



Preparing A Return to On-Site Operations Strategy

Purpose and Timing

This document provides “how-to” guidance from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and <insert college or unit> regarding returning to on-site offices, laboratories, classrooms, and other workspaces. In addition, this document provides a framework and template to help units develop strategies for post-pandemic operations, including remote work.

Increased vaccinations coupled with the use of social mitigation tools and practices allow us to continue on a measured path toward more typical levels of in-person engagement. As the state has moved into Phase 5 of Restore Illinois, a return to on-site operations will be possible with a target date of August 1, 2021. As a land grant institution, our decisions must be based on continuing to optimize face-to-face interactions with students while preserving service levels for faculty and staff. At the same time, we should utilize as much flexibility as we can, taking into account what we have learned from our remote working period during the pandemic.

The <insert college or unit> administration ask units to review the following information now to implement their return to on-site operations strategies on that timeline. All units should develop a return to office strategy that meets their stakeholder expectations for service levels and on-site presence. Please contact your supervisor or [<insert contact information>](#) for questions and/or assistance.

We will update this document as more information becomes available and as pandemic conditions change. Note: Accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and/or other health considerations may create an exception to this guidance.

Topics Addressed in This Document

- Transforming Our Work Culture
- Campus – Specific Guidance
- <insert college or unit>Return to Office – General Guidance
- Evaluating Remote Work Requests
- Engaging Employees who Work Remotely
- Training to Support Remote Work Strategies
- Return to Office Strategy Sample and Template

Transforming Our Work Culture

When a global pandemic flipped traditional work models on their heads almost overnight, we learned a lot very quickly about how to create remote work environments that were safe, supportive, and productive, even in the midst of chaos. As we begin to return to on-site operations across campus and the state, our intention is to keep the best parts of what we learned from the past year and blend those with the hallmark characteristics of being an employee of the University of Illinois. To achieve that goal, supervisors and unit leaders are tasked with defining their return to on-site operations strategy, a process outlined in this document.

A companion to this effort is the evaluation of modified work arrangements that allow us to consider long-term remote work arrangements. When operationally feasible, return to on-site operations strategies should leverage discoveries from the COVID-19 pandemic to foster work-life balance, efficiency, innovation, space optimization, and other considerations. Our individual and collective situations throughout the pandemic give us a framework for creating new and improved approaches for executing our work. Remote work opportunities give us a competitive foothold in the labor market, but it is not the only tool available; for example, adjusting normal work hours can also provide valuable flexibility.

By necessity, we find ourselves in the middle of a work culture transformation. By leveraging the plan mapped out in this document, the <insert college or unit> can actively manage how that transformation unfolds, increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes for employees, supervisors, and the college.

Campus – Specific Guidance

Please review these helpful campus resources when developing your overall strategy.

Campus Level Resources

- 4/01/2021 - MASSMAIL - [Planning for Academic Year 21-22](#)
- 3/31/2021 - [Human Resources Planning Guidance for AY 21-22](#)
- 4/01/2021 - MASSMAIL - [University COVID-19 Vaccination Guidance](#)
- 4/22/2021 – DDDH Notice – [Planning for AY 21-22](#)
- 04/26/2022 DDDH -- Planning for AY 21-22
<https://blogs.illinois.edu/view/7559/270572165>
- [Campus Positions Determined Ineligible for Remote Work](#)
- [Illinois Human Resources Remote Work Website](#)

<insert college or unit>Return to Office – General Guidance

Safety and Employee Support

Any return to office strategy must emphasize the steps the unit has taken and/or will take to ensure employee safety, including but not limited to continued focus on hand sanitizer, encouraging vaccination, testing requirements and Plexiglas barriers (if requested by an employee). The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign continues to follow the CDC and public health COVID-19 guidance's, which can change frequently. For the most up to date information visit the University's [COVID-19 website](#) as the source for current campus requirements. Employee safety and COVID-19 mitigation should undergird unit planning, strategies, and conversations to ensure a successful return to office.

- If units would like to slowly transition to the office, this should start well before August 1, 2021. The goal should be to complete the transition as close as possible to August 21, 2021.
- As training to support remote work becomes available from the system and campus, managers need to incorporate training into the professional development plans for their team members. A number of training resources are referenced below. Return to work strategies must balance work location flexibility with delivering on stakeholders' expectations regarding service and on-site presence. Optimal remote work strategies allow the employee to achieve performance goals while also meeting stakeholder expectations.
- We need to continue to be aware of and respond to team members' childcare and confidential health considerations. Units should work with <insert contact> to adapt individual employee work plans to their unique circumstances. If an employee has received an accommodation through the ADA Division of the Office for Access and Equity, including remote work accommodations, and the employee's supervisor, dean or department head has questions about whether the accommodation is still appropriate, they should contact OAE (217-333-0885 or accessandequity@illinois.edu). to have these questions resolved via the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) interactive process rather than directly addressing potential accommodation changes with the employee. It is important to note that this process can take thirty days or longer during periods of high volume. ([See CAM policy HR-67.](#)) All existing ADA accommodations will remain in place unless they are revised through the OAE process.
- Remote and Hybrid Work agreements should not be approved by a department/unit until remote work location needs are identified and a plan is in place to address those needs.

