maple

The Canadian employer's handbook for safely re-opening the office

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Dear partners,

Returning to the office is a time of mixed emotions. It's a sign that things are slowly but surely returning to a new normal. Brainstorming, collaborating, and forming human connections are all best done in person. But, the re-opening of office spaces also presents a host of new challenges for employers to deal with.

We put this guide together to help our partners manage the transition back to the office smoothly and safely. Healthy offices start with a sound strategy. We'll always recommend employers to listen foremost to their province's guidelines. Making the safety and mental health of your staff a priority is a key element to a successful return-to-office strategy.

If we all do our part, we'll greatly reduce the threat of future COVID-19 outbreaks. We're all working towards the same goal — keeping Canada healthy, and getting business back on track.

Sincerely,

Christy Prada
VICE PRESIDENT OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Provincial regulations

Guidelines for re-opening businesses and public spaces are established at the provincial level. Check with your provincial regulations to see what type of businesses have been given the green light to start operating again. Below is a summary of helpful resources to reference based on your province.

ALBERTA:
- Temporary workplace rule changes.
- Alberta Biz Connect.

BRITISH COLUMBIA:
- BC's restart plan.
- WorkSafe BC: COVID-19 and returning to safe operation.
- Small Business BC guidelines for re-opening your business.

MANITOBA:
- Your business and COVID-19 in Manitoba.
- SafeWork Manitoba: industry-specific COVID-19 information.
- WCB-Manitoba (Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba): How the WCB is responding to COVID-19.

NEW BRUNSWICK:
- WorkSafe travail sécuritaire.
- New Brunswick guidance and resources.

NEWFOUNDLAND:
- Your business and COVID-19 in Newfoundland and Labrador.
- NLife with COVID-19.

NOVA SCOTIA:
- Preparing to reopen Nova Scotia.
- WorkSafe. For life. Workers' compensation board of Nova Scotia: COVID-19.

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES:
- Program and service availability during COVID-19.
- WSCC (Workers Safety & Compensation Commission: Safe at Work and WSCC service updates.

NUNAVUT:
- Nunavut's Path: moving forward during COVID-19.
- WSCC (Workers Safety & Compensation Commission: Safe at Work and WSCC service updates.

ONTARIO
- Reopening Ontario.
- Health and Safety Association guidance documents for workplaces during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Guide to the Occupational Health and Safety Act.
- WSIB Ontario (Workplace Safety and Insurance Board).

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND:
- WCB (Workers Compensation Board of PEI: COVID-19.
- Renew PEI together.

QUEBEC:
- Québec reopening plan.
- Québec is going back to work safely.

SASKETCHEWAN:
- Re-open Saskatchewan plan.
- WorkSafe Saskatchewan.
- Information for workers on COVID-19.
- Information for care providers on COVID-19.

YUKON TERRITORIES:
- Current COVID-19 situation.
- COVID-19 resources for businesses.
- Yukon WCB (Yukon Workers Compensation Health and Safety Board): COVID-19 worker and employer resources.

Preparing the building

CHECK FOR HAZARDS

With prolonged building shutdown, there can be hazards at play upon re-opening. These hazards include mould, standing water disease, rodents, and trouble with fire alarm systems, to name only a few.

Detailed instructions for inspecting mould and standing water disease can be found here. For a fire safety checklist, click here.

REVIEW YOUR INSURANCE POLICIES

If you rent your office space, speak to the building owner and/or insurance broker to discuss new risks and liability around operating a workplace during COVID-19. Discuss scenarios around tenant or contractor noncompliance of new policies, and distinguish between tenant versus landlord responsibilities.

LOOK FOR EXPOSURE POINTS

Employees are more likely to be exposed to the virus in areas where it's difficult to practice social distancing, such as doorways, elevators, kitchens, and small meeting rooms. Identify these exposure points ahead of time, and create rules and signage to limit the number of people who congregate there. Touchless hand sanitizer dispensers placed by doorways or in halls can help reduce virus transmission in common areas.

AIR CIRCULATION

Proper ventilation is important for reducing the spread of diseases. Increasing air circulation can dilute indoor viral contaminants.

Before reopening your office, ensure the ventilation systems in your building are working properly. A building HVAC system that has not been operating in the interim should be run for 48-72 hours, known as a "flush out" period, before workers return.

If possible and safe, open windows to allow circulation of outdoor air within your office. You can help this process along with stationary fans.

TEST ELEVATORS

Check to make sure that elevators are functional, up-to-date on maintenance, and have working emergency phones.

