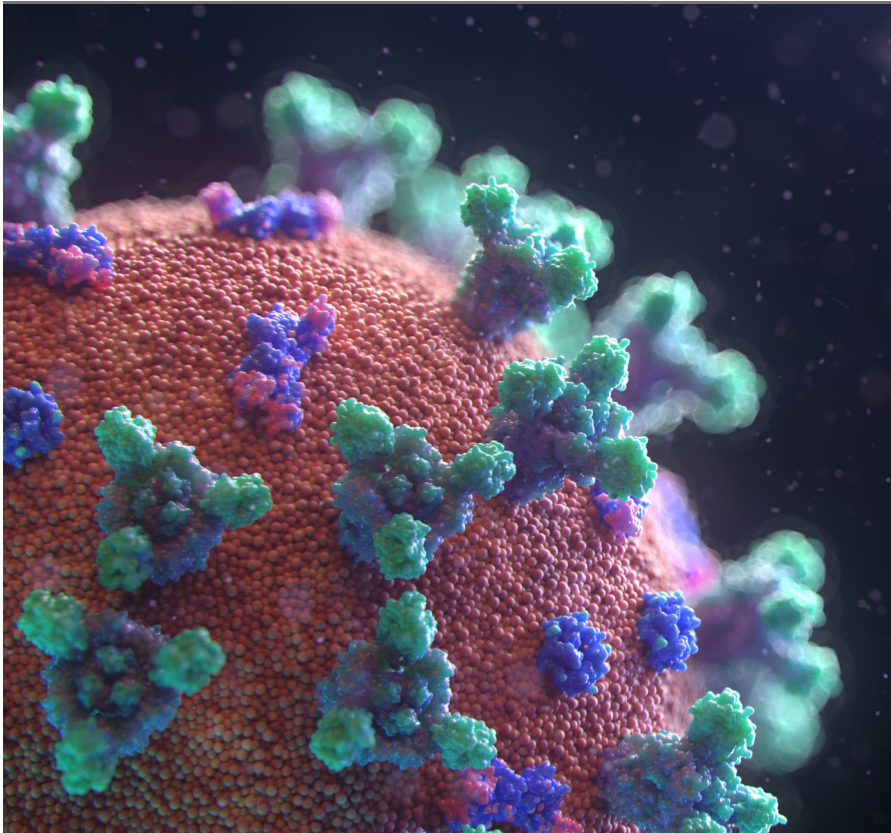


# COVID-19 Office Strategies: Returning to work amid a pandemic

REVISED 2 SEPTEMBER, 2020



To put things in perspective, the United States is still averaging about 1,000 deaths per day, down from the 2000 per day average of mid-April and the average number of new cases per day across the country is now close to 40,000 per day, down from around 65,000 per day in mid-July. In short, new cases are diminishing, but the rate of death is still alarming. If this pandemic lasts 18 months like the 1918 pandemic, we could total well over 500,000 deaths in the US alone.

IT IS SEPTEMBER 2,

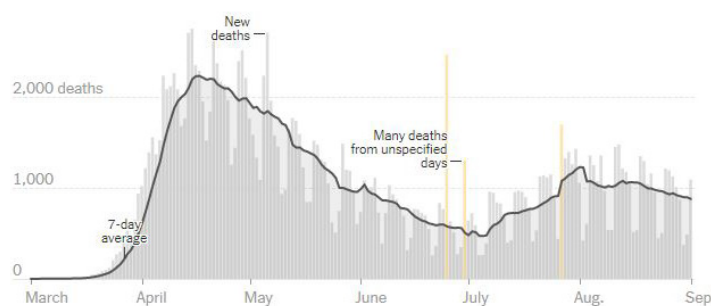
almost 6 months after the “safer-at-home” policies imposed to “flatten the curve” of new cases of COVID-19 were first implemented. The curve of new cases did indeed flatten, only to rise again far beyond where they were in June. States are struggling to balance the need to reopen the economy while keeping their citizens safe. This article will lay out the challenges ahead and present some sensible solutions for businesses to consider as they contemplate the future of the workplace.



