

By Vanguard CEO Craig Stauffer

It has been 17 long months since we heard the familiar and continual buzz of our vibrant Vanguard Issaquah head office. We are not alone as many companies have transitioned from their offices to working from home since the start of the pandemic Spring last year.

A year plus later, Microsoft Teams and Zoom have replaced conference room meetings, WhatsApp, Slack, Messenger, and other such tools have subbed in for water cooler chat. We have leaned heavily on technologies that will ensure our global communications are not interrupted and the efficiencies expected of us by our partners around the world are not diminished.

Although vaccines continue to roll out, the Delta variant combined with the upcoming cold and flu season is offering many USA head offices a new set of challenges to consider as we try and dissect the return-to-work puzzle.

A recent report by CNBC showed several leading tech firms have delayed their return-to-work plans. Lyft CEO Logan Green announced it will push its September return date by six months until February 2, 2022. Green wrote to employees that the company intended to bring workers back assuming "improving Covid trends," but grew concerned over the Delta variant's spread in recent weeks. He said the rising number of cases, as well as the CDC's updated guidance on indoor masking, led them to decide to extend the date of return.

Then there is the more complicated question of do employees want to and are they willing to return to the traditional office setting? Bloomberg recently shared the results of a survey of those in the work force that are hoping remote office spaces become a more permanent solution. Cost savings and commuting topped the list of reasons for this group.

Of course, not everyone has the privilege of choice depending on industry and role. For many front-line workers, warehouse operators, growers, and packers this is not a viable option.

At the Vanguard head office, we elected to poll our team using an anonymous survey. We have always said we are people first, and this would not be true if we simply made this a top-down decision. As nice as it would be, we know there will not be complete consensus, but it is critically important to involve all the stakeholders in this important conversation, listen critically to each others' thoughts, and "hear" what our people and teams are needing

in a workspace was an important first step to help guide our planning to develop a rationale and motivating hybrid return-to-the-office plan.

Our internal polling turned out to be a very helpful exercise as we listened first-hand what was working across functional teams, what parts of working from home was presenting the most challenges, and where everyone's pain points were and are. From optimal work scheduling, to what was working well, to what improvements needed to be made, our staff shared openly and honestly and we are deeply appreciative for their active involvement and feedback.

For our Issaquah based team members it was split with 31% of employees reporting they would like to return to the office, while 30% reported not feeling it necessary to have all team members physically together. 46% expressed concern returning to the office without a vaccine mandated policy.

With offices in California, Chile, China, Indonesia, Peru, South Africa, Spain, Taiwan, and Washington supporting our global team means understanding the rules, cultures, and protocols in different countries. Fortunately, we have well connected teams situated around the world who are in the best position to support all our Covid safety efforts worldwide.

I, like my fellow CEO's in our industry and across Washington are aware these are incredibly challenging times, and every wave or new news report on a variant is another challenge stacked on our efforts to bring our teams back together. I believe first and foremost that we must safeguard our team's safety and thereby also protect our communities, and ultimately our business.

So where does this leave the Vanguard head office return-to-the-office hybrid plan? We have just pushed back our official return date back to October 2021. We are continuing to review this plan and will review the specific date as Fall approaches with continual input from all sectors and people in our business with the safety of our team members and our community of primary importance.