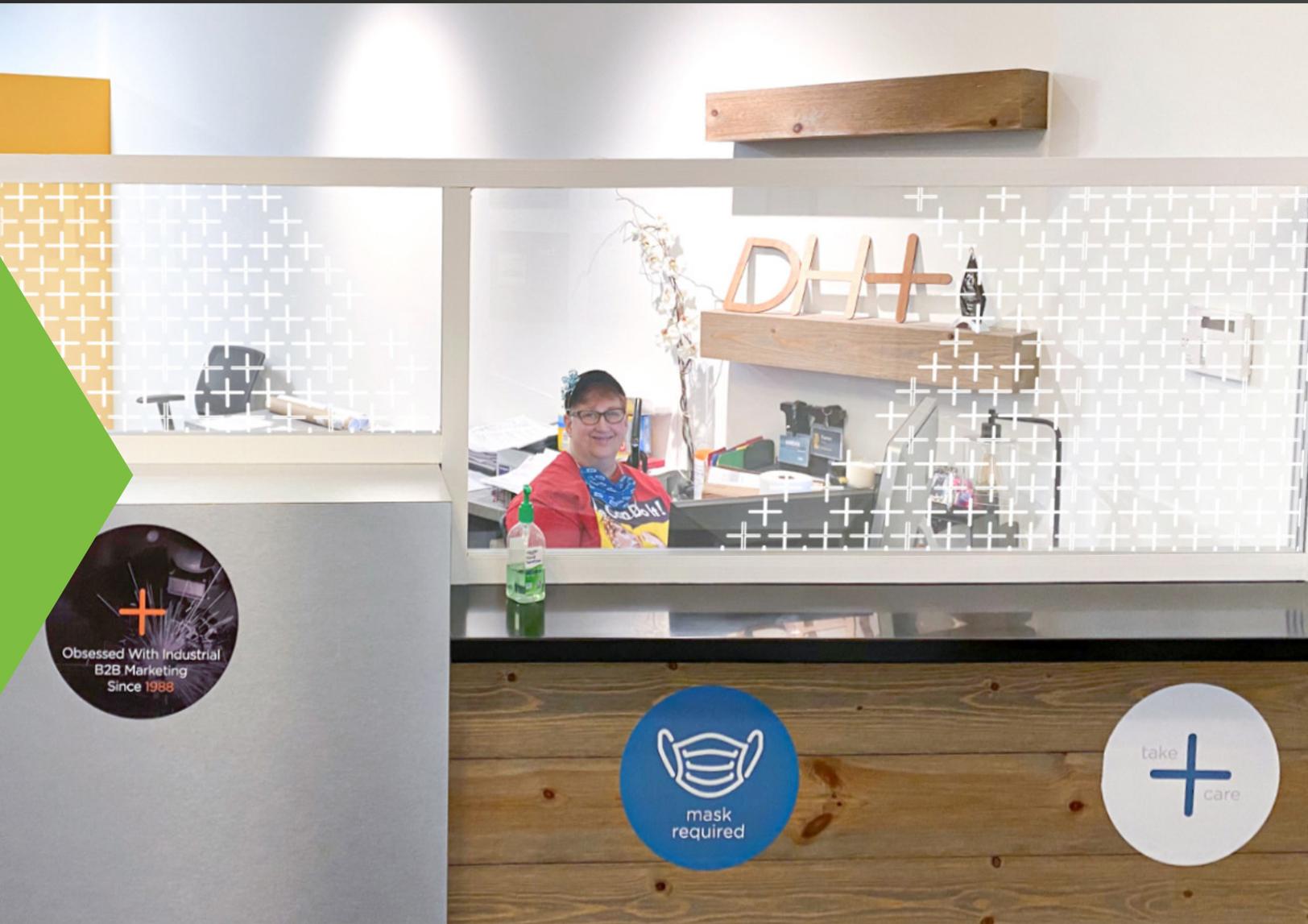


How DEANHOUSTON+ Prepared and Executed **SUCCESSFUL RETURN-TO-OFFICE PROCEDURES**

Understanding the Power of Planning and Empathy During Our Reopening Process

By Emma Mendenhall



It happened so fast.

The virus initially lampooned because of its unusual name – *Coronavirus? Like the beer?* – dealt a quick and devastating blow to the entire world. The streets were empty, while unemployment (and anxiety levels) were skyrocketing.

One day, it was business as usual. The next, the infrastructure of the modern workday came crashing down. The disruption fast-tracked major changes with little time to brace for impact.

Pack up your things. We're working from home now.

So began the Age of Video Conferencing.

It forced adjustments for those lucky enough to work from home with both perks and downsides. No commute. Dealing with children being home. Wearing sweats during meetings. Lots and lots of people trying to talk while muted.

The days became weeks and the weeks became months. We knew that eventually we would be through to the other end of the metaphorical tunnel. Life wouldn't return to normal... it would return to *normal-ish*.

