inducing for others. Hopefully, teams will find a “sweet spot” between the number of staff remaining at home and those on-site to maintain safe protocols at the work location.