

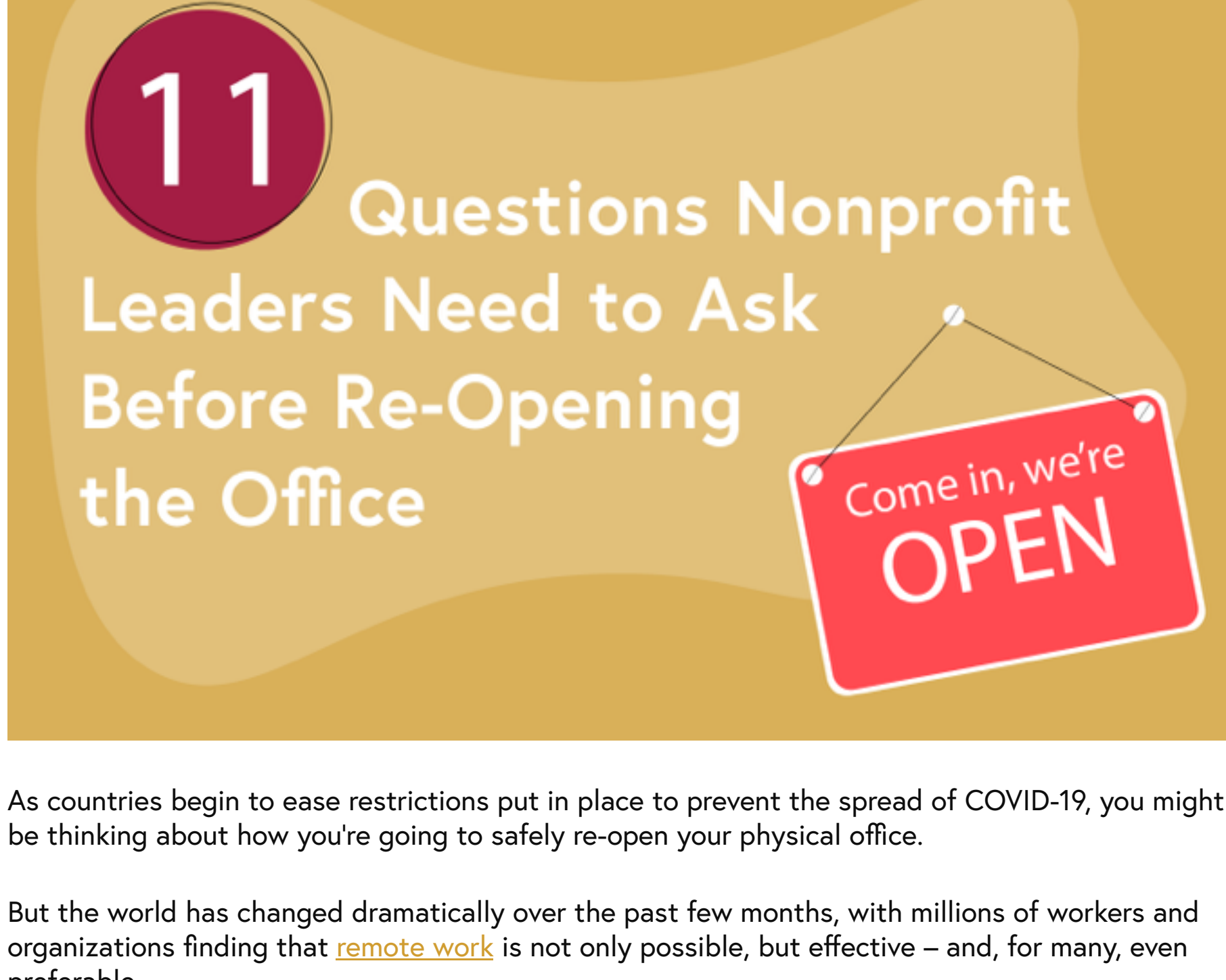
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11 Questions Nonprofit Leaders Need to Ask Before Re-Opening the Office



As countries begin to ease restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, you might be thinking about how you're going to safely re-open your physical office.

But the world has changed dramatically over the past few months, with millions of workers and organizations finding that [remote work](#) is not only possible, but effective – and, for many, even preferable.

(Goodbye, commute! See you never, coworkers looking over my shoulder!)

And [this new reality](#) makes the process of re-opening less straightforward than many nonprofit leaders previously anticipated.

However, depending on the type of work your organization does, some of your employees may need to return to the office (or some of them might already be there).

Considering the ongoing pandemic, the need for careful safety planning and the challenges presented by school and childcare closures, Peggy Hornell, Chief Operating Officer at Children's Aid Foundation of Canada in Toronto, says her team has come to realize the organization will likely never fully return its pre-COVID days.

