Return to the Office for Canadian Associations

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The Portage Group

With businesses across the country being forced to rapidly adapt to working in a virtual environment, there has been much speculation and debate about the longer-term impacts of COVID 19 on working in the office. While the results suggest that some changes are coming, they also indicate that it is unlikely that associations and other nonprofits will completely give up their office space.
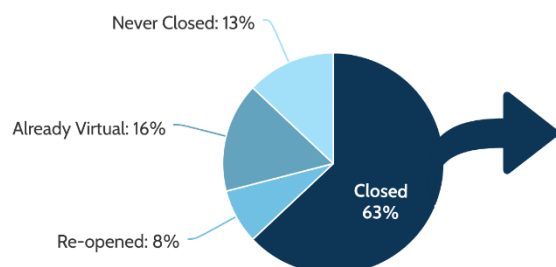
The TPG Pulse for Associations is a publication series focused on providing information, insight and tracking of the impact of COVID 19 on the association sector.

This edition of the Pulse highlights the key findings from the June Pulse Survey, which was completed by 311 Canadian associations and other nonprofits between June 3 and June 11, 2020.
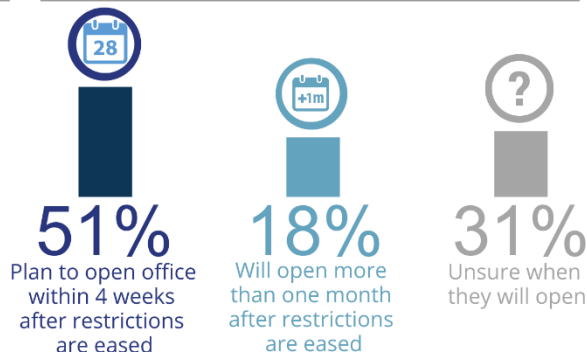
This Pulse has been developed in partnership with The Canadian Society of Association Executives.

Return to the Office for Canadian Associations

THE PORTAGE GROUP

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OFFICE CLOSURE STATUS - JUNE 11

Never Closed: 13%
Already Virtual: 16%
Re-opened: 8%
Closed 63%

RETURN AFTER RESTRICTIONS LIFTED

51%
Plan to open office within 4 weeks after restrictions are eased

18%
Will open more than one month after restrictions are eased

31%
Unsure when they will open

BARRIERS TO RETURNING TO THE OFFICE

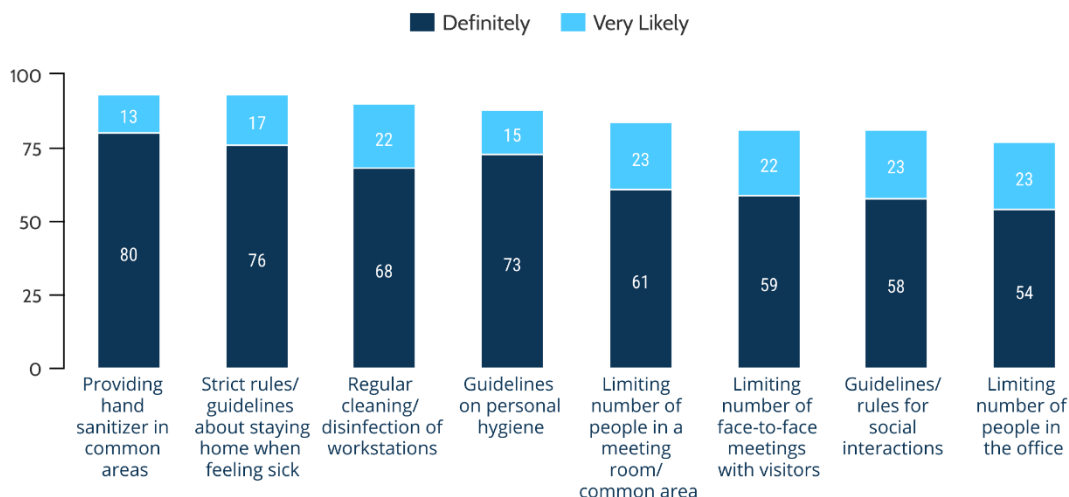**70%** Have or plan to consult staff about concerns over returning to the office.

Fear of exposure to the virus is the primary barrier to returning to the office. Nine in ten respondents indicated that fear of exposing at risk family/friends and general anxiety/fear over exposure were barriers for staff.

