




Institut de recherche  
Robert-Sauvé en santé  
et en sécurité du travail

A photograph of a person with dark, curly hair, wearing glasses and a light blue surgical mask. They are sitting at a desk, looking at a laptop screen. The background is a blurred office environment with large windows. The overall color palette is cool, with blues and greys, accented by the orange of the logo in the top left.

# Returning to the Office After the COVID-19 Health Crisis

## An Approach to Transitioning to a New Organization of Work

## Scope And Limitations

Given the urgent need to make materials available to support workplaces, the research team is releasing a preliminary version of a guide developed in the scope of the call for research proposals geared towards developing solutions or advancing knowledge related to OHS in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be updated as additional information becomes available.

The content of this guide has no legal or regulatory status. Some of the recommendations presented may not be applicable or may need to be adapted to the context of each workplace. In any case, professional judgment should be used to define and implement the most appropriate measures.

## Origins

This document is the result of research funded by the IRSST. The researchers looked at how a large provincial government organization managed the COVID-19 health crisis and the lessons it learned. They were able to observe the measures implemented by three different teams (reception and client service, the printing department and the file processing department). Interviews with 24 respondents made it possible to document

1. what was done;
2. what worked or didn't work;
3. the fears, apprehensions and needs that these people had about returning to the office.

It thus presents the elements that seem relevant to guide the return to the office and to facilitate the transition to new ways of working. It is a **proposal** that those responsible for the return to the office in **your organization can adapt**. It can be used as a reference, but is not a blueprint that must be followed to the letter. Rather, it provides milestones to help those involved in this process to think about how to carry them out.

This guide is addressed to everyone involved in the following processes:

- ▶ developing return-to-office arrangements,
- ▶ reorganizing workspaces,
- ▶ developing telework arrangements.

The approach used in this guide is based on scientific research and complements other documents currently available.

You will find the following in this guide:

- ▶ a list of general principles that can inform your approach;
- ▶ a comprehensive and localized approach to developing return-to-office arrangements;
- ▶ models and tools to guide your deliberations;
- ▶ examples from the research to illustrate the points.

## The Context

After a year and a half of the COVID-19 health crisis, companies are actively thinking about the return of staff to the office. **But this return to the office does not mean “back to business as usual.”** In fact, many companies are taking this opportunity to reflect on new ways of organizing work, whether in terms of saving space (e.g., reducing rental costs, implementing flex office, etc.), work flexibility (e.g., willingness to work remotely or going paperless), or attracting new staff (e.g., recruiting difficulties).

We find that **many organizations tend to take a centralized, non-participatory approach** to developing return-to-office arrangements and that this approach often centres around **negotiating or developing a single, “one-size-fits-all” telework agreement.**

**This risks not meeting the wishes of the organization’s members.**

Given the high degree of mobility in today’s labour market, losing employees means losing expertise and difficulties in finding replacements. There is currently talk of phenomena such as “the great resignation.” We also know that it leads to problems in terms of physical and psychological health, lower work quality and productivity.

### The Future of Telework: Different Visions, Different Needs

Employers and employees have different views on the future of telework, post-pandemic. According to a CROP poll of 450 teleworkers in May 2021, 38% of respondents wanted to continue working remotely full-time, and 24% wanted flexibility in the choice to work from home or in the office. Only 9% of employees surveyed wanted a full return to the workplace. However, among the 1060 human resource consultants who responded to another survey by their professional association

during the same period, “only 1% reported that their employer was willing to maintain full-time telework, and 8% of companies would offer full flexibility to their employees. The vast majority are instead leaning towards a hybrid solution requiring a minimal physical presence.”

(Source: <https://ordrecrha.org/salle-de-presse/communiqués-de-presse/2021/06/teletravail-durables-post-pandemie>)



**Developing a telework agreement is not the same as developing a return-to-office plan.** Telework is only one of the factors to be considered in this return, and many other actions will be needed to assist people returning to their workplace (or not) and to provide them stability in their new organization of work.