Implementing effective safety measures for employees

ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL DISTANCING

Canadians are still required to practice physical distancing, even as they return to work. Employers can support this by putting up posters around the office reminding people to stay six feet apart. Desks should be arranged so there's a minimum six foot distance between each.

In common areas such as the kitchen or reception, place stickers on the floor to show employees where to stand, and indicate the recommended number of people allowed to congregate in that space based on the size of the room. You can purchase these stickers on Amazon, at a local printing shop, or at a custom sticker retailer.

Adjust seating in your reception area so chairs are placed at least six feet apart, or are turned away from each other.

INSTALL PLEXIGLASS DIVIDERS

Plexiglass has become the go-to standard— it's been installed at grocery store checkouts, between restaurant booths, in airplane seating, and now is a solution for office spaces.

Plexiglass dividers between desks act as a "sneeze guard." They prevent respiratory droplets from being sprayed towards other coworkers should someone cough or sneeze. They also reinforce physical distancing and are a supplement to facemasks' protection.
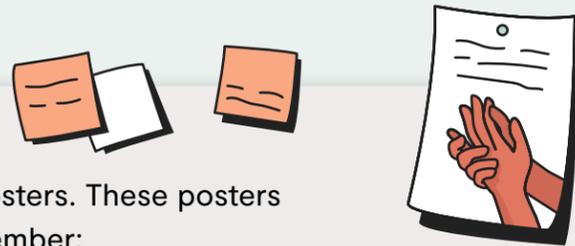
PUT UP POSTERS

Outfit your office with some jazzy and informational posters. These posters will serve as constant reminders for employees to remember:

- Physical distancing
- Hand washing
- Stay home when sick
- Cleaning tips
- How to seek help
- How to support each other

INSTALL NO-TOUCH EQUIPMENT

Anything employees touch becomes a hotspot for germs to spread. Wherever possible, replace items that require manual operation, such as:	If it's within budget, install automatic options in their place:
• Door handles	√ Automatic doors
• Push soap and sanitizer dispensers	√ Sensor automated soap and sanitizer pumps
• Toilets	√ Automatic flush toilets
• Garbage cans	√ Automatic or foot pedal garbage cans
• Light switches	√ Motion sensor lights

STOCK UP ON PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

Make sure secure personal protective equipment is readily available for everyone in the office. Depending on your budget, PPE can include no-touch door openers, re-usable or disposable masks, miniature bottles of hand sanitizer, alcohol wipes, or other touch-free tools.

STOCK UP ON CLEANING EQUIPMENT

Cleaning schedules will have to be ramped up once employees return to the office. There are no official guidelines for how often to clean, but a good goal is to clean and disinfect high-traffic areas every hour. The entire office should be thoroughly deep cleaned each night.

To meet this increased cleaning demand, make sure your office is well stocked up on the following supplies:

- Antibacterial hand soap
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Disinfectant cleaning spray
- Disinfectant wipes
- Paper towels
- Bleach
- Garbage bags
- Plastic gloves
- Medical masks to wear while cleaning

Return to work policies to consider

A well-planned set of policies will help keep employees safe, and ensure minimal confusion about roles and responsibilities when returning to the office.
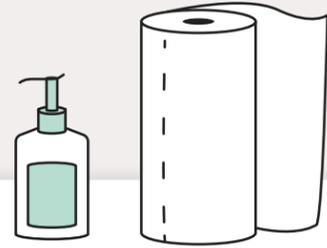
CREATE POLICIES AROUND:

- Physical distancing rules
- If an employee tests positive for COVID-19
- If an employee feels unsafe returning to the office
- Remote working options
- Kitchen use in the office
  - For example, after using the fridge or microwave, an employee may need to wipe down any surfaces they touched
- Phased or staggered return to work
  - To maintain physical distancing, certain teams may only come to the office one day out of the week, one week out of the month, or another similar schedule modification

- Whether business travel will resume, to which locations, and self-isolation policies after travel has been conducted
- Use of shared office items, such as phones, printers, and kitchen appliances
- Maximum occupancy of close quartered spaces, such as office rooms and elevators
- If an employee requires consideration for adjusted childcare schedules, or caring for elderly or dependent family members
- Office cleaning schedule
- Controlling access to the office site, in relation to maintenance staff, contractors, clients, and so on
- Plan of action in the event of another COVID-19 outbreak

Employee wellness checks

To maintain a healthy office, it will be vital to perform regular employee COVID-19 screenings. There are two options for coordinating these wellness checks:

√ **VIRTUAL SCREENINGS**
Employees can see a doctor online to record temperature and symptoms. The patient will be advised as to whether they should stay home and seek further help if anything seems to be awry.

