

# REPORT BRIEF

## Leadership Perspectives: Leading and Looking Ahead Through COVID-19

The full e-book features 30 profiles and interviews with communication executives about the impact of COVID-19; the increased importance of internal communication; return to work; future of business and the industry; diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; impact of Black Lives Matter protests; and corporate purpose. **This brief focuses on one specific theme in the ebook.**

### Theme: Return to Work

#### Key Findings on how companies are returning to work:

- The communication function has been very involved in the “return-to-work” planning. Many respondents mentioned a “phased” or staggered approach for returning to the office.
- Some leaders are helping manage the communication of facilities where employees have already physically returned or they had never left, especially essential workers in healthcare or PPE producers, research facilities, or those who are on the frontline.
- Executives noted that their organizations were less flexible around working from home before COVID-19, but many are rethinking that perspective, allowing employees to continue work from home when able.
- Leaders are having to manage multiple “office” openings on a global scale and timeline, which depends on country-specific governmental guidance, local guidelines, and other factors.
- Some respondents said they were surveying employees or using other methods to gauge how employees feel about returning to the office – some said employee perceptions will guide their RTW procedures. In certain cases, employees were given the choice to physically return when they are most comfortable.
- Some respondents mentioned physical measures that will be taken in the workplace to support social distancing, such as rearranged workspaces, PPE, and temperature checks.

“Like a lot of leaders, I don’t know when we will finally return to the “new normal,” but I do anticipate that the communications industry has been permanently affected by the change. An emphasized focus on internal communications – for client crises, employee engagement and continued work practices – will remain a vital need for both corporations and agencies. PR agencies with diversified offerings and experience will be best prepared to weather the current crisis and support client priorities on the other side.”

**-Barbara Bates, Global CEO, Hotwire**

“Communications has been instrumental in return-to-work preparation. We have created and distributed an Employee Handbook to all employees with general and site-specific information to help ensure a smooth and safe transition back to the workplace. It includes resources and guidance, as well as FAQs to address top employee concerns. With stable operations in place and colleagues working effectively from home, we believe that a pragmatic, phased approach to returning to work will significantly reduce the risk for potential future infection and help keep our employees safe.”

**-Matt Bianco, Head of Corporate Public Affairs, Novelis, Inc.**

“Communications is closely involved with the teams establishing our return-to-office plan, and we’ve seen great efficiency and collaboration across teams virtually.

We’ve given careful thought to how we will approach the return to our offices. We will take all the necessary precautions for the safety of our colleagues. The return to offices will be a slow and measured process with all decisions made carefully based on conditions in the community, government and health guidelines, and readiness of the office environment.

At this time, we do not plan to fully reopen our corporate offices until, at least, September 2020. Our teams are diverse with a variety of roles, needs and specific space requirements that need to be considered. As a result, we’ve identified three types of role classifications that we will use to build our plan to return to the office: highly dependent on the office; somewhat dependent; or not at all dependent. At the right time and when it is safe, colleagues will return based on these classifications.

This pandemic has re-shaped how we think about remote work, shifted our view about the importance of an office environment and taught us about flexibility. We have learned how to adapt and be efficient without being together physically. We have remained connected, building relationships and achieving camaraderie despite the distance. Most importantly, we have experienced a significant increase in collaboration and speed of decision-making that has been vital not only to our culture but to our business strategy.

So, now is the right time to re-frame our mindset about how we work. The role of the office will remain important, but it may not play as much of a central role as it has in the past – at least in the near-term. Getting our work done is the primary focus, regardless of where that work physically takes place. As a company, we will embrace a virtual and flexible work approach that is more advanced than our policies in the past.”

**-Jill Carapellotti, Group Vice President, Corporate Communications, Macy's Inc.**

“We’ve had a sub-team of the crisis team working specifically on the return to office. We completed our return to office toolkits for our facilities a couple of weeks ago, and now we’re in the process of getting authorization for the return to work at a site by site level. Social distancing, PPE, and so forth has to be in place before they’re given a green light to go back and we have around 160 locations around the world. We’ve only had three that have gone back to work so far.”

**-Rob Clark, Chief Communications Officer, Medtronic**

“We are playing an integral role, in partnership with our human resources organization, in the messaging and rollout of the return-to-work guidance. We are in a unique position as we are moving into a new location at the end of the year, which ultimately factors into our approach to returning to work – both from a standard and a change-management communications standpoint.