Finally, taking an overly centralized approach to a telework agreement does not acknowledge the following:

- ▶ **Many workers cannot telework** (because of the nature of their tasks, socio-affective issues or their personal environment);
- ▶ During the pandemic, everyone, whether they were teleworking or not, **developed a number of “hacks” to ensure their performance**. They did not wait for instructions on how to reorganize or develop new management or communication strategies to work together, etc. **They turned the instructions into real, diversified practices**, all related to the need to continue to produce and to obtain good results.



### Unilateral Decisions and Local Reorganization in a Large Provincial Administration

When offices were closing and there was a generalized lockdown, all the departments had to quickly pivot into teleworking to comply with government health orders. There was no one left to deal with the mail during the peak season; that sector had been forgotten, as it wasn't considered “essential.” Another team, which was providing a service considered essential, saw the paper

mail piling up and decided to take on this task: employees started opening documents, scanning them and putting them into electronic files to enable employees working remotely to follow up on them. That reorganization was decided locally, by the team.

The members of your organization reorganized themselves during the pandemic and adapted the instructions that you gave them. It is important to take this into account in order to develop **return-to-office arrangements that will promote the safety, performance, health and well-being of your employees**.

The time invested in planning the return to office will be time saved in the day-to-day running of the organization. Hastily devising return-to-office arrangements without a participatory approach may lead to the development of inappropriate arrangements that will be detrimental to the productivity of your employees as well as their health. **Take the time you need!**

# The Guiding Principles of the Approach

The process of developing return-to-office, reorganization and/or teleworking arrangements can be modelled on the following principles:

## Recognize Complexity

An organization is a complex system. It is made up of numerous operations and processes carried out by many people who are experiencing different realities, who have more or less formal relationships, in situations that are always highly variable and where obstacles arise on a daily basis. There are many ways to respond to multiple contradictory demands and instructions. To develop effective return-to-office arrangements, this complexity must be accepted and an organization should not be reduced to a series of linear processes.

## Avoid Working in Silos

Working in silos leads to situations in which employees must choose between conflicting, even unrealistic instructions and demands. To avoid this, mechanisms must be put in place to decentralize the development of arrangements. It is also a good idea to bring the representatives of the various parts of the organization together into a strategic steering committee and local committees for the development of return-to-office arrangements, if the size of the organization so requires. At a minimum, these should include management and staff representatives, services, quality, HR, OHS and IT department managers, property and team managers.

## Focus on the Specific Nature of Work Situations

While the objective is to develop arrangements that can be applied to everyone, it is important to look at the specific nature of the work situations that make up the daily life of your organization. They all have their own particular characteristics and specific needs. If this diversity is not taken into account, there is a risk of creating inequalities among individuals, threatening their health and degrading the performance of the organization.

## Encourage Everyone's Participation

It is important to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in some way in decisions about returning to the office. Everyone's active participation furthers the most comprehensive collection of data, enabling informed and effective decisions. It is also an excellent way to encourage the workers concerned to take ownership of the arrangements and lets them provide feedback about their experiences so as to adapt these new arrangements where necessary.

## Plan a Gradual Approach

The health crisis caused a rupture in our working methods and our lifestyles in general. To facilitate a return, we need to think about phasing in arrangements that give people time to organize themselves and adopt routines and habits in their new organization of work. Planning a gradual approach helps everyone concerned take ownership of the arrangements. As well, it makes it possible for them to provide feedback about their experiences with these new arrangements so as to adapt them if necessary.