New reported cases by day in the United States



New reported deaths by day in the United States

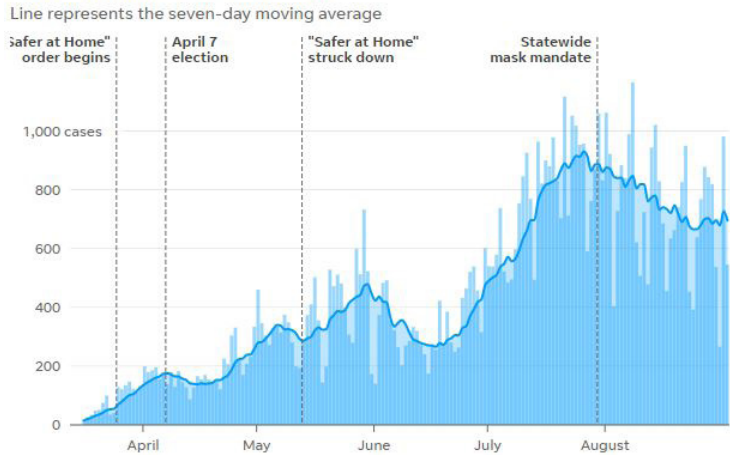


“Reopening” has been a bit of a misnomer; most bars, restaurants and other retail establishments are conducting a fraction of their pre-COVID business, and most office workers are still working remotely. Travel has been severely curtailed, and whole countries are closed to non-residents. Many schools and churches are still closed, almost all organized live entertainment has been canceled or played without fans, and states are continuing to mandate wearing masks when indoors and in public. I say this not to repeat what we all know too well, but to point out that despite all of this, daily new cases in Wisconsin are still 7 times higher than at the start of the quarantine in mid-March.

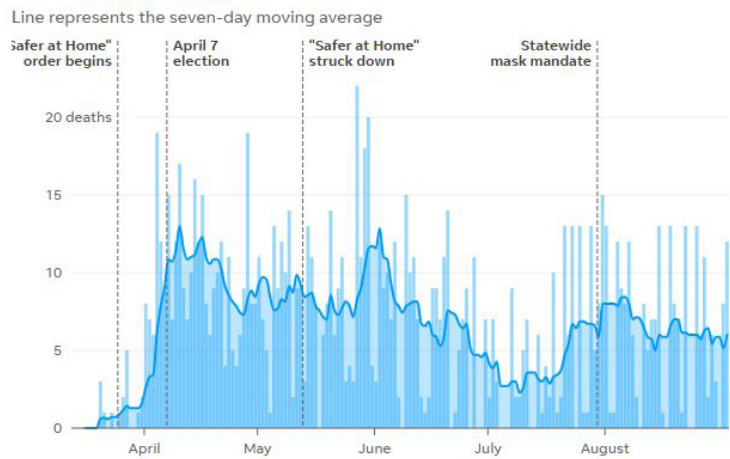
Wisconsin began re-opening its economy and allowing people to return to work after the State Supreme Court threw out the Governor’s extension of the original stay at home order. Gov. Tony Evers had planned to begin reopening the State on May 26th if we had reached the mileposts outlined in the Badger Bounce Back plan; a downward trend in new cases for 2 consecutive weeks, increased capacity of our health care system, coronavirus tests for anyone with symptoms, increased tracking of the virus, and adequate supplies and PPE for public safety personnel (See the *Badger Bounce Back plan to the right*). This was a prudent approach, but after a blow-up of new cases in July and the implementation of a state-wide mask mandate, Wisconsin currently has an average of 700 new cases and around 6 new deaths per day.

Still, many offices have opened at least partially by following what we know and changing our practices. Wisconsin *must* stay open, and the following recommendations can help us do just that.