From a physical office space standpoint, we, similar to other companies will likely stagger the employee return and limit the capacity in our current office space. We have provided all office- and field-based employees with Personal Protective Equipment and we are preparing socially distanced office configurations. In addition, we have the capability to check temperatures and are following other global health authority and individual state guidance for a safe return.”

**-Geoff Curtis, Executive Vice President, Corporate Affairs and Chief Communications Officer, Horizon Therapeutics**

“As we all eventually seek a return to normalcy, we know it will be a slow and phased return for both The Stagwell Group and across the country. American workers have asked for safety before returning to the office and employers will need to take that into account and remain flexible. Our entire leadership team has spent time each week coordinating our global return to work and establishing a standard of safeguards for all 3,000 members of our global team. We have given our leaders the flexibility to return to work when it’s right and safe for their specific teams and locations. To assist with this, we centralized pan-Stagwell support, including OSHA-certified best practices, communications templates, legal resources, bulk PPE ordering and COVID-clearance via Vital Check.

As a digital-first company, we have been flexible and nimble pre-COVID-19. During the crises, we tested that capability further and will emerge even stronger in flexible working methods.”

**-Ray Day, Vice Chair, Stagwell**

“The Communication team has been very involved and an active member in the overall Return to Work and Pandemic teams. We created an overall communication strategy to return employees at all locations in phases as outlined by federal, state and local officials. If an employee is uncomfortable or has extenuating circumstances and chooses not to return in their phase, a custom solution was created.

In addition, we are following all Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines to ensure the work environment is safe and healthy. We have embraced social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE), employee temperature checks and enhanced sanitation.”

**-Jon Harris, Senior Vice President and Chief Communications Officer, Conagra**

“The workplace will not look the same going forward. With all of the investment in technology as a result of keeping employees productive during the emergency orders, for some companies, it won’t make sense to hold as much real estate or the overhead costs associated with doing so. Additionally, companies will need to social distance those who do come back into the office, meaning workspaces won’t even look the same post-pandemic.

Return to campus protocols at Aflac are being established to include staggered schedules, masks requirements and temperature detection protocols.

Employees from different locations will return at different times, based on everything from childcare availability, to government restrictions by geography, to the health care community’s surge capability.”

**-Catherine Hernandez-Blades, SVP, Chief ESG and Communications Officer, Aflac**

“As a strategic function, Communications is co-leading re-entry preparation efforts with our operational excellence and HR teams. We’ve prepared multiple scenarios, a detailed, three-pronged communications approach reflecting our phased re-entry process aligned with the Restore Illinois plan and created a communications theme, “Working Well Together, Wherever” designed to motivate and reassure employees. This campaign will further support employees via a ‘welcome kit’ containing PPE, manager and employee toolkits for ready access to important information, a re-entry video detailing safety measures, and more.

A number of critical upgrades have been made to our facilities to promote a safe working environment, including: thermal scanning upon entry; limited capacity rules; social distancing decals; signage reminders throughout the buildings; closing of all “gathering” spots; and PPE. We’ve also mapped out all safety measures and precautions we’ll need to take through a Day in the Life simulation exercise as we resume in-office activity and in-person interactions with healthcare professionals, to protect our employees and prevent community spread.

We’ve gained a greater comfort with workplace flexibility. From a functional perspective, our team has grown closer through weekly touch base meetings, and we see the function becoming even more imbedded into the strategy and planning efforts of the organization and operating as a fully integrated team.”

**-Moyra Knight, Vice President Corporate Communications, Astellas US; President, Astellas Global Health Foundation**

“We are currently looking at options to return to physical office spaces, following our cues from the government and when it will be safe to return. We will return in shifts, as per the March protocol, to ensure safety of employees. We have designed a campaign – Home2Home – that

is intended to both reacquaint and reassure employees, creating a sense of security that their work environment will be as safe and secure as the home environment they will shift from. We are also looking at different employee seating configurations, and rules for conference meetings. And, for the time being, we have ceased any outside guests coming into our office spaces.

We are at the very beginning of trying greater flexibility in core work hours, to ensure people have time to meet obligations at home and at work. Some of these initiatives may become permanent.”