"At this stage we can't assume we'll ever go back to status quo," she says. "So we're focusing on establishing a solid virtual workflow for the long-term while also considering how to safely re-open the office."

If you're feeling similarly, you may be wondering how to juggle all of the facets of this new reality.

To help you orient yourself, here are 11 questions every nonprofit leader needs to ask themselves and their team as they consider returning to the office in a changed world.

1. First and foremost: Do you have the authority to decide when to re-open?

If your nonprofit is based within a larger organization – such as a hospital foundation co-located inside a hospital or a food bank located within a community centre – you may not have the authority to decide when your offices can re-open and will instead need to follow the direction of those responsible for your facility's operations.

In this case, it's still important to be at the table as decisions are being made so you can represent your team's interests – particularly if they have questions or concerns about returning to the office (see question seven).

2. What are the current guidelines in your city or region?

It can seem like guidelines for re-opening are changing every day – and in many places they are. Make sure you're staying on top of the official recommendations so you can make the best possible decisions for your team.

"We're constantly referring to the government guidelines and reading every website and article we can find," says Hornell.

Here are a few suggestions and resources to check out:

- Check the official website of your town, city, state or province for the most up-to-date guidelines in your local area.
- The [U.S.](#) and [Canadian](#) federal governments maintain dedicated COVID-19 webpages providing quick access to the latest news and recommendations.
- The [World Health Organization](#) provides comprehensive information about safety guidelines and planning for individuals and businesses.

If you're unsure how to access your local guidelines or have questions about how they apply to your organization, contact your local representative for more information.

3. How are cases of COVID-19 trending in your area?

Although your area may be re-opening, it's important to know if cases of COVID-19 are trending in the wrong direction. An increase in cases could mean workplaces may need to shut down again in the near future – a critical consideration as you think about timing your re-opening plan.

4. Will re-opening mean staff will come into contact with the public?

If opening your doors means staff will come into contact with members of the public – for example, if you're running a food bank or a drop-in reading program – you'll need to be extra vigilant about ensuring everyone's safety.

Which brings us to...

5. Do you have a detailed plan in place?

No matter where you live or where your office is located, strict health and safety guidelines are in place to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Some of these guidelines may require physical adjustments to your office space, such as plexiglass dividers between open-plan desks or new signage.

Others may require the implementation of new rules, such as how many people can be in a shared washroom space or kitchen at the same time.

Every office space will require a unique approach. So, to develop a plan best suited for your space, think carefully about the layout of your office and how your staff typically work together and interact. Then consult the recommendations, discuss strategies with key members of your staff or other stakeholders and put your plan in writing.

Here are a few tools and resources for health and safety planning:

- The CDC maintains a [guidance tool on cleaning and disinfecting](#) for any business considering re-opening.
- The Government of Canada offers a [risk mitigation tool](#) for workplaces and businesses.
- Some states and provinces, like the [Ontario government](#), maintain sector-specific guidelines and sample workplace safety plans.
- WorkSafeBC offers an excellent [planning tool](#) to help businesses consider all aspects of their re-opening plans.

As always, be sure to consult the website for your town, city or region to access recommendations and considerations unique to your area.

6. How are you communicating your plan to staff?

You have a plan. Great! Now how are you communicating the plan to your staff?

In times of uncertainty, it's better to communicate too much rather than too little. Take the time to consult with staff as you develop your plan and share the full details of your re-opening plan with the team once it's ready. It's important to give everyone a chance to absorb the information and ask questions.

Hornell says that ongoing communication with staff has been critical to keeping everyone in the loop on the status of re-opening plans and managing questions and concerns. "In between monthly virtual staff meetings, I've been issuing an e-newsletter to all staff sharing key updates and information," she says. "With so much uncertainty in our lives, we can't and won't leave people without information for weeks at a time."

Looking for additional inspiration?

[Here's a great example](#) of an email from Stan Soderstrom, Executive Director of Kiwanis International and Kiwanis Children's Fund, detailing his organization's plans for re-opening.

7. How does your staff team feel about returning to the office?

Even if you have the green light to re-open and a solid safety plan in place, if your staff are uncomfortable returning to the office, then you may need to re-think your strategy or timing.

"We certainly will not be saying that the office is suddenly open and everyone is to come back," says Hornell. "We'll be listening to staff, understanding their concerns and creating a back-to-work plan that accommodates their unique needs and circumstances as much as possible."

Consider conducting a staff-wide survey or meeting one-on-one with staff members to chat about how they're feeling and address any concerns they may have. [This post](#) offers great examples of questions to ask staff and even provides free survey templates.

