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## In weeks ahead, many CT companies expected to implement long-term return-to-office strategies



HBJ PHOTO | MICHAEL PUFFER

Whittlesey CEO Drew Andrews continues to work out of his Hartford office, even though all but a handful of staff generally opt to work from home. Andrews said he tries to set an example and maintain his availability.

By Michael Puffer

**W**ith the days warming and COVID-19 abating, the next few weeks will show how much of the state's white-collar workforce will ultimately head back into centralized offices, particularly in downtown Hartford.

Large employers that have yet to mandate an end to the COVID-19 home-office exile are likely to decide and implement their long-term office strategies this spring, experts and employers said.

“From what we see, it looks like a lot of places that were closed, if they are going to reopen, it is happening this month, next month and springtime,” said Abby M. Warren, a partner and employment lawyer with law firm Robinson+Cole.

Like other big law firms, Robinson+Cole has advised clients on workplace policies throughout the pandemic. Now, many employers are surveying returning staff to understand and address the challenges of coming back to the office, she said.

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With COVID-19 waning and flu season ending, there is little reason left for companies to delay implementing more permanent work models, Warren said, whether that means requiring workers to be in the office full or part time, or not at all.

### Clear guidelines

Warren advises employers to have clear guidelines for work expectations and ongoing precautions. Consistency among employees is important, she said.

Morale is a big concern and companies returning staff will want to make them feel valued, with either gifts or welcome-back celebrations, she said.

The flight out of workplaces in March 2020 was a difficult transition. Conversely, employers need to acknowledge the “huge transition” of a return to the office, she said.

Shipman & Goodwin Partner Peter Murphy said his clients have either returned workers full or part time to the office, or laid out a return-to-work strategy. He emphasized the need for clear policies and expectations.

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“People who have worked remotely for a long time want to know what they are coming back to,” Murphy said.

Patricia E. Reilly, a partner at law firm Murtha Cullina, said she continues to field questions from employers poised to return staff to office settings. Some clients still need help finalizing hybrid work policies that allow employees to split time between the office and their home.

The effort includes formulating guidelines on how to log hours, when employees should be available and how to maintain data security, among others.

Reilly sees hybrid work models as the new normal. Data seems to back that up.

Globally, about 38% of workers said they are already in a hybrid work environment, up seven percentage points from a year earlier, according to Microsoft’s 2022 Work Trend Index: Annual Report, which was released March 16. About 53% of people are likely to consider transitioning to hybrid this year, according to Microsoft, which surveyed 31,102 full-time employed or self-employed workers across 31 countries.

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“I don’t see the floodgates [opening] and everybody returning to work 100% of the time just like before the pandemic,” Reilly said. “I don’t see that ever happening because the labor market has tightened significantly, and employees are demanding some flexibility in their lives.”

## Welcome back

Some of the largest Hartford-area companies have announced plans to return staff to offices in March and April using a hybrid model.

The Hartford, with 5,500 employees in Connecticut, will “significantly increase” employees returning to offices beginning April 4, said company spokeswoman Suzanne Barlyn. At present, more than half of the company’s employees are working remotely, although many already did so pre-pandemic, Barlyn said. Some portion of staff will work on a hybrid basis.

Health insurer Aetna began welcoming employees back to corporate offices in mid-March under a hybrid model, according to Erin Shields Britt, spokesperson for Aetna parent company CVS Health.

Denise Raphael, human resource director at Hartford-based JCJ Architecture, said her roughly 125-person firm has worked with a “3-2-2” policy since last summer. That means three days in one of the company’s seven offices, two working from home and two days off for the weekends.

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Staff are allowed to determine which three in-office days best suit their project teams, Raphael said. The majority choose to be in office for the first three days of the week, she said.

The hybrid model is no longer focused on COVID-19 prevention, Raphael added. Today, it is a potent tool to recruit new workers. The presence of a flexible work environment has become one of the standard questions from job candidates — right up there with vacation, retirement and health benefits, Raphael said.

Andrew Lattimer, managing principal of auditing and business consulting firm CLA’s West Hartford office, said at the outset of the pandemic his company allowed its 7,500 employees into offices on alternating two-day schedules. That helped space out staff for social distancing.

Beginning in January 2021, those in-office attendance restrictions were lifted, he said. However, CLA staff retained the ability to work from home. Lattimer said his company always allowed staff to work remotely.

“We do think that we are better together in that you can learn so much more from being in the office,” Lattimer said. “But we also understand there are fears out there we have never confronted before.”

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CLA maintains about 300 staff in Connecticut, with offices in West Hartford, Shelton and Marlborough.

“If we normally had 100 people come in [to the office] on a daily basis because the rest were out at clients, it wouldn’t surprise me now if it’s at 60 people,” Lattimer said. “I don’t think our policy has changed. It’s just more people are taking advantage of it.”

## Work gets done

Regional accounting firm Whittlesey gave staff the option to come back to the office last summer. CEO Drew Andrews expected a flood of returns. That never materialized but the company has still seen productivity increase in each of the past two years, he said.

“There’s probably about eight of us here today, including me,” Andrews said, speaking March 15 from his corner office on the 24th floor of the downtown Hartford skyscraper at 280 Trumbull St. “So, people aren’t coming in and work’s getting done. We aren’t going to mandate people come in any certain day. We will continue in this mode for the foreseeable future – come in when you need to come in and work where it works for you.”

Whittlesey currently occupies about 25,000 square feet of Hartford office space that accommodates 100 employees. The company employs 165 people overall with two other offices in Hamden and Holyoke.

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Andrews said he hasn’t decided if the company will consolidate its office space. There will be reconfiguration at the very least, setting up for more group activities rather than individual offices or cubicles.

Andrews said he thinks more of his staff will come back to the office, once activity picks up in downtown Hartford.

“Our people like being here when they can walk around and see other people and talk with friends who work in other offices,” Andrews said

Whittlesey doesn’t just crunch numbers for other companies. It helps advise on policies and business practices.

Andrews said return-to-office advice really needs to be tailored around the work culture of individual firms. Most are concerned about remaining competitive when it comes to attracting new employees.

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“What they are still struggling with is, are they going to be competitive in an environment where they mandate their employees to come back when their competitors don’t require their staff to come back,” Andrews said.



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