**-Brian Lott, Chief Communications Officer, Mubadala**

“As we look ahead, we’ll begin to concentrate more on how to safely return to our offices. We are currently fielding another survey to determine our employees’ reactions to returning to the office and their expectations for measures the company could take to protect them when they do. The results of that survey will be used to create our plans for reopening the offices that are currently closed.”

**-Catherine Mathis, Chief Communications Officer, McGraw Hill**

“Like many academic institutions, my university has been developing resumption plans for fall that have been in continuous flux since activating an emergency preparedness plan in February.”

**-Juan-Carlos Molleda, Edwin L. Artzt Dean and Professor, University of Oregon**

“Of course, the sudden impact on our business from the COVID-19 pandemic moved into reverse as we re-opened stores and began to resume ‘normal’ business operations once it had become safe to do so. During this time, we’ve also kept up and even accelerated the transformation of our business, bringing in new services like Buy-Online-Pickup-In-Store and contactless curbside pick-up. Communicating how customers can buy quickly, effectively and with limited contact will be an essential part of the retail mix in the near-term, so these have proven to be critical to helping us rebuild.”

**-Dominic Pendry, Head of Corporate Communications, Bed Bath & Beyond Inc.**

“I believe that working remotely is here to stay at Cox, and our internal communications team will need to continue to employ strategies that can effectively serve this new “office.” As we do, we’ll need to revisit conventional wisdom about volume and become comfortable with communicating more frequently to fully satisfy employees’ information needs. And we’ll have to continue listening. Truly listening. Not listening for an opportunity to insert company messaging, but to understand what’s on the hearts and minds of employees and responding to that. Understanding EQ will become just as important as feeding employees’ IQ. At the end of the day, helping leaders stay emotionally connected to employees will reap greater engagement and loyalty rewards than it ever has before.

If we do that, and do it well, we’ll be able to adapt and get our messages across to reach our employees in whatever workspace they will use. That’s valuable for today, but it’s even more valuable as the business and cultural landscapes continue to evolve for the future.”

**-Shirley Powell, Senior Vice President of Communications and Industry Relations, Cox Automotive**

“Communications, Operations, HR, Facilities and others have been collaborating on “return to work” policies and decisions. In mid-March we instituted our “Code Yellow” portion of our campus policy that closes the facilities to outside visitors and all but essential personnel. We went from daily attendance of ~8,500 people to fewer than 500 a day. It’s important to note that as an airline operation, our frontline was always at work, so we had to be sensitive in our broad communication. Another quick learning for us: “return to work” is a terrible phrase which hints that you weren’t working at home. We quickly pivoted and renamed our effort “Return to Campus.” With a focus on our corporate campus (multiple support buildings), we have been creating new policies, signage, communication, educational videos, etc., to help the effort of getting word to all our corporate campus employees prepared for our “new normal” of reduced building capacity, need for physical distance, mask wearing and limited services (such as Cafes and our Tech Zone), and guidance on no large gatherings. We have recently distributed a Return to Campus guide, launched an educational video in our Learning Management System that all campus employees need to view, and communicated department by department on what “phase” employees will be returning in our first wave, second wave, third wave, etc. We have limited the entrances to all the facilities in order to implement temperature screenings upon arrival and we are currently investigating what technology might be available to use to get daily “health declarations” from employees as they arrive on campus (no temperature, not around anyone who has been ill, has not traveled internationally, etc.). Nearly all of our employee workstations on our corporate campus allow for physical distancing; we do have a few work areas where “scrum” work had employees in close quarters and those are being studied for solutions, including alternative in/out of office team scheduling, staggered schedules and other options.

Prior to COVID-19, Southwest allowed flexible work arrangements but did not fully embrace remote working. For example, we operate seven call centers around the country. While we have studied the idea of agents being able to work from home, we had not enacted it for the nearly 3,500 people who manage Customer calls and emails. After the crisis fully emerged, the leadership team over our Customer Support & Services area, in partnership with our Technology team, found hardware, software security protocols and training to be able to allow 1,700 of those agents to be able to work from home in a matter of weeks—thus allowing the remaining agents to physically distance themselves in our call centers as needed. Moving forward, our company is coming up with a formal remote working policy to be able to support a higher level of this kind of work arrangement post-pandemic. As for the communications function, we will take lessons learned from dealing with this crisis into our day to day and further improve our product delivery (learning the voices of each of our executives), collaboration with other departments (work on any gaps in our relationships), and more fully fleshing out our Pandemic response plan and fully articulating the associated business risks.”

