

Back to the office!

CNO Financial returns to a transformed workplace

As vaccination rates climb and COVID-19 restrictions ease, employers across the country are welcoming associates back to the office.

A Harris Poll survey conducted in late April and early May on behalf of the employer review site Glassdoor found that almost 75 percent of remote workers were eager to return to the workplace in some capacity. To facilitate a smooth return to work, many companies are rethinking how their offices will be configured to accommodate a workplace that is much different than what employees left 15 months ago.

IBJ's Custom Content Studio talked to CNO Financial Group Vice President of Facilities Matthew Woodruff about the Carmel-based financial services company's official reopening and how CNO has improved its facilities to accommodate a hybrid work model.



Woodruff

Q: How did CNO transition to a work-from-home model when the pandemic started? What initial obstacles had to be overcome?

Insurance and financial services were always considered an essential business by many states, so CNO offices were never fully closed. We had a small team of essential associates coming into the office to serve our customers and their families. Like many other companies, we adapted to COVID restrictions and mandated remote work, providing additional tools and technology—thinking it would only be a short time.

But as we entered the fourth month of the pandemic, we learned a lot about workplace flexibility. We surveyed our associates, who told us they wanted a mix of work from home and work from the office—essentially a hybrid workplace. This feedback provided a deeper understanding and allowed us to focus on the future state of work, preparing for a post-COVID, improved workplace. So, while our home offices were officially closed, we redesigned our office layouts and office configurations. It's hard to imagine that more

than 15 months ago, we began a long journey to reopen our offices.

Q: If most associates have been working remotely since March 2020, why was it important to reopen the office?

Many of our associates have expressed a desire to work in the office and at home using a hybrid schedule. Our offices play a key role in the associate experience to build a positive and engaging corporate culture. For many, being in the office with other team members can be very positive in supporting collaboration and innovation for key projects.

Q: How has the return to work unfolded for CNO?

It's been an exciting week as CNO reopened its Carmel office and welcomed back about 150 associates. There is not one return date for everyone. We are using a staggered approach by bringing back associates in smaller waves throughout the year. This helps ensure we return to the office in a safe and secure manner. We expect each wave will be separated by 6-8 weeks, with likely a total of 3 waves.

Q: What feedback have you received from associates about coming back to work?

It's been very positive. Some have coined it a "Back to School" feeling: excitement, nervousness and a sense of optimism. Because many have been working from their kitchen tables for over a year, coming back to the office, even if not full time, signals a sense of normalcy.

With new workspaces in Carmel, we are getting real-time feedback about how associates are using the new spaces and how they are interacting in both an in-person and virtual setting. After we've collected enough feedback, we are going to use it to reimagine our other spaces and office locations.

Q: CNO's updated office setup has been described as a "hybrid workplace." Please tell us what that looks like.

During COVID, we spent a lot of time rethinking how we work and how our offices support our new hybrid model. We knew we were not going to return to the same work experience we left in March 2020. We not only planned for an office reopening, but also reinvented how we work with a new reimagined workspace.

Quite frankly, our Carmel offices needed a makeover—a fresh, new and modern look. So, we completely gutted one floor of our building and are piloting new spaces and configurations. We have large collaboration spaces, project zones, Microsoft Teams-enabled meeting rooms, quiet zones, focus rooms, and phone booths (think Superman changing into his suit). Another noticeable difference is our associates no longer have permanent desk spaces, as we've moved to a hoteling environment. Associates can pick whatever space works for them while they are in the office.

Q: How are you promoting workplace flexibility?

We want to give our associates flexibility. We anticipate our associates to be in the office 2-3 days a week. In fact, less than 10% of our associates will be in the office every day. Our hybrid workplace means that our associates can work with their managers to ensure they have the flexibility to decide their schedules: when they should come into the office and when they should work from home.

Q: What are some key things CNO Financial Group has learned about itself since the start of the pandemic?

We have learned a lot—both personally and professionally. Not only were we locked down from a global pandemic, but we were also confronted with social injustice throughout our communities. Throughout all of this, we learned that we are stronger and more resilient than we imagined. We strengthened our connection with associates as we relied heavily on communication in a virtual environment. The pandemic also helped accelerate our focus in better servicing and supporting our associates, customers and stakeholders. ■

Making a difference. Together.

CNO Financial Group supports our communities, our associates and our customers through non-profit organizations that address the health and financial wellness of middle-income Americans.

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