## Leave Room for Manoeuvre

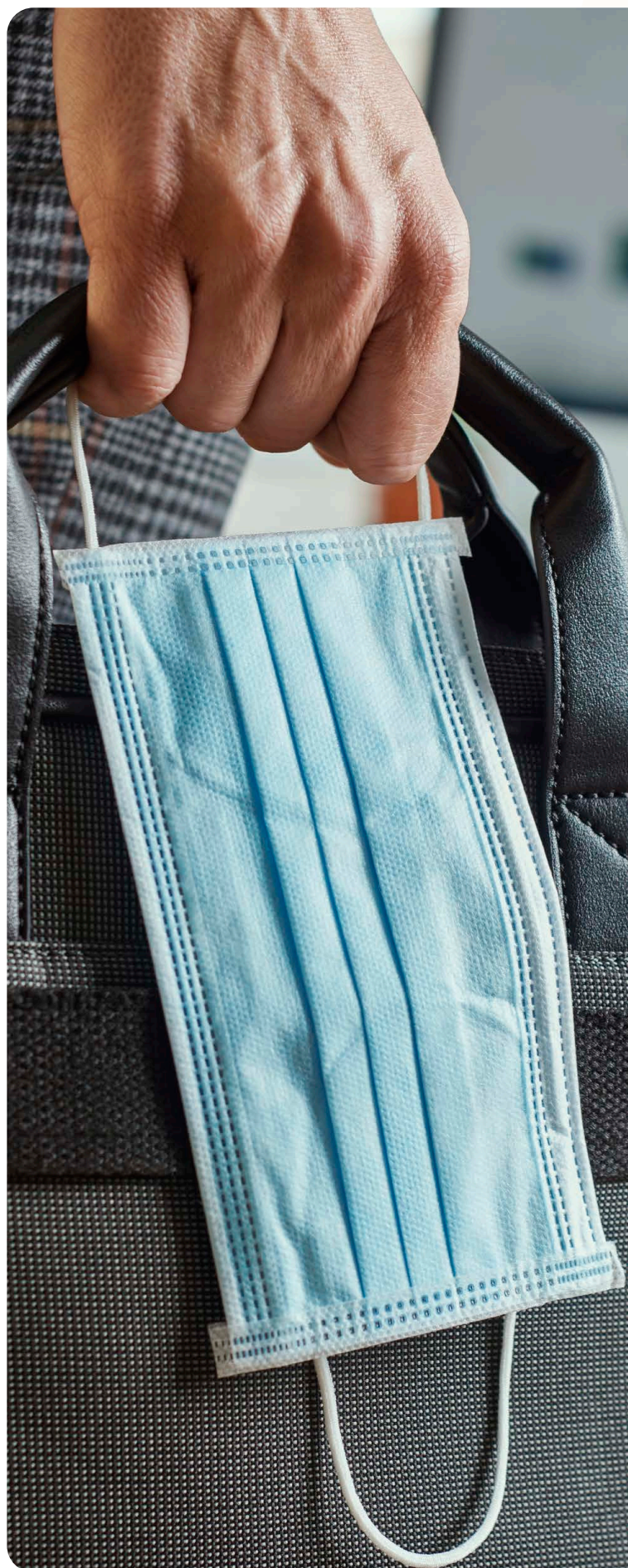
The arrangements developed will inevitably differ from their actual application and from the way in which work situations will be experienced on a day-to-day basis. It is very important to be aware of this. We therefore recommend leaving room for the individuals concerned to adapt the proposed arrangements to their own reality and needs. It is also advisable to be attentive to these adaptations and to consider them not as a defect, but rather as an opportunity for continuous enrichment and improvement of the arrangements that were originally devised.

## **Establish an Iterative Approach, Promoting Top-down and Bottom-up Communication**

In order to provide room for manoeuvre and to identify possible adaptations, it is very important to organize effective communication mechanisms among the various actors involved in developing return-to-office arrangements. If a strategic steering committee and local development committees have been set up, ensure that they can communicate with each other and that it is not just top-down. Local committees will be able to point out many inconsistencies, which the strategic steering committee will have to resolve. In addition, good practices and other local innovations will be shared.

## **Closely Monitor the Implementation of Arrangements**

Many unforeseen issues will arise during implementation of the arrangements. Monitoring is not the same as trying to force people to adopt them. Rather, it provides an opportunity to see how these arrangements deviate from their real needs and actual experiences of returning to the office, reorganizing and teleworking.



# The Components of the Return to the Office, Reorganization and Telework

In the research for this document, a model emerged to illustrate how telework and reorganization were rapidly organized and the components that were mobilized to do so.