√ **ONSITE WELLNESS CHECKS**
Temperature and symptoms can be recorded upon employees arriving at the office. The area for these wellness checks will need to be configured to ensure employees stay a six foot distance apart. Proper PPE will need to be provided to the wellness checker. If an employee is found to have symptoms, they will need to be sent home immediately and guided to a doctor for further care instructions.

Caring for the physical and mental health of your employees

After a period of extended quarantine, some employees may feel overjoyed to return to the office and see coworkers in person while others may feel apprehensive about having to commute again or spend time with others in close quarters.

Keeping employees safe and healthy and addressing their concerns should be a top priority, as eliminating stress factors for employees reduces the risk of burnout, improves productivity and morale, and decreases employee absenteeism. Organizations should encourage their employees to share their concerns and acknowledge that this "new normal" will continue to evolve and change over time.
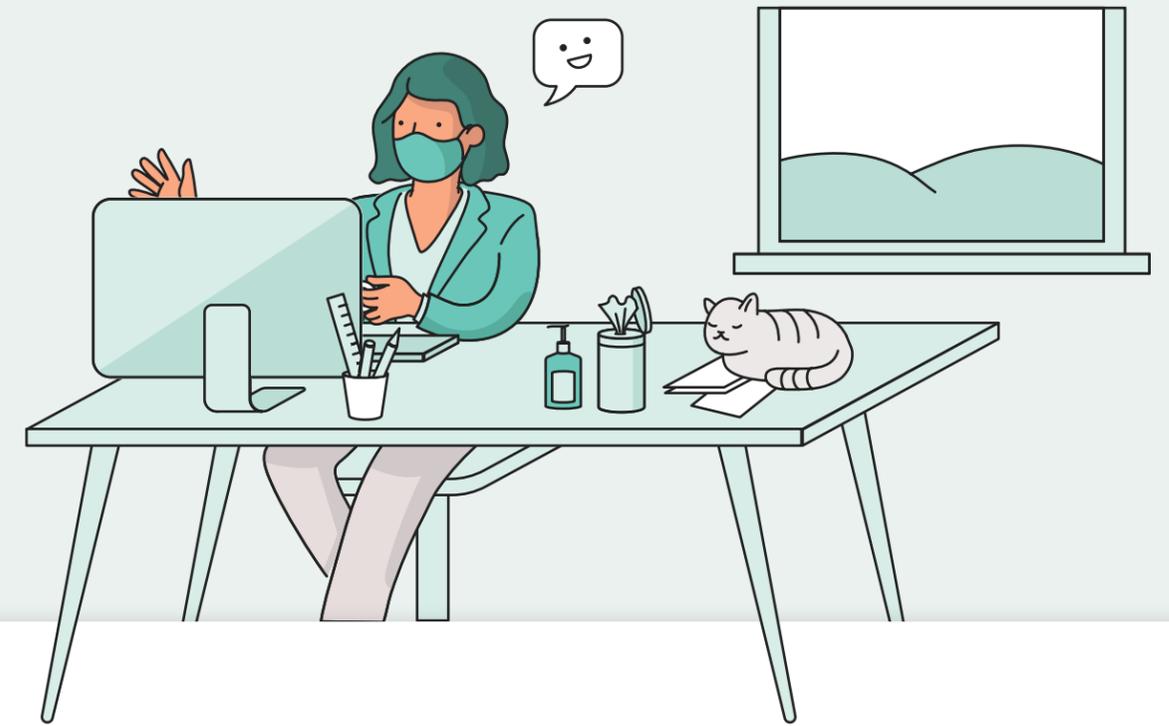
Employers can also care for their employees' physical and mental well-being in the following ways:

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Maintain some flexibility with regards to allowing employees to work for home. Employees should be encouraged to work from home if they feel sick or if they've been in close contact with someone who may have contracted COVID-19. When in the office, employees should also feel comfortable requesting reasonable accommodations by speaking to a manager or HR representative. Allowing employees to consult doctors quickly by providing them access to a virtual care platform can also be tremendously beneficial, as it enables employees to receive medical advice or support whenever they need it, wherever they are.

MENTAL HEALTH

Change can be difficult to navigate, so helping employees receive support from a mental health professional for anxiety, stress, depression, or any other issues caused by the return to work in person can have a positive impact. Employees should be reminded of any mental health services available to them through their benefits. If nothing's in place, you should consider investing in a mental health program to provide support to your employees. A quality virtual care platform can provide online access to a wide range of mental health counsellors on demand or by appointment.

Communication with employees

Bringing staff back to the office will require a well-planned, comprehensive communication plan. Make sure to include all building personnel in this plan. Employees, landlords, building supervisors, janitorial staff, contractors, relief workers, maintenance staff, and any other building tenants should be looped in.