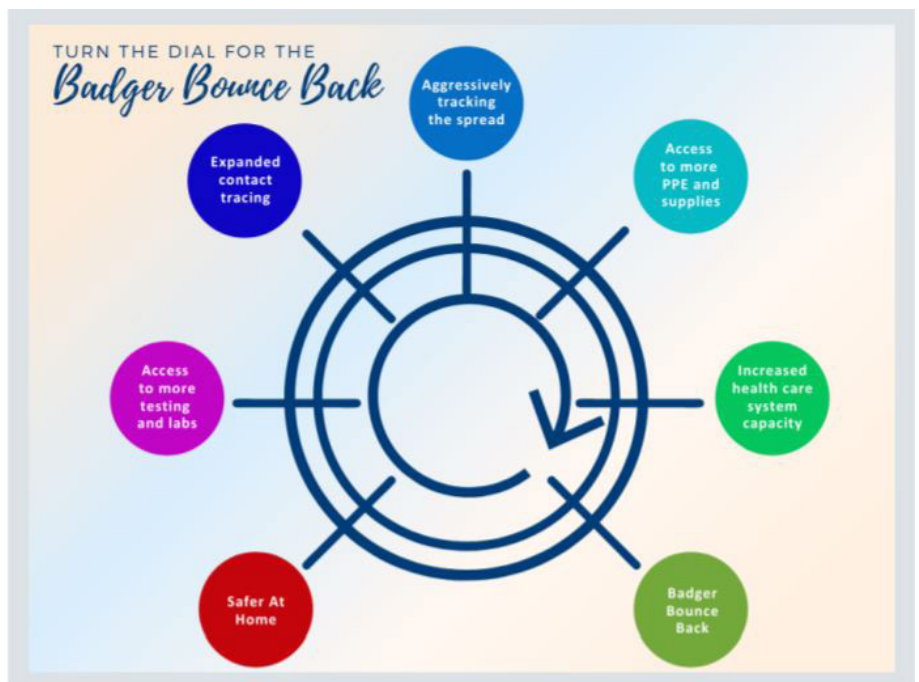
### New confirmed cases per day



### New deaths per day



USA Today



Wisconsin Department of Health Services



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The steps below have been selected to help businesses keep their employees safe. They are ordered from easy to difficult, or inexpensive to costly, depending on your point of view, and are distinguished by their proven ability to address the four suspected means of transmitting the coronavirus:

- 1 How close you get to an infected person
- 2 How long you are near the person
- 3 Whether that person projects viral droplets on you by coughing, sneezing or talking
- 4 How much you touch your face

### OFFICE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

When deciding when, how and who to return to the office, business leaders should first decide who cannot effectively do their jobs without returning to the office, and return only those people and those they need with them to the office. There are many businesses that are functioning quite well with a remote workforce. Returning to the office for those businesses will not improve their bottom line or the economy in general. For those businesses who need to return either in part or en masse, these are some suggested steps to mitigate the danger for your employees:



- 1 In existing offices, people should be moved from their existing work area if they cannot work at least 6' from someone else.
- 2 If moving people is not an option, reduce the number of employees in the office by asking people to continue working from home and possibly alternate days in the office.
- 3 Sharing of workstations, (hoteling, free address, etc.) should be avoided if possible. If it is required, only one worker per day should use the space and workers must be taught to clean it when they arrive and when they leave.
- 4 Employees must be taught to not enter a person's workspace but stay in the aisle.
- 5 Meetings will need to be smaller, held in bigger rooms than normal, or held virtually, even in the office.
- 6 When traveling to meetings by car, people should travel separately.

7 Conference Rooms should have a maximum posted occupancy. Chairs in excess of this number should be removed.

8 People will need to maintain distances in all areas of the building, which means during lunch, walking in the halls, etc.

9 Everyone in the office must wear a [cloth face covering](#) unless alone in a conference room or private office. (See Special Highrise Building Considerations below.)

10 **Anyone who might be sick needs to be told to work from home or stay home and fully recover if they can't work.** Coming in to work no matter what can no longer be valued in our society.

11 New office policies put in place to keep employees safe should be clearly communicated. Consider signage and/or a laminated card for each employee that clearly communicates shared expectations.

12 Assign a workplace manager in charge of cleanliness, distancing, and health protocols.

13 Hand sanitizer needs to be liberally distributed, and sanitizing wipes need to be provided anywhere surfaces will be touched by multiple people, such as kitchens, conference rooms and copy machines.

14 Handshakes are done, for now.

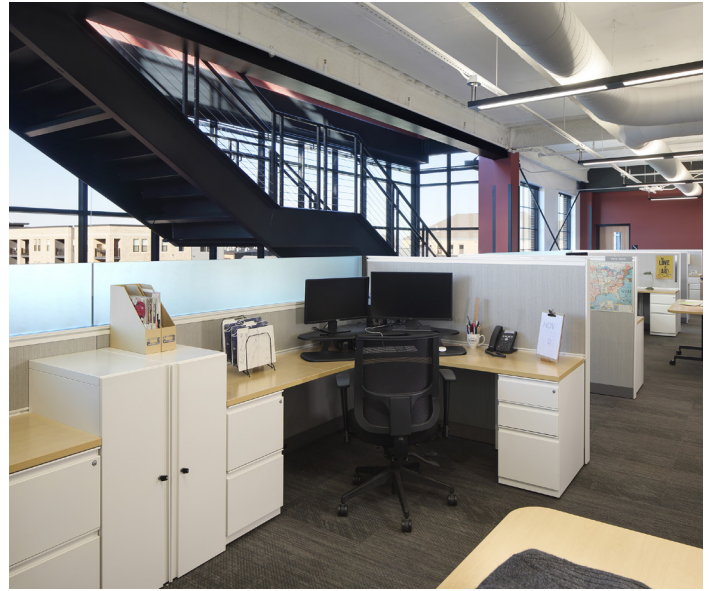
15 Visitors should not be allowed past the lobby.

16 Receptionists should have a sneeze guard installed.



## FURNITURE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Open office workstations should be a minimum of 6'x7' with 52" partitions. The top of the partition could be 14" of glass.
- 2 Benching office arrangements should be eliminated.
- 3 Washable surfaces should be included wherever possible, including [anti-microbial](#) surfaces.
- 4 If workstations cannot be designed to maintain the 6' required distance between employees, partitions or mobile screens should be used.