**-Linda Rutherford, Senior Vice President, Chief Communications Officer, Southwest Airlines**

“The vast majority of our workforce has been working throughout the crisis, though about half have been doing so remotely. We are now implementing a phased return to the workplace – research labs are now open and staffed, albeit under very different conditions than before COVID, plans are being refined to reopen public facilities like libraries and offices as we plan for the return of students to campus in August. Communications has been critical to all of this, including websites, FAQs and video explainers on new processes and procedures. Our employees are eager for information and reassurance that the university has taken the necessary precautions, is looking out for their safety and is following the medical and public health guidance from our own medical center and scientists as we move through this continuum.

The speed and precision with which we need to speak to our stakeholders means that have centralized more communications as a result of the COVID-19 environment. That is, the “old” way of cascading messages through local units has been increasingly supplanted by direct communications from leadership, or the central communications office. We have also put in place a much more rigorous review process for employee and student-directed communications that comes from individual units.”

**-Michael Schoenfeld, Chief Communications and Government Relations Officer, Duke University**

“With businesses beginning to reopen, it can be tempting to think that we can just revert to our old ways or that proactive communication efforts we took in the early months of the pandemic are no longer needed. But the virus isn’t going away, so neither is the disruption or uncertainty in our workplaces and economy. For that reason, communicators must hold firm—keep communicating regularly, clearly and with an emphasis on a greater cause.”

**-Erin Streeter, Senior Vice President of Communications and Brand Strategy, National Association of Manufacturers**

“When we talk about “returning to work,” the reality is, we probably won’t be returning in the same way for a very long time, if ever. Now that we’ve been sheltering-in-place for several months, the big takeaway for me is two-fold: On the one hand, we’ve learned that many roles can be done well remotely. On the other hand, we’ve also seen the downside of isolation and the absence of the comradery and collaboration that comes from a shared workplace.

The reality is, different people have different needs and preferences, whether it’s coming into an office or working from home, or adopting a less traditional work schedule to care for themselves or others. COVID-19 has proven that we have viable options. The post-COVID work environment will need to do a better job of balancing new personal habits now that they have now been tried and tested.”

**-Jennifer Temple, Chief Communications Officer, Hewlett Packard Enterprise**

“To state the obvious, the clinicians who have been working on COVID patients have been coming in to work throughout the entire pandemic. But there was a time when we had to shut down our physician practices, so those folks were not working in the office and many of them

went to virtual work. Specifically with the marketing communications team from the very beginning, I said to them, you get to make this decision just like you would for any inclement weather day that we have. If you feel comfortable coming in, you're more than welcome to come in and if you don't feel comfortable, then you should not. You have the ability to work from home and there is COVID-related work that you can do from your virtual location. That's what we've been doing. There have been a handful of us, probably three to four on average, who come in every day or a couple times a week. We also have a weekly staff meeting with everyone through Zoom.

As an organization, we've already started planning what bringing people back in could look like. As we do so, we're realizing we have an opportunity at an organizational level to think about this differently. Maybe we don't need all this real estate that we have that houses office people. Maybe there are some functions that are okay being handled remotely. What are those functions and who are those people? And what might that plan look like? There's some very concerted work going on at the enterprise level to understand what that looks like."

**-Chuck Wallington, Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing & Communications Officer, Cone Health**

"We're very involved in the development of communications in the forms of emails or Q&As or visuals that can help employees digest the large volume of content they need to know about this new norm. Our company is returning to work in phases. We started with a pilot program allowing a very, very small number of employees to enter the office. Next week, we'll open that program a little bit more. It is still uncertain when or if things will ever be back to normal, unless there is a vaccine.

Yes, our company wasn't 100 percent supportive of work-from-home. This situation has made people open their eyes to trusting employees to do their jobs remotely. The communication function has always been one that has been appreciated, but for us the function changed a bit. We began offering operational solutions because the main "operation" was now communicating in a new way."

**-Senior Communications Executive in the Pharmaceuticals Industry**