The phases outlined below can serve as helpful guidelines for developing your return-to-work communication strategy. This strategy should begin well before employees are asked to return to the office.
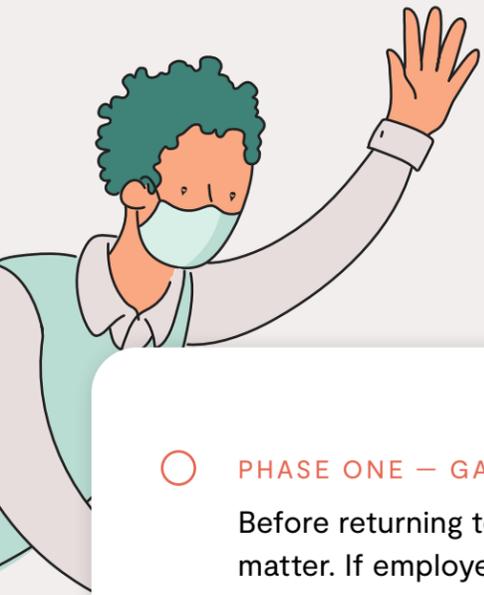
PHASE ONE — GAUGE EMPLOYEES' COMFORT LEVELS

Before returning to the office, poll employees to see where they stand on the matter. If employees are largely hesitant to go back to the office, then perhaps extend their work from home tenure or explore hybrid models of work.

Ask employees what sort of accommodations they'll have to make in their own lives to resume onsite work. Many will need to find childcare. Some employees may commute from a long distance, and will need to adjust their schedules to fit in travel time. For employees who rely on public transit, they may need accommodations to travel in off-peak times so they're not forced to ride crowded trains and buses.

PHASE TWO — ANNOUNCE RETURN-TO-OFFICE TIMELINES

Let employees know of the proposed office start date well in advance. This will give them time to make needed accommodations, or to voice concerns with HR.

PHASE THREE — COMMUNICATE NEW OFFICE POLICIES

Publish your new COVID-19 office policies and distribute them to all individuals included in your communications plan. Let everyone know where they can find this guide for future reference. It should live in an easy-to-locate spot, both online and as a physical copy in the office.

Inform employees of the support options that are available to them. Many people find it reassuring to talk to a doctor about their risks, or for guidance on managing chronic conditions in this health landscape. Virtual care is a great tool to help boost employees' peace of mind during the transition back to the office.

PHASE FOUR — EDUCATE AND SUPPORT EMPLOYEES

The transition back to office work should be closely managed and supported. This way, employees will feel reassured, and are more likely to keep up hygienic and healthy habits to support the safety of the entire workforce.

- Have an open door policy. Let employees know they're free and encouraged to approach leadership about comfort levels, points of concern, or with any questions they might have.
- Educate about COVID-19 symptoms. Send out symptom information over email before employees return, and hang up posters in the office for further reminder and education.
- Educate about hygiene, cleaning, and safety. Clearly explain how to wash hands effectively, disinfect work stations, new office cleaning policies, and ways to reduce virus transmission. For example, how to catch a cough or sneeze, wearing a mask, and staying home if an employee doesn't feel well.
- Provide mental health support. This has been a stressful time for all Canadians, so show your employees you're aware of the mental strain they're likely experiencing. Promote healthy habits such as exercise and meditation, and offer therapy resources. Virtual therapy is a great option as patients can book a therapist whenever their schedule is free, and receive a session from their home, office, or wherever is most convenient.

Accommodations for employees

As employees return to the office, one of the best ways to foster a culture of positivity and camaraderie is to be proactively accommodating. Here are some tips to achieve that goal.

Consider your communication style — keep updates calm, concise, and positive.

Allow employees to stay home if possible — this will help reduce headcount in the office and make physical distancing easier. It will also greatly help out employees who are worried about commuting over public transit, finding childcare, or who have vulnerable people living in their homes.

Create work-life balance — it's important to inject levity into a potential stressful transition. While employees should take care to physically distance, social closeness is still very much possible. Have game nights, break times, and social hours where people can discuss topics unrelated to work.

Protect employees with disabilities — people with disabilities are especially vulnerable during COVID-19. If you know of any employees with disabilities, reach out to them and ask how they can be best accommodated.

Give parents flexible work arrangements — parents returning to the office will need to find childcare, and may have to comfort their children about being separated during the workday. If possible, give parents the option to work from home, or to come into the office on a schedule that best fits their needs.

Maintain health information privacy — it's incredibly important that employers don't divulge any diagnoses, symptoms, or conditions a worker is dealing with.