Working from home was functional, but we knew in-person collaboration of our creative team members makes DeanHouston special and it's difficult for a company to grow when everyone's scattered away from home base.

It was a long process, but here's what helped us during reopening:

➤ CREATE A TASK FORCE



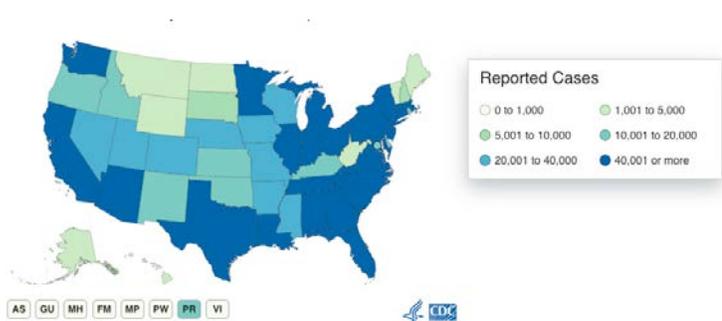
Obviously, reopening in the face of a pandemic is a Herculean effort.

That's why it was so important to get a plan in place. We didn't want to make it up as we went along. We spent months planning, with a task force getting a blueprint ready for when things got more under control.

With around 80 employees across several offices, we created a cross-functional COVID-response team to monitor and address the operational needs of the company.

The 8-person task force reached out to employees and helped sculpt an educated path forward – making sure every aspect of the return was addressed. This allowed the majority of employees to focus on their day-to-day tasks and let the responsibility of worrying about reopening rest on a collective group's capable shoulders.

➤ UNDERSTAND THE FLUIDITY



There were ups and downs, yes. Like many things involving COVID-19, not everything went according to plan. Dates got pushed back. We learned about people who were more at-risk. The drastic rise in demand made getting hands on supplies more difficult.

Considering the fluidity of the situation, we needed a plan but not feel beholden to it if things change. It was no time for stubbornness.

This was particularly true because our branches spanned across different states – which meant different regulations and recommendations. What could happen in Ohio may not be possible in Illinois, California, or Tennessee.

We had an overarching philosophy for the company as a whole, but each office created their own specific plan, too. However, it was important the task force evaluated the situation regularly.

In fact, that flexibility extended even after reopening. With cases rising during the summer and more people out in public for the Fourth of July, we implemented a two-week work-from-home period following the holiday.

➤ 'STEAL' GOOD IDEAS

One reopening process we found interesting was the 4-10 Plan – which we learned from a [New York Times](#) article.

Each office location separated its staff into two groups. Group 1 would work in the office for 4 days (Monday-Thursday) then spend the next 10 days away from the office, including weekends. When Group 1 was working from home, Group 2 would be in the office for their 4 days (Monday-Thursday) before spending 10 days away from the office. Both groups would work from home on Fridays.

THE 4-10 PLAN

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
26	27 TEAM 2	28 TEAM 2	29 TEAM 2	30 TEAM 2	31 WORK FROM HOME	1
2	3 TEAM 1	4 TEAM 1	5 TEAM 1	6 TEAM 1	7 WORK FROM HOME	8
9	10 TEAM 2	11 TEAM 2	12 TEAM 2	13 TEAM 2	14 WORK FROM HOME	15
16	17 TEAM 1	18 TEAM 1	19 TEAM 1	20 TEAM 1	21 WORK FROM HOME	22
23	24 TEAM 2	25 TEAM 2	26 TEAM 2	27 TEAM 2	28 WORK FROM HOME	29
30	31 TEAM 1	1 TEAM 1	2 TEAM 1	3 TEAM 1	4 WORK FROM HOME	5

The 4-10 Plan let us exploit a key weakness of the virus: “its latent period, the three-day delay on average between the time a person is infected and the time he or she can infect others.” The plan also helped reduce the potent viral nature of the virus by reducing the density of people in the office.

This way, we could ease into working in the office while keeping a safer environment.

KEEP EMPLOYEES' PHYSICAL (AND MENTAL) WELL-BEING A TOP PRIORITY



With a project of this magnitude, it was important for us to look at this as an investment.

They don't pay the bills, but team-wide meetings became vital. Our company-wide Wednesday meetings kept everybody on the same page and helped limit some fears people may have about the uncertainty involved with the virus. We created reopening policies and made sure every employee had internal access to them at all times.

There were plenty of physical investments to provide some peace of mind, too. We purchased social distancing signage for our office to keep safety top-of-mind and make sure people followed new protocols. There's cost involved in getting acrylic desk dividers, but the level of protection employees felt with them was priceless.

We did this because the safety and well-being – both physically and mentally – of our employees was the single-most important thing to consider during this process.

IMPLEMENT NEW PROTOCOLS



There were some obvious new protocols, such as requiring face coverings, limiting office occupancy and having plenty of disinfectant available. We took away communal food, limited guests to appointment only and had packages delivered outside the office.