DOCUMENTED SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

56%
of associations already have documented safety precautions

TOP COVID 19 SAFETY PRECAUTIONS ASSOCIATIONS WILL IMPLEMENT IN THE OFFICE

■ Definitely   ■ Very Likely

Precaution	Definitely	Very Likely
Providing hand sanitizer in common areas	80	13
Strict rules/guidelines about staying home when feeling sick	76	17
Regular cleaning/disinfection of workstations	68	22
Guidelines on personal hygiene	73	15
Limiting number of people in a meeting room/common area	61	23
Limiting number of face-to-face meetings with visitors	59	22
Guidelines/rules for social interactions	58	23
Limiting number of people in the office	54	23

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Opening the Office

When COVID 19 restrictions went into place in March 2020, like other non-essential businesses, many associations and other nonprofits closed their offices and had staff work from home. Specifically, seven in ten (71%) participating organizations closed their offices. Almost two thirds (63%) reported that their offices were still closed as of June 11.

Office Closure Status as of June 11

Already Virtual 16%

Never Closed 13%

Re-opened 8%

Closed 63%

Note: N=311

Of the remaining 29%, a significant 16% were already operating virtually while 13% indicated that they never closed their offices.

Not surprisingly, there is some variation by region. In Ontario and Quebec where the re-opening process is slower than in other areas of the country, roughly seven in ten (68% to 70%) participants reported their office was still closed. In other areas of the country the portion was lower ranging from 43% to 53% depending on region.

> "Working remotely has been largely a non-issue for us, so there is no rush to return to the office. [We] will be encouraging more work from home opportunities moving forward."
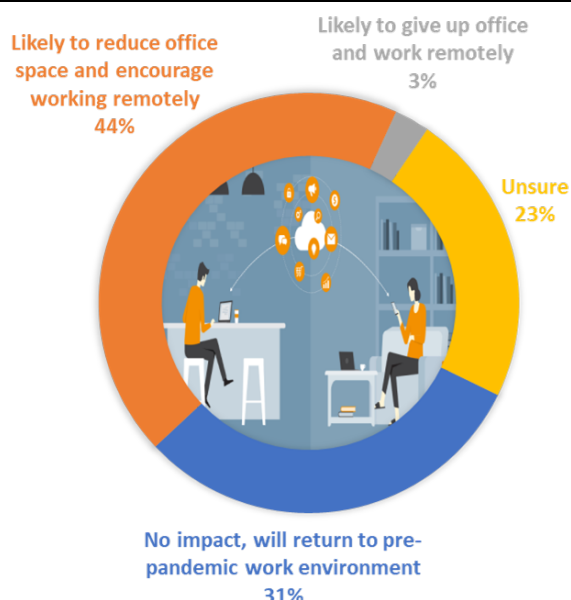>
> ***Professional Association CEO, Ontario***

Among those whose offices are still closed, half (51%) indicated that they would open their office within four weeks of restrictions being eased. In fact, one-third plan to open their offices within two weeks of restrictions being eased. While many are hoping to get back to the office quickly, a significant portion are uncertain about their return. Three in ten (31%) did not know how long they would wait to open their office after the easing of restrictions.

Move to Fully Virtual Unlikely

With businesses across the country being forced to rapidly adapt to working in a virtual environment, there has been much speculation and debate about the longer-term impacts of COVID 19 on working in the office. While the results suggest that some changes are coming, they also indicate that it is unlikely that associations and other nonprofits will completely give up their office space. Only 3% of respondents indicated that their organization is likely to give up their office entirely in favour of working remotely.

Change in Approach to Working Virtually

Likely to reduce office space and encourage working remotely
44%

Likely to give up office and work remotely
3%

Unsure
23%

No impact, will return to pre-pandemic work environment
31%

Notes: Base is those who have an office.
N=260

Although few reporting associations are likely to move to a completely virtual work environment, many are considering reducing their 'bricks and mortar' footprint. Forty-four percent (44%) indicated that they would likely reduce their office space and

encourage staff to work remotely. This shift signals a significant change in the amount of office space used by associations and other nonprofits.

It is also important to note that there is still a high level of uncertainty with respect to office space - one quarter (23%) were unsure about whether they would return to the office.