Keep an inclusive workplace — ensure that no one in your office is discriminated against due to their ethnicity, health status, family obligations, or any other basis.

Be kind — it's simple, but true. Treat your employees with kindness and compassion. A little warmth goes a long way.
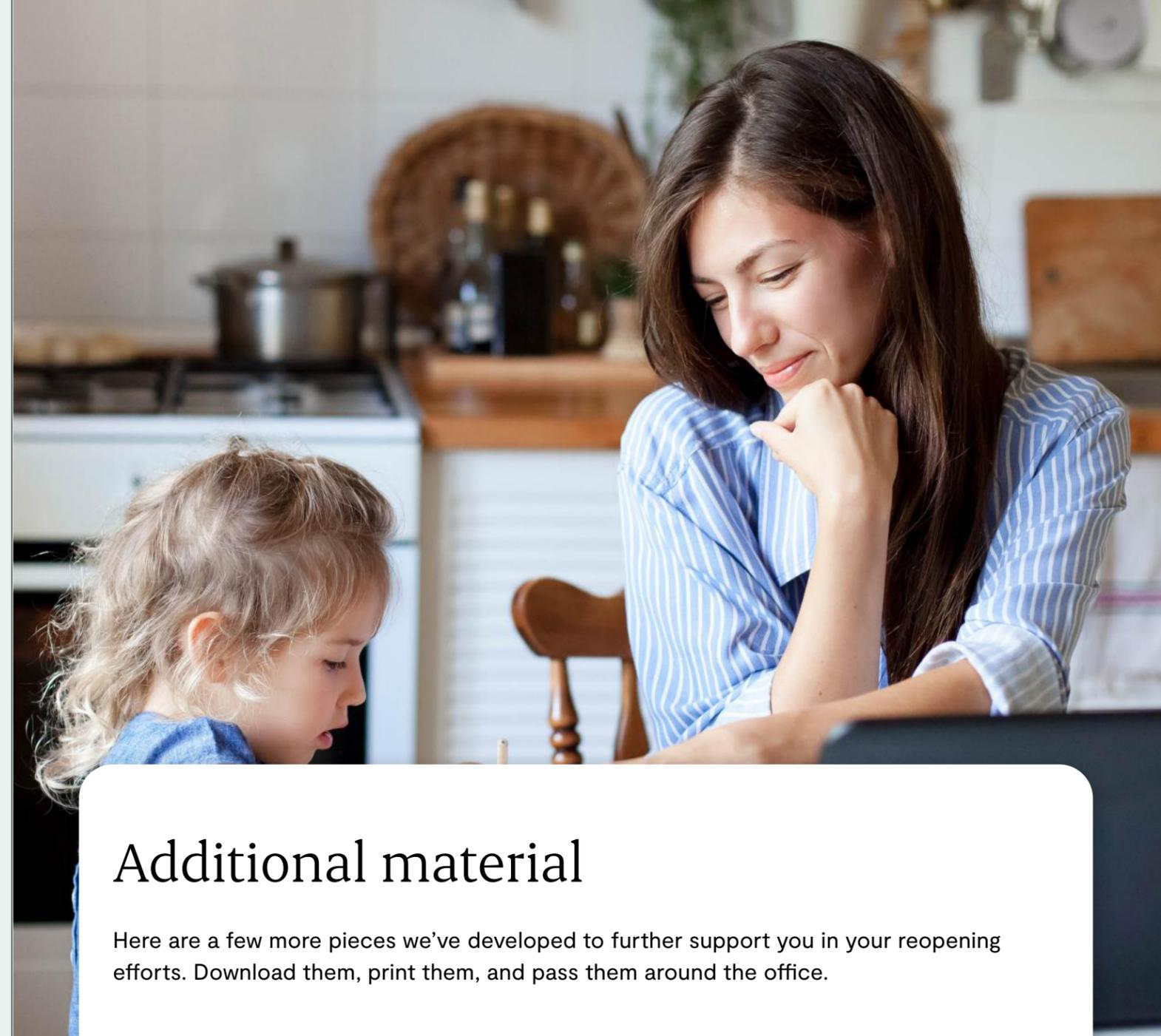
Additional material

Here are a few more pieces we've developed to further support you in your reopening efforts. Download them, print them, and pass them around the office.

Our checklist of essential office supplies for keeping a clean and safe work environment.

Add our guide to your kitchen and washroom areas to help your employees wash their hands like pros.

If you'd like further support with your back-to-office transition plan or if you're interested in implementing virtual care in your workplace, get in touch at sales@getmaple.ca.

We'd be happy to offer guidance as to how to support the health of your staff.

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