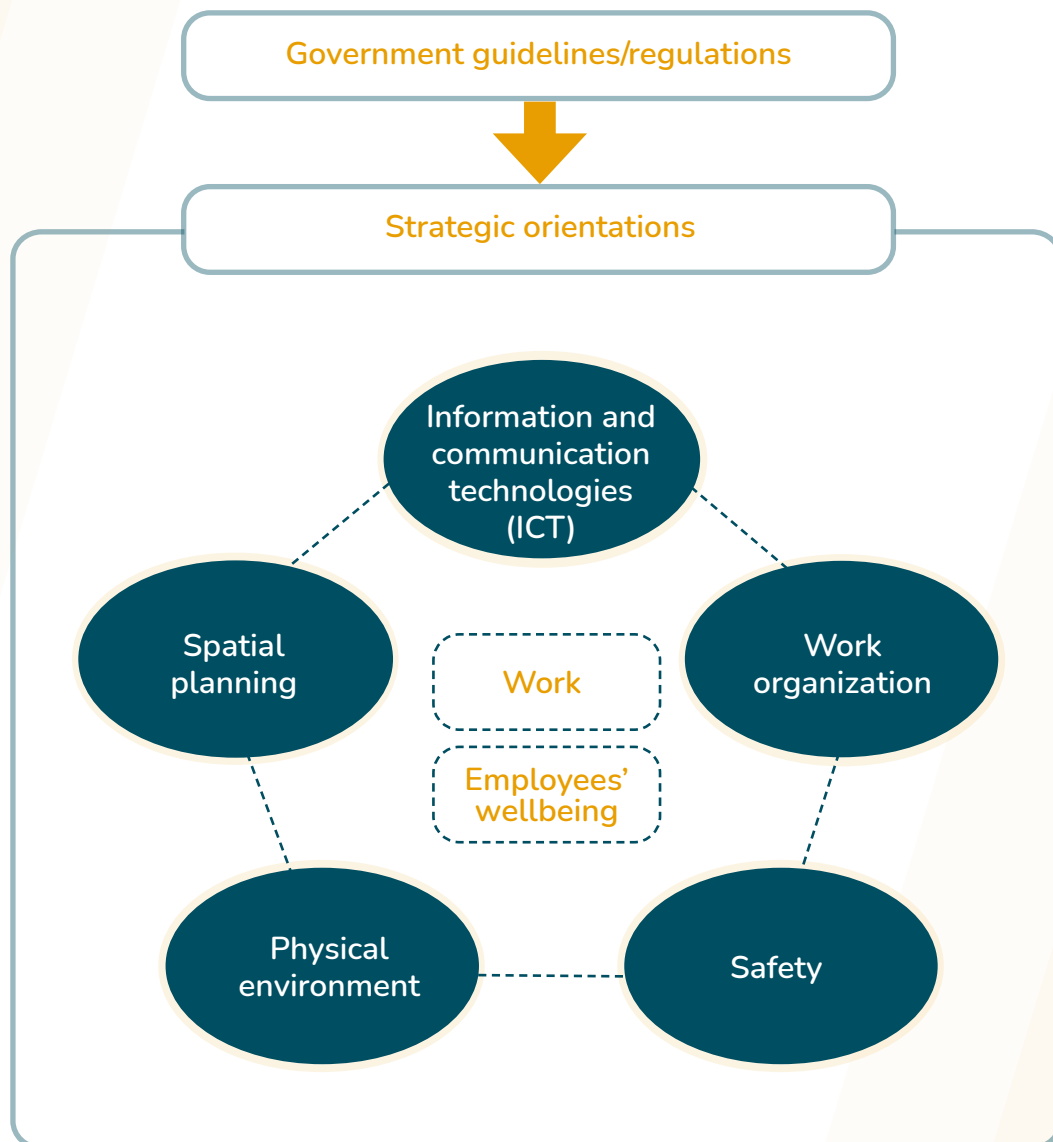


Figure 1. Model of the components of the return to the office, reorganization and telework

**Caution: This model should not be considered as prescriptive.** It is instead a basic framework to guide actions and can be expanded as the process of developing return-to-office arrangements progresses. It's a starting point for thinking about the return.

# Detailed Description of the Model's Components

## Government Guidelines and Regulations

This component refers to the key health and governmental guidelines enacted for telework or the return to the office, as well as the principal regulations to be respected to ensure the occupational health of your organization's employees (AOHS, Act respecting labour standards, etc.).

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## Strategic Orientations

This component concerns the main strategic orientations that will guide your organization in the coming weeks, months and years. They include wanting to reduce rental costs, to go paperless or to enhance employees' experience.

