PRACTICE ADVISORY

How to Re-enter
the traditional work environment

Open, open, open

Since March 2020, COVID-19 struck and the world had to respond. Architectural firms across California quickly pivoted to remote work environments while frenetically attempting to maintain progress on projects, all the while continue to stay connected to their clients albeit remotely. As the United States begins to carefully reopen the economy, firms are pivoting once again, developing plans on how to safely reopen workplace operations.

California has started to reopen, following its [Resilience Roadmap](#). This reopening will be phased in gradually and is dependent on individual counties self-certifying to California Department of Public Health that they have met the readiness criteria. Under these guidelines, some counties may move more quickly through the current stage if their local health jurisdictions meet the State's criteria, and counties can also choose to proceed more cautiously if they deem necessary.

Once your county gives the green light, it is time to implement your reopening plan!

Reopening offices and returning to the workplace will not happen overnight. It will take a gradual, phased-in plan that prepares office environments and employees for a safe and healthy return following the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The workplace will need to be cleaned and prepared to safely practice social distancing. Take a look at your office policies and update those relevant to the post-pandemic workplace, such as sick leave and remote working. You may also want to contact your attorney or insurance company to discuss if you are covered for various COVID-19 related claim exposures. Leadership should meet with staff ahead of reentry to train them on new social distancing and cleaning protocols, as well as changes to the office layout. Staff should also be prepared for a health assessment protocol, whether it is with temperature checks at the office or self-assessments at home. When possible, offices should utilize telework options and modified work schedules to help maintain social distancing.

As Cushman & Wakefield suggest in their [Recovery Readiness: A How-To Guide for Reopening Your Workplace](#), there are a handful of primary focus areas applicable to most business operations. Whether your firm is large or small, or even if you have multiple locations, the following Six Readiness Essentials should be focused on:

1. **Prepare the Building:** cleaning plans, pre-return inspections, HVAC & Mechanicals checks
2. **Prepare the Workforce:** mitigating anxiety, policies for deciding who returns, employee communications
3. **Control Access:** protocols for safety and health checks, building reception, shipping and receiving, elevators, visitor policies
4. **Create a Social Distancing Plan:** decreasing density, schedule management, office traffic patterns
5. **Reduce Touch Points and Increase Cleaning:** open doors, clean desk policy, food plan, cleaning common areas
6. **Communicate for Confidence:** recognize the fear in returning, communicate transparently, listen and survey regularly

Once you are prepared, help your clients! The architectural profession is uniquely positioned to leverage itself to help forge a new era of public health awareness through the power of design. Architects, through their unmatched spatial awareness, can be leaders in risk mitigation for a society now hyperaware and concerned with health standards.

Utilizing tools, such as the [AIA Re-occupancy Assessment Tool](#), can help architects promote enhanced safety measures with their clients to better protect communities as they begin to enact phased opening procedures.

This is an opportunity for architects to lead by example within their own offices and to champion innovative design solutions. Providing better standards for healthy environments is not just essential, but fundamental to your charge as protectors of the public.

And most importantly, communicate! Presently, there is no such thing as overcommunication. Talk to your staff. Reach out to your clients. Let everyone know the everchanging plans for the future to keep them at ease and engaged. If nothing else, the Pandemic has brought us closer in ways we never imagined and has created a new sense of community among our colleagues, clients, friends and family, and our profession. Let us use this newfound camaraderie to keep one another safe and healthy.

Re-Opening Guidance & Resources

- Cal/OSHA: COVID-19 Industry Guidance: Office Workspaces
- Cal/OSHA: COVID-19 General Check List for Office Workplaces
- AIA's Re-occupancy Assessment Tool
- HGA: Returning to the Workplace: COVID-19 Signage
- HGA: Redefining the Workplace During COVID-19
- Cushman & Wakefield: Recovery Readiness: A How-to Guide for Reopening your Workplace
- CBRE: Reopening the World's Workplaces
- JLL: Reentry: A guide for working in the next normal
- AIHA: Back to Work Safely
- Wiley: Employer's Guide to Reopening the Workplace
- CDC Infographic: Workplaces During the COVID-19 Pandemic: *Should you consider opening?*
- Risk Strategies Creating a Return to Work Action Plan
- AIA: COVID-19 Business resources to thrive

AIA California