## BUILDING RECOMMENDATIONS

This is the most difficult area to affect, as many businesses are in existing buildings that they do not own and many of the recommendations here would require new equipment. However, if you are considering moving to a new building, many of these can be included in the design for a relatively small upcharge. These include:



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- 1 Touch-less plumbing fixtures and door openers.
- 2 Touch-less elevator controls, preferably programmable to limit the number of passengers. (See Special Highrise Considerations below.)
- 3 Use of non-porous and/or anti-microbial surfaces where practical.
- 4 Increased outdoor air. (Difficulty: High) This typically cannot be done with existing units and can add significant cost to new AH units. Another solution is to run the HVAC system 24/7 if possible.



5

Increased filtration. (Difficulty: Easy to Medium, depending on the solution.) Existing units can sometimes just switch to higher rated filters, but often to the detriment of airflow and unit lifespan.

6

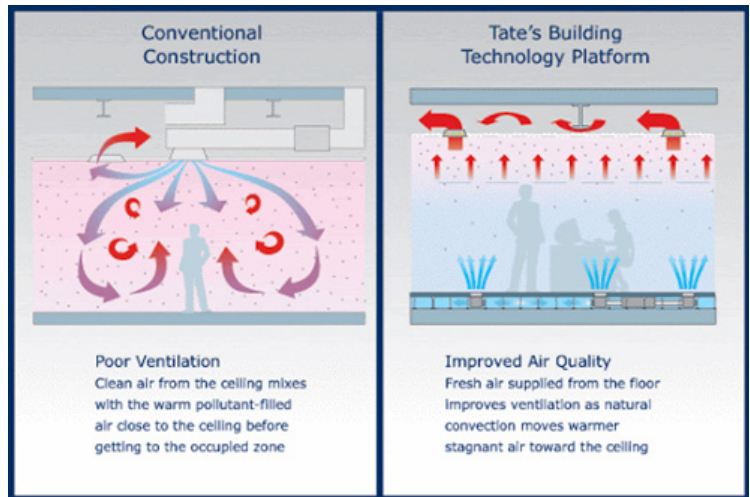
UV treatment of air. (Difficulty: Medium) [Studies](#) have shown that Ultraviolet Germicidal Irradiation (UVGI) lights can improve the health of building occupants. This could add \$5-12,000 per new air handing unit, but can also be installed in existing air ducts.

7

Bi-polar ionization to reduce contaminants in the air stream. (Difficulty: Easy)

8

In-floor air distribution. Typical office buildings heat and cool via forced air systems blowing air down from the ceiling through the naturally rising warm air of the equipment and occupants of the space. This creates a swirling mixture of fresh and existing air in the space. Supplying air from an underfloor plenum and removing it at the ceiling can create [clean-to-dirty flow patterns](#) and move infectious aerosols to be captured or exhausted.



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## SPECIAL HIGHRISE CONSIDERATIONS

Since the novel coronavirus is known to be transmitted by an infected person projecting droplets into the air through [coughing, sneezing or talking](#), and since the virus has also been shown to be transmitted by people who [did not yet know they were sick](#), social distancing from everyone is the most successful way we currently have to prevent the spread of the disease. Unfortunately, highrise buildings depend on elevators to transport their occupants from floor to floor, and maintaining the recommended 6' distance from other people in an elevator is nearly impossible. Business leaders contemplating a return to an office in a high-rise building where the avoidance of elevators is impractical should consider the following:

- 1 To minimize the exposure of employees using the elevators, every effort should be made to minimize the number of people returning to the office for the foreseeable future.
- 2 To minimize the usual crunch times at the beginning and end of a workday, landlords should be engaged to create an agreed upon window of time for the arrival and departure of each tenant's employees.
- 3 [Cloth face coverings](#) must be mandatory for anyone using an elevator. This cannot be optional for the reasons listed above.
- 4 Hand sanitizer should be provided in every elevator lobby.
- 5 A means for communicating COVID-19 cases affecting other tenants in the building should be created. This should ideally be managed by the building owner



## CONCLUSION

In [1918 the flu pandemic](#) known as the Spanish Flu infected 500 million people, or 1/3 of the world's population, and killed 50 million, of which 675,000 were in the United States. These are staggering numbers, but not too far beyond where we could be headed with our pandemic at our current rate of death. Fortunately, communication advancements have made our world significantly smaller, and medical, scientific and technological advancements predict a much better outcome this time around. Common sense strategies like the ones listed above can play a huge role in avoiding the catastrophe of 1918-1919 and put us on a path toward another 102 years of pandemic free work places. Until that time we each need to do our part to not just flatten the curve, but eliminate it.





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