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## Information and Communication Technologies

This component brings together all the technological aspects that will be needed for the effective performance of your employees: cloud solutions, bandwidth requirements, network size, paper document digitization requirements, communication systems required for work and collaboration (videoconferencing), online technical support, intranet, extranet, user support, data security, software, etc.

## Spatial Planning

This component includes all aspects related to spatial layout, starting with the large spaces (parking lots, flow of movement, buildings, etc.), then workspaces: desk sharing, hot desking, open areas, various functions of the work areas (meeting rooms, multipurpose room, cubicles, storage area, changerooms, toilets, lounge area, telephone booth, client reception area) and the occupancy rates of these spaces.

It also includes office equipment (screens, computers, microphones, chairs, desks, headsets, etc.).

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## Work Organization

This component includes all the organizational aspects of work in your organization: existing agreements (particularly regarding teleworking), the company's management style, work-life balance, intra- and inter-position rotations, company culture, social support, cooperation, work team and feeling of belonging, training (particularly in OHS), social climate, recruitment, reception and integration of new employees, vertical and horizontal communication.

## The Workplace's Physical Environment

This component includes all aspects related to the workplace's physical environment: ventilation, noise, lighting, cleaning and sanitation (hygiene), temperature, air quality, etc.



## Safety

This component includes all aspects related to onsite safety, such as emergency measures, contingency plans, first aiders, attendance sheets, first aid, etc.



# Developing Return-to-Office Arrangements

The two other components at the centre of the model, “Work” and “Employees’ wellbeing,” will be detailed in the next few pages and constitute the key data points to gather when you develop return-to-office arrangements.

The suggested process is divided into three phases; the figure below provides an overview of the process presented in the rest of the guide.

## Phase I Strategic steering of the development of return-to-office arrangements

- Step 1** Establishment of a strategic steering committee composed of the representatives involved in the return to the office
- Step 2** Development of global orientations and design of a preliminary return-to-office scenario
- Step 3** Transmission of the global orientations and the preliminary scenario to all the organization’s departments in order to develop the return-to-office arrangements



## Phase II Development of local return-to-office arrangements

- Step 1** Establishment of local committees responsible for developing return-to-office arrangements in each of the organization’s departments
- Step 2** Identification of the situation of each of the operational units along the office work continuum line
- Step 3** Understanding of how employees are doing (their wellbeing), their preferences regarding telework and their actual ability to do so, in order to adjust your office work continuum lines accordingly
- Step 4** Consideration of the socio-affective dimension of work, in order to adjust the continuum line accordingly



## Phase III Iterations and discussion about the divergences between strategic orientations, preliminary scenarios and office work continuum lines

## Phase I Strategic steering of the development of return-to-office arrangements

### Step 1

Establishment of a strategic steering committee composed of the representatives involved in the return to the office

#### The representatives of the various components of a large provincial administration

In a large provincial administration organization, the strategic steering committee could be composed of representatives from

- ▶ general management,
- ▶ the human resources department,
- ▶ the property management department,
- ▶ OHS management,
- ▶ the information and communication technology department,
- ▶ the planning department,
- ▶ any other relevant department related to the activities,
- ▶ worker organizations.

Remember that one of the guiding principles states that you must **avoid working in silos** so as to promote the development of appropriate arrangements. Bringing together the representatives of the various components (presented in the model on page 7) and providing them with the conditions to work together will enable them to draw up global orientations for the return to the office.

It is important for the strategic steering committee to act as a space for exchanges that enables the local committees responsible for developing arrangements to provide feedback, especially with respect to divergences between local arrangements and the global orientations.



## Step 2

### Development of global orientations and design of a preliminary return-to-office scenario

Some strategic orientations will already have been decided on by the time the committee meets to develop an overall return-to-office strategy. For example, your organization may be looking to reduce its rental costs or to remodel its spatial layout by choosing solutions such as flex office. It is important for the strategic steering committee to take stock of these directions and the government's health guidelines. You can use the model to identify the various components that may influence these global strategic orientations (e.g., the "spatial planning" component if your organization wants to reduce its rental costs) and those that will need to be worked on to adjust your organization. For example, reducing rental costs requires rethinking the organization of work, the distribution of tasks and/or schedules to ensure that everyone is able to work under good conditions.