8. What is the status of childcare or schools in your area?

With many schools and childcare centres still closed or only operating at partial capacity, working parents will likely be unable to return to the office unless they're able to make alternate childcare arrangements for their kids – which they may not want to do if it exposes them to additional risk.

Being aware of the unique logistical and emotional challenges facing parents is crucial for developing a re-opening plan rooted in compassion and flexibility.

9. Can you offer flexible working options?

While some employees may be eager to return to the office, others may be hesitant or need time to adjust to the transition – and many workers may simply be unable to leave home due to a lack of childcare options, as mentioned above.

To compensate, consider whether you're able to offer a range of options to staff. This could include a mix of employees working full-time hours at the office, those who are physically in the office only one or two days a week and those who are continuing to work remotely on a full-time basis.

And as you make these decisions, always consult the most recent official safety guidelines. "Government recommendations call for limiting the number of people in an office space at any one time," says Hornell. "So we're looking at 50% or even 25% capacity and thinking about whether to shift from dedicated desks to a hotelling model."

10. What kind of health benefits or health insurance do you provide?

Can your employees afford to get sick?

It's a hard question, but one that's important to ask – especially in a sector that's not known for its benefits.

As you consider bringing employees back in contact with one another and inevitably increasing their exposure to COVID-19, a review of your employee health insurance policy is in order. [This article](#) provides a great overview of how health insurance can provide coverage for COVID-related illness or death.

11. Is remote work sustainable for your organization?

Some organizations – particularly those that provide direct services to the public – may have been finding remote work detrimental to their operations and unsustainable over the long term.

But for many organizations, the realization that remote work is both possible and sustainable may come as a welcome surprise.

Prior to the pandemic, Children's Aid Foundation of Canada staff did not regularly work from home.

"As an organization, we've been forced into adapting to the concept of remote work – which has been fabulous, because otherwise we may not have done it," says Hornell. "It just wasn't part of our culture."

Realizing that the organization can continue to operate successfully with a remote staff, Hornell says that ensuring the team is able to work effectively from home will continue to be a priority even as the office re-opens.

"The pandemic has changed the way we work, and we've realized we need to adapt to a new model of flexible, remote work – which will be the reality going forward, beyond COVID-19."

Adapting to the new world of work

As nonprofit leaders consider how to best approach the complex process of re-opening, accepting that working environments may never be the same as they were pre-COVID will be crucial to making the best decisions for your organization and your staff.

"I don't think any workplace will be able to get staff onboard with returning to the standard nine-to-five schedule within a physical office space going forward," says Hornell. "That's why we want to make sure everyone is able to work really well from home – so that we can ease into a flexible new world of work even after the pandemic is over."

[For more information and strategies on adapting your organization virtually, check out our resources on remote working for nonprofits and managing your organization virtually.](#)

How is your organization feeling about returning to the office? Let us know in the comments.

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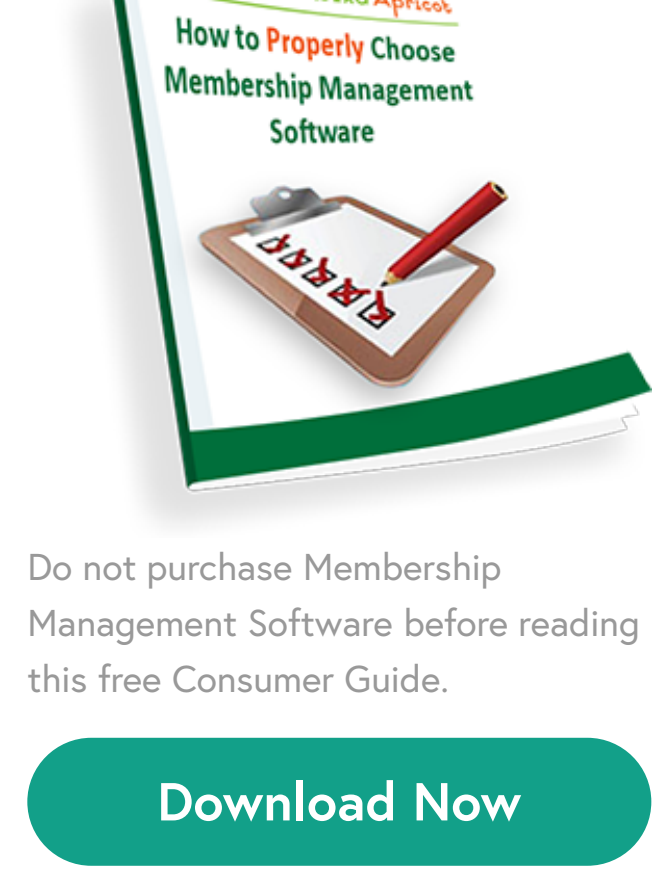
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