> "We are really unsure whether we will ever return to the office - working from home has worked very well. We are able to collaborate via Zoom. If we do need to meet, we could rent a boardroom and save approx. $60,000 on our office lease."
>
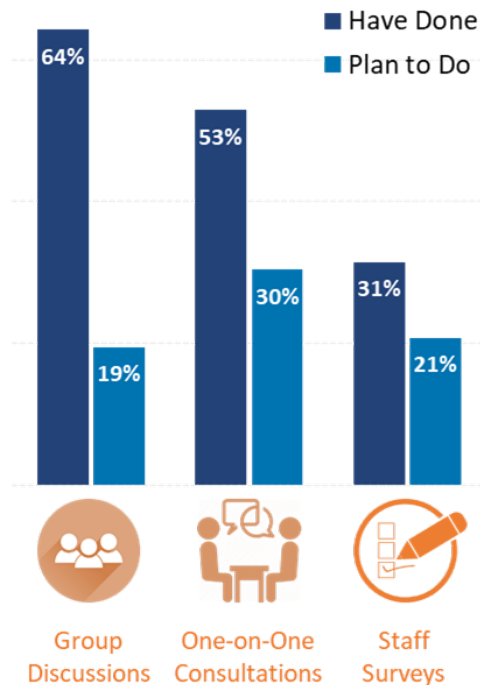> **Trade Association Senior Manager, BC**

Addressing Staff Concerns About Returning to the Office

Almost all (95%) participating organizations with an office indicated that they have (or plan to) undertake some form of consultation with their staff regarding attitudes toward returning to an office environment. This includes 77% who have already done so and a further 18% that plan to.

The most common approach to consulting staff about their concerns so far is through group discussions. Almost two-thirds (64%) have used this approach. One-on-one consultations are a close second at 53%. When including those who also plan

to use these consultation methods, roughly eight in ten (83% for both) will have used at least one of these two consultation approaches. Staff surveys are far less common with only half indicating they have consulted staff in this way, or will in the future.

Staff Consultations Regarding Return to Office

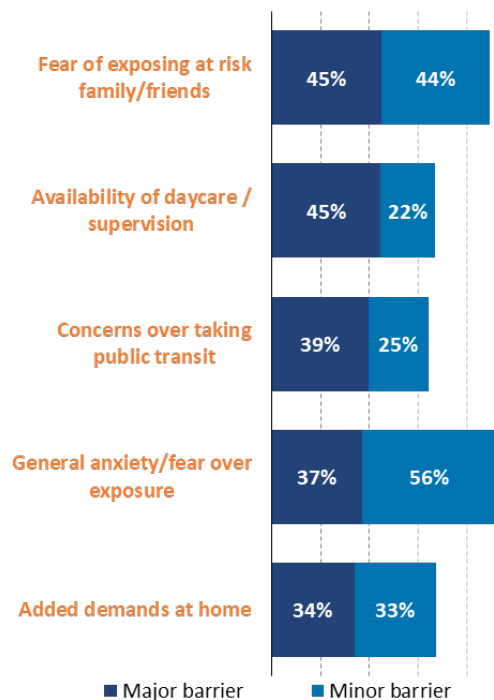Notes: Base is those with an office.
          N≥240

Not surprisingly, the use of the different methods of consultation varies based on the number of staff. Specifically, staff surveys are considerably more common among organizations with more than 20 staff (70% have or plan to) than among those with two to five staff (27%). One-on-one consultations are most common among those with six to ten staff (95%) while group discussions are most common among those with six to ten (95%) or 11 to 20 (93%) staff.

When asked to indicate whether potential concerns were barriers to staff returning to the office, the results indicate that fear of exposure to the virus is the primary barrier to returning to the office. Nine in ten respondents indicated that fear of exposing at risk family/friends (89%) and general anxiety/fear over exposure (93%) were minor or major barriers for staff. Among these two barriers, fear of exposing at-risk family/friends ranked slightly lower on the combined major/minor scale but was most likely to be listed as a major barrier for participating organizations (45%).

While other barriers were viewed by 34% to 45% as major barriers, the combined minor/major rating is considerably lower than the top two barriers. In all three cases, the extent to which they are viewed as a barrier would be situation specific. For example, the availability of daycare/supervision is only a barrier for those with young children and transit is only a concern if staff take transit. The results suggest that for those that have these circumstances, the barrier is considerable.