A preliminary return-to-office scenario will emerge from the intersection between the strategic orientations and the health guidelines. It is important to note that **this scenario will inevitably require adjustments**, as the specific nature of each department, team or service in your organization will fit in more or less with the first scenario you draw up.

#### Example of a global orientation for return-to-office arrangements

In June 2021, the Québec government published a policy framework for telework that provides for a maximum of three days of telework per week; management based on autonomy,

trust and a results-based approach; voluntary.

(Source: *Politique-cadre en matière de télétravail pour le personnel de la fonction publique*, [https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/gouvernement/MCE/Information\\_personnel\\_fonction\\_publicue/Politique\\_cadre\\_teletravail.pdf?1625057364](https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/gouvernement/MCE/Information_personnel_fonction_publicue/Politique_cadre_teletravail.pdf?1625057364))



## Step 3

### Transmission of the global orientations and the preliminary scenario to all the organization's departments in order to develop the return-to-office arrangements



## Phase II Development of local return-to-office arrangements

### Step 1

Establishment of local committees responsible for developing return-to-office arrangements for each of the organization's departments

It is important for the departments to be able to determine the relevant "operational units." They could be teams, services or departments. They represent the smallest relevant unit for the development of local return-to-office arrangements.

For each of these operational units, we recommend setting up a local committee to develop return-to-office arrangements. However, the format should be adapted to what makes sense for your organization, such as setting up as many local committees as there are departments. It is crucial to ensure that managers are able to participate in the development of return-to-office arrangements and that they are not imposed on them. In the same vein as the strategic steering committee, we recommend that you ensure there are representatives from each of the model's components sitting on this committee (e.g., a representative from spatial planning) to **avoid working in silos**.

### Step 2

Identification of the situation of each of the operational units along the office work continuum line

During the health crisis, some people never stopped working in the office, others worked in hybrid mode, while others worked entirely remotely. It is essential to identify the proportion of people in each of these categories for each operational unit.

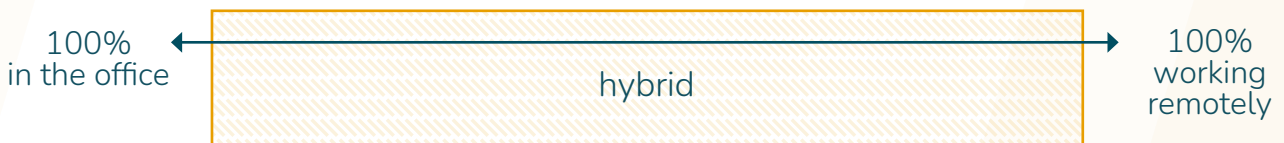


Figure 2. Continuum line representing the proportion of employees according to where they work

To situate individuals along this continuum line, we suggest asking your managers to conduct a post-mortem of how the crisis was managed in their teams. During the health crisis, how was telework organized, how were workspaces arranged, new employees trained and welcomed, or new tasks distributed?



### Examples of continuum lines for three departments of a large provincial administration

Three departments, each considered to be an operational unit, were monitored within a large provincial administration: the reception and client service team, the printing and insertion department, and the individual and company file tracking and processing department. The reality of working in these three departments meant that the proportion of employees who were present on site, teleworking, or in hybrid mode was different. The following shows how each of them was positioned differently along the continuum line.

The role of the printing and insertion department is to prepare and publish documents for the entire organization. Therefore, most of the employees responsible for operating the machines (90%) were present on site throughout the pandemic, while the few employees who were responsible for preparing the documents (10%) were teleworking.



Figure 3. Continuum line for the printing and insertion department

The file tracking and processing department worked almost entirely remotely (90%), with a small proportion of staff occasionally present in the office to scan documents and follow up on related mail (10%).

