Density

Return to Work:
A People-First Guide

Letter from our CEO

In 30 days, hundreds of millions of employees went home. It is a mass migration unlike any before it. Most of our economy is still and most of our buildings are empty.

Amid the chaos and quiet, companies the world over have begun laying plans to bring everyone back. There is no authority on how to return hundreds of millions of employees to work safely because there is no precedent.

Instead, teams are innovating. As one real estate executive remarked, "COVID is the largest change agent in the 150-year history of this company and no doubt the most significant of my career. What's happening to the world is awful. However, when we come back, there is opportunity for us to be better. We just need to put our people first."

The decisions you make in the coming months will have a material impact on the lives of your colleagues, the safety of your workforce, and how well the world does business.

For the first time, workplace strategy is the white-hot center of corporate strategy.

To understand and document how different teams are approaching this challenge, we interviewed our customers. Many of them are considered the brightest minds in workplace safety, personnel, real estate, and design. Below we've documented how they are thinking about the problem.

You will notice that there is not consensus. However, they all seem agree on at least one thing — "We need to put our people first."

—Andrew Farah

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In order to bring 82 million US employees back to offices effectively, organizations need to put their people first. Keeping people safe is the top priority of any return to work program, but planning around the individual will help ensure new safety measures are adopted successfully. We're fortunate to work with some of the most dynamic workplace leaders in the Fortune 1000. This guide was designed to help companies plan re-entry programs and navigate potential challenges.

While many companies are focusing on clean-desk policies, one-way corridors, and fewer seats in conference rooms, the following is a list of ways to prioritize team members and develop strategies that will work for employees. In our Return to Work: A People-First Guide, we offer nine guidelines for how to think about policy implementation and communication that will reassure your employees and empower them to be part of the solution.
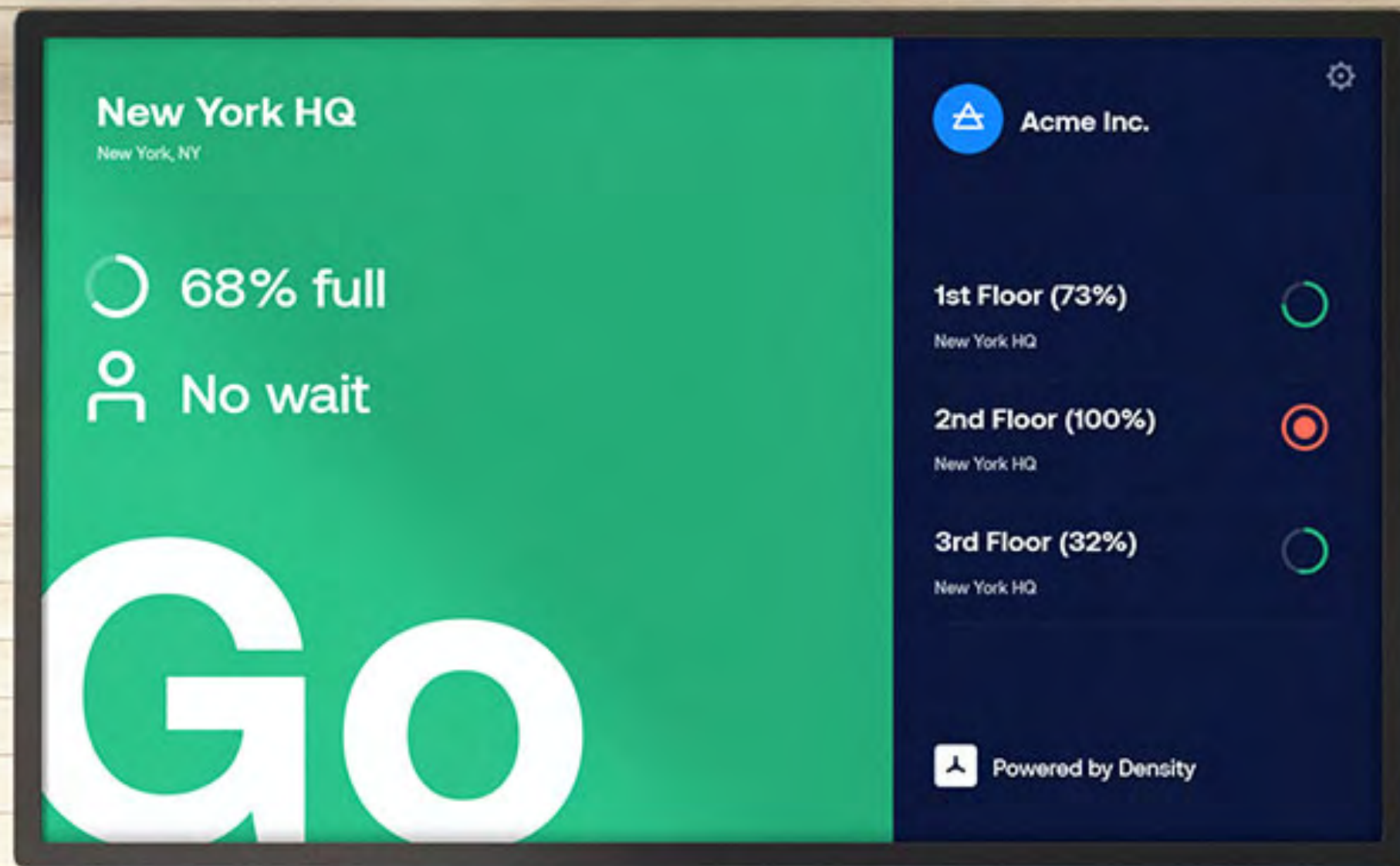
The Steps

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01

Over-Communicate Health & Safety Strategy

Over-Communicate Health & Safety Strategy

Returning to the office will require both organizational strategy and open communication of that strategy to employees. Creating a reliable flow of information between managers and employees will build trust in org policies and enable employees to share responsibility for a healthy work environment.