Perceived Barriers for Staff to Return to the Office

Notes: Base is those with an office.
          N≥242

Not surprisingly, the extent to which concerns over taking public transit is a barrier is significantly higher in major metropolitan areas (49% major) than in smaller cities (4%).

> "[The] mental health of my team is varied, [with] lots of anxiety and concerns about balancing child care and work expectations, causing undue stress - We have mental health check ins so people know they can talk about their feelings re: returning to work."
>
> *Special Interest Association CEO, Ontario*

Respondents who already have documented policies or safety precaution were asked to indicate which safety precautions were included in the document. Those that did not already have safety precautions documented were asked to indicate the likelihood that the various safety precautions would be implemented. These two questions were combined by merging "included" and "will definitely implement" into the same group and "will be added" and "very likely" into another group.

COVID 19 Related Office Safety Precautions

Among organizations that have an office, just over half (56%) indicated that they already have documented COVID 19 policies for returning to the office. Not surprisingly, the likelihood of having a documented policy increases with the number of staff. Only 37% of organizations with two to five staff have a documented policy while seven in ten (71%) of those with more than 20 staff have one.
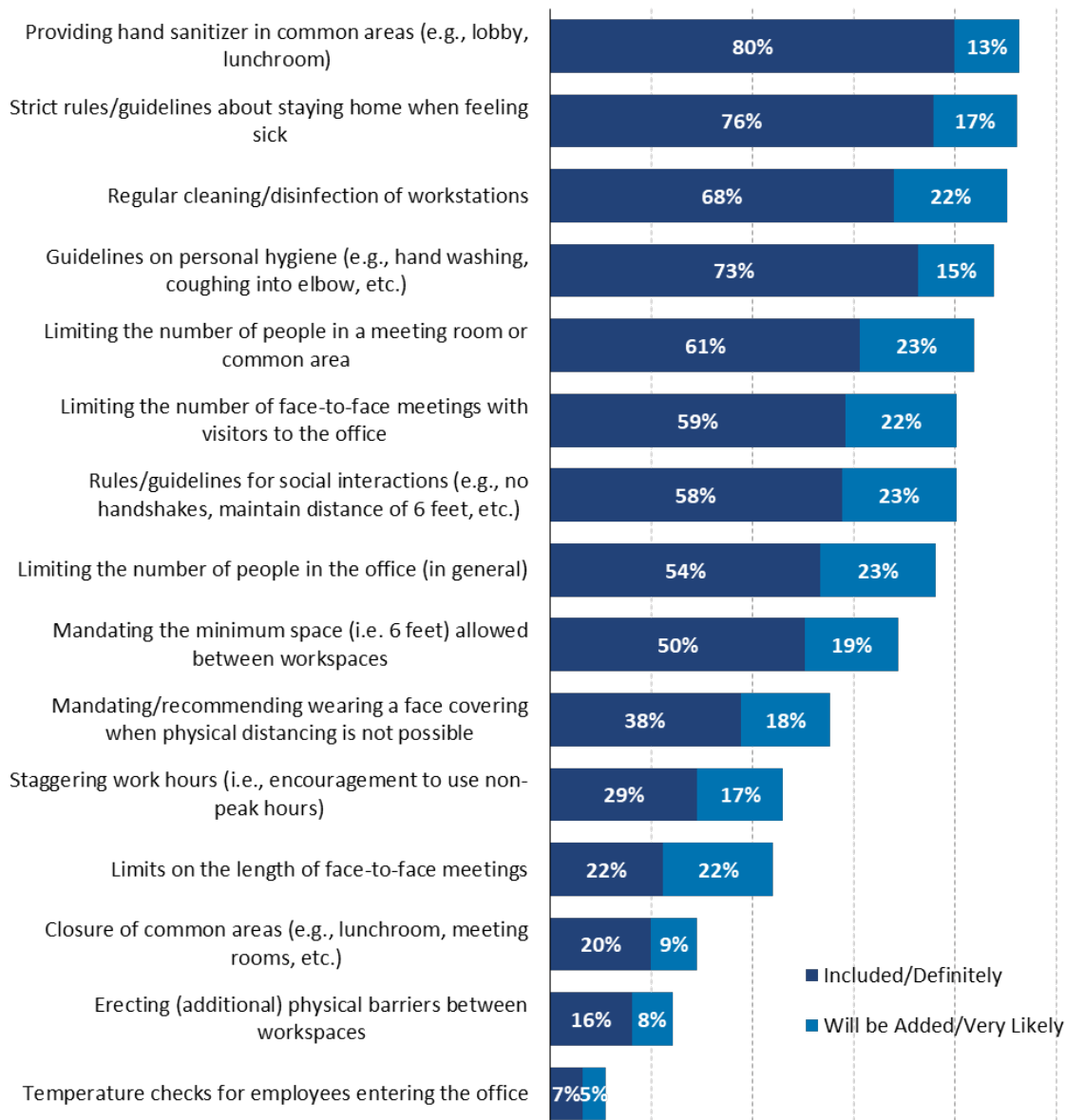
> "[We are] working closely with the commercial landlord to align our policies to the building wide policies."
>
> *Special Interest Association CEO, Ontario*