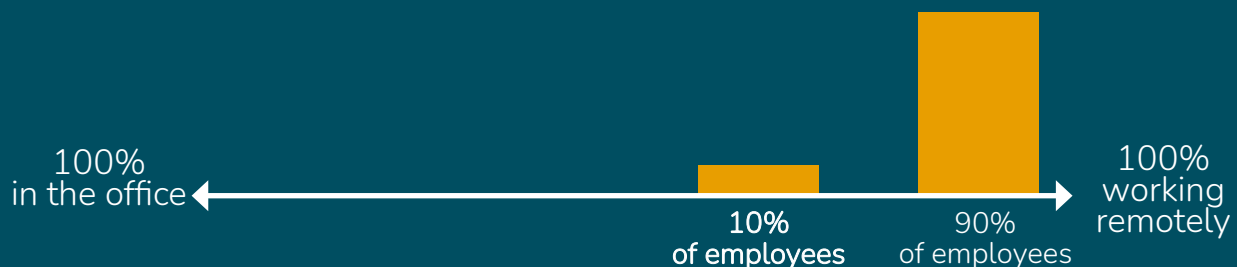


Figure 4. Continuum line for the file tracking and processing department

Client service was reorganized into a hybrid model by modifying the tasks. A smaller team was present on site to receive clients. Their work schedule was reduced, because fewer clients were coming to the reception desk in person. Other staff was teleworking and doing telephone follow-up.



Figure 5. Client service continuum line

This post-mortem of the experience makes it possible to highlight the factors influencing the ability of each individual in your team or operational unit to work remotely. In reality, there are factors that can prevent someone from teleworking. These would include working on specific machines, needing to have direct contact with the clientele, or handling documents that only exist in paper format. **It is very important to encourage a participatory approach** to draw up an exhaustive list of these factors. To promote equity, is it possible to allow an individual who is normally present 100% of the time to do more clerical work at home one day every two weeks, for example?

### Step 3

Understanding of how employees are doing (their wellbeing), their preferences regarding telework and their actual ability to do so, in order to adjust your office work continuum lines accordingly

The scientific literature shows that the pandemic and telework have had real consequences for the workers involved. Although many teleworkers have expressed satisfaction, telework has raised many challenges that affect health and productivity: family or roommate conflicts, concentration difficulties, inability to set up a proper workstation, a poor Internet connection. People have experienced anxiety, stress and musculoskeletal problems. It should be noted that being in an office environment is also a protective factor for people living in polluted environments, private homes without ventilation systems and for those who suffer from conjugal violence. While some individuals will be very happy to return to the workplace, for others this will cause stress and anxiety. And there are still others who do not want to return at all and may even resign if forced to do so.

### The Well-being of Employees, Their Needs and Desires

An international survey (Actineo, 2021, <https://www.actineo.fr/article/enquete-internationale-actineo-2021>)

revealed that what office workers want most is balance. In fact, 86% of them reported that “I do all I can to maintain very clear boundaries between my work and my private life,” while 79% said, “I would like to have a better balance between my work life and my personal life.” What these people are looking for is a better quality of life, more autonomy and flexibility, even if this means adding a third place nearby to their routine, as a bridge between office and home. In another survey, this one from Statistics Canada, related to COVID-19 and barriers to productivity in telework situations (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00012-eng.htm>), employees said that they were less productive because of a lack of interaction with their co-workers (22%), they had to take care of children or other family members (20%), they did not have access to the necessary work-related information or devices (11%), their workspace was inadequate (10%), or because of slow Internet speeds (5%).



**What is the situation in your organization?**

**What do your employees want?**

It is a good idea to survey the wellbeing of your employees along the following lines:

- ▶ How did they feel during the pandemic, and how are they feeling now?
- ▶ How was their experience of teleworking, hybrid, or office-based work? What was their actual ability to telework? Everyone's daily life has been shaken up and the environment of all employees has been greatly changed. Why did it happen that way?
- ▶ What do they want in the future and why?

**The answers to these questions by operational unit will help you to adjust the office work continuum line, and thus avoid alienating or losing your employees.**

#### Step 4

Consideration of the socio-affective dimension of work, in order to adjust the continuum line accordingly

Working is not just about performing a task. It is also about creating social contacts and relationships with others. This is not simply for the sake of socialization, nor is it simply for pleasure. We all need others to be able to do our work, even if we mainly work alone. This dimension of thinking is too often overlooked because it is invisible.