Wayfinding systems and digital signage are effective tools for communicating new policy. **Consider establishing company wikis, occupancy and usage monitors, and clearly displayed cleaning schedules** in order to efficiently disseminate important health and safety information to teams.

"Communication is not only verbal but also visual. The right cues make it easy to have that sense of safety when people enter the office."

"There will be a lot of things that employees just don't see, like better air ventilation and HVAC, but we need to communicate that to reassure them."

02

Preserve Anonymity & Privacy

Cameras and other surveillance systems jeopardize employee trust and negatively impact company retention. Seek out PropTech and IoT systems that actively preserve employee privacy while still providing necessary office metrics to maintain a healthy space.

Managers should be apprised of what they can and cannot ask employees during this time. For example, the EEOC states that if an employee is seen coughing upon return to the office, an employer has a reasonable right to ask if that person has been tested for COVID-19.

Use anonymous surveys and questionnaires to seek feedback on new policies and cleaning procedures. This will give employees an appropriate channel for providing observation and criticism.

"Contact-tracing is a slippery slope to surveillance."

03

Create Functional Waves, Not Status Waves

Create Functional Waves, Not Status Waves

Companies should consider employee needs and bring people back based on function. **Focusing on the functionality of a role instead of seniority will help mitigate concerns about employees who are perceived as "most" and "least" important.**

Staggering schedules and returning in waves will also provide cleaning crews the ability to keep up with the resurgence in foot traffic and increased sanitary standards.

"There were lessons learned where we saw 'Send everyone back' and then boom, there was a case (of COVID-19) and they all had to go back home. Instead, we need to ease back in for those who need to be in the office. Who has critical adjacency?"

04

Prioritize
Payroll

Prioritize Payroll

If you're looking to lower your cost-base, start by reviewing your real-estate portfolio. In doing so, empower employees to provide guidance on what amenities they can live without.

Putting your people first may mean putting your space second. Real-estate is often an organization's second largest budget item. Think of ways you can reduce property expenses through space consolidation and halting new projects until you understand what the WFH environment will look like.

"Half our team is moving to WFH. We're getting rid of 50% of our offices, globally."

05

Decentralize Decision Making

Decentralize Decision Making

If your company has offices in multiple regions, consider empowering local managers to set site-specific guidelines about their team needs. Strictly enforcing org-wide mandates will both slow down the implementation process and compromise effectiveness in different markets.

Delegating decision-making to local managers will provide team leaders agency over their office and remind employees that your organization is prioritizing their specific health and wellness over less efficient corporate directives.

"We're arming our market leaders with an action-oriented playbook, not a 300-page playbook, that can really give them guidance on how to put employee wellness & safety at the forefront."

"They know their teams, they know their culture, so they need responsibility around communication and how they're setting up the return."

06

Create WFH & Office Hybrid

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After adjusting to a remote workforce, some companies have found that they can still be productive (or even moreso) when working from home. Because of this, many employees may not want to return to the office at all. To support these changes, companies should consider enabling video conferencing in all meeting rooms. You could also establish a WFH budget for remote employees by redirecting the funds needed to support them in the office.

Preparing for future pandemics and office-disruptions means adopting a WFH & office hybrid environment. **Ensure that company productivity can be maintained remotely.** This flexibility will increase employee agency over how and where they work.

"There will no longer be a stigma that working from home means you're slacking off."

"This will become a new office, so really getting employees set up for that and having that flexibility will be great."

07

Avoid Excessive
Mandates

Avoid Excessive Mandates

Too much regulation can be detrimental to cleaning initiatives. **Companies should aim to create a healthy-but-not-sterile environment for employees when they return.** Real-time occupancy data enables you to schedule usage-based cleaning and avoid wasting time cleaning areas that have not been visited.

If your organization adopts an excessive amount of new cleaning policies, employees may find it difficult to adhere to every detail. Pick the essential policies for keeping your team safe and implement those to the letter. Otherwise, employees may start to slip up and ultimately compromise the effectiveness of all new strategies.

"Workplace experience people will become the clearinghouse for workplace safety protocol and rollout."

Establish Strategic Buffers for Cleaning

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Cleaning crews will need ample time and space to sanitize regularly used areas in the office. To help them succeed, establish natural buffers by staggering work schedules, distributing teams to specific/separate locations, and carefully rotating available resources to employees who need them.

These buffers will create a margin of error that will help keep your people healthy. If you can limit the overlap of teams and resources, fewer people will interact with the same spaces, and cleaning crews will be able to tend to those areas more effectively.

"We're using Density to clean spaces that get used and ignore the ones that don't."

09

Preserve
Culture

Preserve Culture

Whether it's driven by changes in safety protocols or how employees socialize, COVID-19 will impact office culture. Your teams will be returning to a changed office. Consider how limited shared spaces, plexiglass dividers, and clean-desk policies will affect workplace experience. Companies should plan for this and make every effort to preserve culture. **Review and re-publish core values, display team-building strategies, and support employees as they adapt to the changes.**

These guidelines will help your company stay healthy while navigating the inevitable change in team culture. By following these steps, your organization can boost employee confidence and flexibility, empower managers to lead initiatives, and set your team up for success in the event of future disruptions.

"I think it will be a year at least before things go back to any semblance of normal. Also… handshakes are dead."

"This is a trauma for culture. We need to be mindful of that."

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