The most glaring of these new routines, however, was the *Self-Administered Health Check*.

Before entering any DeanHouston facility each morning, employees and guests with appointments are required to conduct a self-administered temperature and health check.

We created a website employees use every morning, with important considerations:

- If you have a temperature of 100.4 or higher, do not enter the facility.
- Have you traveled outside of the area?
- Has anybody you've been in contact with been diagnosed or fear has contracted COVID-19?

Some may feel it's a nuisance, but it's a small step to ensure the office is healthy and protected.

REDEFINE WHAT 'CLEAN' MEANS

While we appreciate the cleaning teams in our buildings, we wanted to also take matters into our own hands, too.

That meant redefining what clean meant.

We took extra precautions about our cleaning routine and provided collateral with detailed descriptions of what (and how) things should be cleaned.

Area/Place	Disinfection Surfaces	Disinfectant	Disinfectant Measures	Frequency
Common Work Areas	Lobby, conference rooms, etc.	Hospital grade disinfectant OR 10% chlorine bleach solution (sodium hypochlorite)	Spray with handheld sprayer or wipe	After each meeting and end of each day
Office desks	Table and chair surface		Spray with handheld sprayer or wipe	At the end of each day
General objects that are used or touched often	Door handles, faucets, etc.	Solution of 70% isopropyl alcohol and 30% water	Spray with handheld sprayer or wipe	At least 4 times per day
Kitchen	Table and chair surfaces, fridge, microwave		Spray with sprayer	Immediately after each use
Floors	All general floors		Mop or vacuum	At the end of the day
Copiers	Touch Screen Buttons, Copier Lid, Paper Drawer	See separate instructions	Wipe clean DO NOT Spray	After each use. Additional cleaning will be done at the end of day
Computer Equipment	Monitor, PC, Keyboard, Mouse	See Separate Instructions	Separate Instructions Provided	As the end of the day

CONCLUSION

What made this whole process tricky was everything was so unprecedented – at least in our lifetimes. We needed to make sure we had a plan that understood the fluidity of the situation while balancing the safety of our employees and knowing we couldn't be the best version of ourselves if work-from-home continued indefinitely.

We needed to get back into the office. How to do it became the million dollar question.

All of those hours pulling out hair and biting fingernails worrying about coming up with the plan paid off. There is no perfect plan, but what we did ended up working for us.

MEMO FROM HR: HOW I APPROACHED THE REOPENING PROCESS



Rene Normand
Human Resource Manager

- Communicate, communicate, communicate – you can't over-communicate.
- People will be at different stages of readiness to return to the office – returning to the office can create a new level of stress. Don't assume anything – ask!
- Prepare for a 30-day supply of PPE equipment and cleaning supplies. We used more of the hand sanitizer and cleaning solution materials for the individual desk kits than we had allocated. We were able to reorder but a 30-day supply would have helped.
- Preparing employees for return to the office (protocols, videos, etc.) and what to expect upon their return reduces anxiety and stress.
- Contact your building management to discuss plans they have in place for the common areas. Again, don't assume – ask!
- Be patient with each other. Change is difficult especially under these types of circumstances.
- Plans are fluid and can change daily. Be ready to adapt and adjust your plans in accordance with state regulations and the changing landscape of your city.
- Hope for the best but prepare for the worse!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma plans, coordinates and directs the administrative functions of the DeanHouston Chicago office. She oversees the recruiting, interviewing and hiring of new staff, consults top executives on strategic planning and serves as a link between management and employees.



THINGS I LEARNED AFTER COMING BACK

Famous boxer Mike Tyson once said “everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” You can create the best plan in the world, but there’s always something that pops up. We asked some of our employees what aspects they didn’t expect after returning to the office.



Hybrid meetings (with people over chat and in the office) are much more of a challenge than previously thought.

Sean O'Brien,
Content & Social Media Manager,
Cincinnati



I did not realize how much I had fallen out of my routine and how good it would feel to be back in it!

Sally Shireman,
Account Manager,
Chicago

One of the main things for me are the simple things we took for granted, like getting up to grab some water or coffee, having community doughnuts, rooftop happy hours and beer tastings, etc.

Andy Speidel,
Senior Multimedia Designer,
Cincinnati



It felt like going back to school. Seeing my friends again and hoping we could have ‘lunch hour’ together. Even with the added steps of cleaning and all the one-way corridors, it was so nice to be back with my work family.

Hannah Groves,
Account Manager,
Cincinnati



I didn’t realize how much intellectual capacity was required to follow all the signage - especially the floor graphics.

Dana Arrasmith,
General Manager,
Nashville



I got into a rhythm working from home and balancing work and home without worrying about wearing a mask, or sanitizing everything I touch, or worrying about other people in my house outside of my family. Because I got so ingrained in my routine here, it made going to work difficult because I had to adapt to a whole new routine at the office.

Jack Nolan,
Account Manager,
Chicago