Sometimes we need to vent, to share difficult situations with co-workers and to find support (e.g., in customer service, when a customer has been very aggressive).

There is pleasure in meeting in person, especially when collaborating with co-workers, and this collaboration cannot always be planned.

We need to see how other people work to learn the professional skills that ensure quality, productivity and health. However, these learning experiences are not always formalized.

All these are important factors for the productivity of an organization and the quality of work that is done.

When conducting the post-mortem, we recommend being especially attentive to the socio-affective dimension:

- How did the inability to get together influence the productivity, quality or health of your employees?
- When does the socio-affective dimension play a major role?
- When is it mobilized?

Note that this mobilization can vary depending on the period; for example, at the beginning of the summer when the many students who are joining the workforce must be trained.

Considering the socio-affective dimension makes it possible to further adjust the various office work continuum lines so as to provide employees with the means necessary to get good results and maintain their health.

### Examining the Socio-affective Dimension of Work in Order to Reshape It

At the client reception service of a large provincial administration, service relationship work is sometimes complex and emotionally demanding for receptionists. When the offices were fully reopened in August 2020, the entire team decided to establish an “equitable” rotation to

enable everyone to telework while still ensuring face-to-face services at the reception desk, on a rotating basis. This reorganization has meant that it is not always the same employees who must mobilize their socio-affective skills to perform their client service work.



Note that management situations are equally important. With telework, because managers can no longer supervise their workers in person, new control mechanisms must be established or they must switch to results-based management.

## Telework and Remote Monitoring

Companies may be tempted to replace traditional supervision (physical presence) with remote monitoring software that measures, for example, the time spent on certain websites, the number of emails answered, and typing speed, or that even takes photos with a webcam at different times of the day. While it may seem like a good idea, this type of software has perverse effects: it undermines employees' trust in their employer, increases stress and counterproductive behaviour, or strengthens their intention to quit. Thus, the effects on psychological health at work are significant.

(For more information, see the interview with Ariane Ollier-Malaterre (UQAM): <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/ohdio/premiere/emissions/les-annees-lumiere/segments/entrevue/359222/teletra-vail-travail-pandemie-employe-travailleur-employeur-bureau-tele-surveillance-efficacite>).

Caution should also be exercised with results-based management. While it appears to provide employees with the autonomy required to organize their work, it is important to provide the necessary resources (autonomy needs a strong structure) and to regularly follow up to ensure that they are being supported in managing the difficulties they may encounter in their tasks (whether related to their skills, or to the organizational or technical factors that influence their work).



## Phase III Iterations and discussion about the divergences between strategic orientations, preliminary scenarios and office work continuum lines

The strategic steering committee must gather the return-to-office continuum lines that each of the local committees has drawn up and then aggregate them to determine the actual proportion of people who can telework, either partially or fully.

The office work continuum lines from the local committees that you compile, together with the post-mortem, the assessment of your employees' wellbeing and their desires, as well as consideration of the socio-affective dimension, are likely to show divergences between the strategic orientations and the preliminary scenario formulated by the strategic steering committee.

It is essential that the strategic steering committee be structured so as to address these divergences. There are then two options: either to adjust the strategic orientations so they adhere to the return-to-office continuum lines; or to change the components of the return-to-office model (see Figure 1) to try to maintain the strategic orientations. Here too, the model can be used to simulate the influence of work organization decisions on how people will be able to do their jobs, what changes need to be made in terms of ICT or spatial planning, etc. The idea is always to give staff more room to manoeuvre.

This step is very important and must not be avoided. It may not be possible to eliminate the divergences, but they could be managed through discussions in the strategic steering committee and the local committees about the changes required to get the job done, for the maintenance of staff health and for staff retention.



## Conclusion

The recommended course of action is neither easy nor quick. It is a reflective process that is in line with the decentralization of and full participation in developing return-to-office arrangements.

This guide, now in its first draft, is part of a research report to be published in the spring of 2022. In the meantime, we want to make this version available to help companies plan their return to the office and their transition to new organizations of work.



If you are interested in using this guide, and would like to give us your feedback to enhance, improve or adapt it, please contact [maud.gonella@irsst.qc.ca](mailto:maud.gonella@irsst.qc.ca)

### Further information

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