Needs Assessment

Managers should meet with employees and stakeholders, such as students, faculty, staff, and the public, to gather information about their return to office strategies as soon as possible in order to have return to on-site plans in place on or before August 1, 2021. This will also help inform decisions regarding the remote work strategy.

- Academic departments should have their return to office strategies reviewed by their Faculty Advisory Committees to ensure support. Other units should share their return to humanresources.illinois.edu

office strategies with the appropriate academic department heads to ensure support and awareness.

- After vetting, the supervisor must determine whether a remote work opportunity is viable, basing the decision on the need for consistency within their unit and business and operational requirements.

Performance Expectations

An employee must achieve and sustain performance that meets or exceeds expectations to be eligible for remote work. An employee under any active performance management protocol will not be considered for remote work. Note: Accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may create an exception to this guidance.

- If consistent performance concerns arise, an employee can be directed to resume to fully on-site work. Supervisory strategies may need to be adjusted if this occurs.
- Consistent with on-site work, remote work arrangements must be executed in a manner that avoids personal distractions during work hours, such as performing non-university business or operating in an environment that would impede productivity.
- Please contact your unit and/or <insert contact> as these considerations arise.

Operational Needs and Service Levels

All remote work agreements must complement operational needs and meet general stakeholder expectations for service and on-site presence. Falling short on either of these critical thresholds should result in remote work requests being denied.

- A significant consideration when evaluating remote work requests will be the impact on others, such as colleagues, students, and the public.
- On a day-to-day basis, an employee may be required to make adjustments to their remote work schedules if their presence is required on-site. These adjustments should be minimal, but they will be very important when meeting service deliverables.

Evaluating Remote Work Requests

Units considering Hybrid work arrangements such as remote work should include specifics about their approach in their return to office strategy. An example of a return to office strategy template is provided at the end of this document. The leader of a unit/department should ask their managers to review their respective strategies in order to focus on consistency within their unit. Additionally, a Staff Return to Onsite Work Decision Tree, Unit Workplan Template and Staff Default Work Location Listing Template are provided separately.

- Start slowly when approving remote work. The <insert college or unit> recommends that most units start with no more than <insert number> remote days per week per employee. This approach balances on-site presence with productivity and psychosocial factors regarding work.

- Some unit operations may allow for more or fewer remote work possibilities and that remote work plans will be modified as conditions change. Each unit's strategy will differ based on their specific operational needs and stakeholder expectations. As a community, <insert college or unit> respects and supports these differences and the strategies behind them.
- Units must identify jobs that will not operationally allow for remote work, and they must provide compelling rationale for this determination. For instance, the number of staff in a unit may be a key factor in why one unit may have a position that can work remotely, whereas another unit will not have a similar position work remotely. Staff size and need for on-site presence are key components to unit consideration of remote work requests. Additional campus guidance for different employee groups can be found at <insert link to Remote and Hybrid Work form when available >
- Remote and Hybrid agreements initiated before August 1, 2021, should be limited to no more than a six-month trial period. Subsequent agreements should not be approved from more than one year at time. This ensures appropriate training and tools are in place, and it provides an opportunity to assess effectiveness of the agreements under post-pandemic operations and before committing to a longer period of time.
- All remote work arrangements must be formalized through a Remote and Hybrid Work agreement between the employee and the supervisor. A second level review of the Remote and Hybrid Work agreement is required to ensure consistency within a unit. A post-pandemic online, Remote and Hybrid Work agreement will soon be provided by Illinois Human Resources.
- There currently is no requirement for tenure-system faculty, specialized faculty, and graduate student employees to complete a Remote and Hybrid Work agreement for fall 2021. For staff who request an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a Remote and Flexible Work agreement might be used to formalize specific remote work terms. Staff who request non-medical temporary arrangements for fall 2021 are directed to the college or unit executive officer. We will continue to address exceptional circumstances where it may be mutually beneficial to capture specific employment terms in writing.

Additional Considerations

- Units must ensure a consistent approach is applied when approving and implementing Remote and Hybrid Work agreements. As mentioned above, there will be some differences between units; however, within unit consistency is absolutely critical.
- Please do not use the term “essential employee” or “essential worker.” Instead, use language that describes jobs with specific duties or general staffing levels that require them to be on-site and those that do not. Decisions should be based on duties, overall presence, staffing, and stakeholder expectations when implementing a remote work strategy.
- To prevent confusion, avoid using “return to work” and instead use terms such as “return to office/campus/work location.”

Engaging Employees Who Work Remotely

Specific plans should be developed to focus on engaging team member working remotely. It is important to ensure remote workers do not miss out on opportunities when they are not working from their campus office/in the unit. Some of the training opportunities outlined below have helpful hints to inform strategy in this area.

- The <insert college or unit>wants to support you through this process. The following link is much more comprehensive and should be thoroughly reviewed during strategy development: <insert link to new Hybrid and Remote Work agreement when available >