Providing hand sanitizer in common areas (93% included/definitely or will be added/very likely), strict rules/guidelines about staying home when feeling sick (93%) and regular cleaning/disinfection of workstations (90%) are the most common safety precautions to be adopted by respondents who have an office. These safety precautions are almost universal.

Safety precautions related to limiting close contact are (or will be) well represented in office policies. Roughly four in five respondents indicated they would limit the number of people in a meeting room or common area (84%), limit the number of face-to-face meetings with visitors to the office (81%) and limit the number of people in the office (77%). However, only 44% will put limits on the length of face-to-face meetings.

Implementation of COVID 19 Safety Precautions

Precaution	Included/Definitely	Will be Added/Very Likely
Providing hand sanitizer in common areas (e.g., lobby, lunchroom)	80%	13%
Strict rules/guidelines about staying home when feeling sick	76%	17%
Regular cleaning/disinfection of workstations	68%	22%
Guidelines on personal hygiene (e.g., hand washing, coughing into elbow, etc.)	73%	15%
Limiting the number of people in a meeting room or common area	61%	23%
Limiting the number of face-to-face meetings with visitors to the office	59%	22%
Rules/guidelines for social interactions (e.g., no handshakes, maintain distance of 6 feet, etc.)	58%	23%
Limiting the number of people in the office (in general)	54%	23%
Mandating the minimum space (i.e. 6 feet) allowed between workspaces	50%	19%
Mandating/recommending wearing a face covering when physical distancing is not possible	38%	18%
Staggering work hours (i.e., encouragement to use non-peak hours)	29%	17%
Limits on the length of face-to-face meetings	22%	22%
Closure of common areas (e.g., lunchroom, meeting rooms, etc.)	20%	9%
Erecting (additional) physical barriers between workspaces	16%	8%
Temperature checks for employees entering the office	7%	5%

■ Included/Definitely
■ Will be Added/Very Likely

Notes: Responses were combined from those who have documented safety precautions and those who don't. "Included" and "Will definitely include" were group together as was "Will be added" and "Very likely".
N=260

While almost seven in ten (69%) will be mandating (or are likely to) the minimum space allowed between workspaces, only one quarter (24%) will erect (additional) physical barriers between workspaces.

Employee-specific measures that rated high were guidelines on personal hygiene such as hand washing or coughing into one's elbow (88%) and rules / guidelines for social interactions such as no handshakes or maintaining a distance of 6 feet (81%). Mandating/recommending the wearing of a face covering when physical distancing is not possible was also common at 56%, but considerably lower than other personal measures.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to identify other safety precautions they planned on implementing that were not listed in the survey. Some of the more notable themes among the responses include:

- Signage such physical distancing markers, directional arrows on the ground and reminders about hygiene;
- Encouraging more remote working to help limit the number of staff in the office;
- Physical barriers at reception; and,
- Providing personal protective equipment.

Supporting Associations Retooling to Thrive

Through the coming weeks and months, TPG and CSAE will be collecting data, and providing information, insight and guidance where we can. We'll do this by publishing a series of free resources that track the impact of COVID-19 on the association sector and that delve into how associations are adapting, retooling, and refocusing not just to survive, but hopefully to thrive, in our new reality. You can find other recent resources and information on upcoming initiatives here.

For more information please contact research@portagegroup.com or info@csae.com.

About The Portage Group Inc.

The Portage Group is a full-service consulting firm serving the association sector. TPG is the official research partner for the Canadian Society of Association Executives.

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