



WHEN WILL PEOPLE BE RETURNING TO OFFICES, GLOBALLY?



*A Conectys made Whitepaper*



## THE GREAT WORK-FROM-HOME TRANSITION

**I**t began in earnest about a year ago. Now, we need to be honest here and say that while WFH approaches have consumed a lot of digital attention in the last 12 months, not everyone can work from home. Many people have physical, on-site jobs, such as working on houses, retail, service industry, or the like. Even in our space of customer experience contact center work, there were some clients -- often in heavily-regulated industries like financial services -- who simply couldn't shift some of their agent work to work from home.

Those caveats aside, the world was pretty successful with the WFH transition, all told. We achieved our transition for 97% of clients in about nine days, and many companies around the world did it within two weeks to a month. There were hiccups, of course, mostly around security, workflows, and employee mental health (lack of co-worker connection throughout the day). We managed to sidestep a lot of them at a high level, but we did see them in our world as well. We know companies globally have struggled with some of the same issues, including a few of our partners.

Then there are tangential elements to the WFH revolution, namely commercial real estate and urban cores. If businesses decide to opt out of urban core HQs, that decimates a bigger ecosystem of places to eat lunch, places to run errands, and more. A big theme of 2020 was "the end of cities." We wouldn't necessarily be bullish on that idea -- cities have struggled before and bounced back -- but it's important to remember that a multitude of people working from home means a disruption to multiple industries.

What's emerged in the past year is this idea of a "hybrid model," whereby employees work from home part of the week, work in an office part of the week (to have co-worker conversations and potentially innovate new ideas), and then the office cost is justified and for those who enjoyed elements of working from home, it's still there. SHRM, or the Society for Human Resources Management, has indicated the hybrid model might be "the new normal" for 2021 and beyond. But Wired has made a point circulating by many others: when you focus on a "hybrid" model, does that mean that neither experience (home and in-office) are inherently that good? Ever been to a restaurant with a 20-page, glossy menu and everything is OK, but nothing is really that good? Maybe that's what work would be like under a hybrid model.

As vaccines are rolling out in different parts of the world, and as COVID is contained in some parts and less so in others, these decisions and questions are coming to the forefront: when should people return to work? How? And how does it look differently across countries and industries?

## "JULY IS THE NEW JANUARY."

That's one overarching piece of advice. When the pandemic gripped down nations last spring, most companies said "January 2021." Now most global apex companies (\$200B+ in revenue) have said July, with some pushing to October 2021, and varying by office location. Most of the apex companies are considering hybrid models, yes.

You can find COVID statistics from deaths to vaccinations at this link. You can also find solid data at this link or by Google-searching "COVID by country." Some vaccination data is not real-time, but you can get a general sense of where countries stand, and that in turn gives you a sense of where their timelines for work re-opening might be.

Consider some examples: in November, Poland had a seven-day average for new cases of 24,665. As of early March, it's 12,561. That's a nice drop, although their vaccine rollout has been slow.

Or look at Germany, which had a seven-day average of 25,575 cases right before Christmas (December 23, 2020). In early March, that's down to 8,337 as a seven-day average, but again, as with many countries in the EU, the vaccine rollout has been slow. They're at about 2.6% of the population as of this writing.

The Philippines, home to many contact centers, is at about 2,580 new cases on a seven-day average, down from a high of 4,477/seven days in mid-August. Their vaccine rollout had also been somewhat slow, although they just reached a deal with Moderna in early March for new doses.

Because the picture varies so widely from region to region, we can't tell you a specific date in this paper, but it's best to consult with local health officials, data sources, and present and former colleagues on their thinking specific to your areas of operation.

## THE BENEFITS OF WFH AGENTS

As we noted above, not every industry can allow for work-from-home agents. In the last 5-10 years, though, an increasing number of industries have come around to the idea of outsourced partner agents working from their homes. It became a sheer reality for many industries during COVID, and that may serve as a paradigm shift going forward. We don't entirely know yet -- 2022 could see agents back in contact centers in most parts of the globe, possibly -- but it's one potential outcome.

Some of the major benefits that WFH agents afford include:

- Speed of project implementation
- Speed of scaling down due to seasonal demand
- Higher agent productivity
- Higher agent retention
- Client cost savings

You tend to see the WFH agent model in these industries:

- E-Commerce
- Retail
- Gaming
- Travel and Hospitality
- Social Media

Scaling up and scaling down is the biggest advantage most clients that utilize WFH agents with Conectys report and experience. They can easily scale operations up and down relative to geography and seasonal demand. This has a substantial impact on market entry, access to specific markets you're not yet in, and overall cost containment possibilities. The idea of using WFH agents isn't so much a cost decision as a value decision, ultimately.

Some of our specific benefits in terms of developing WFH agents include:

**We build brand ambassadors:** Typically, our WFH agents have a higher productivity level (across key metrics) and a higher retention rate per client. This is tremendously important because we work to build true ambassadors of your brand, and retaining a brand ambassador is strategic to long-term customer experience success, and thus retaining customers as well.

**We've been doing this a long time:** We've had WFH agents on client engagements since at least 2012, with some small client engagements using WFH prior to that.

**We focus on well-being:** We work directly, and tirelessly, with the client on hiring the agents, but once they're in-brand and working from home, we focus on training, re-training, understanding the brand, understanding the metrics, and continuous communication around well-being. A burnt-out agent doesn't serve your customers well. We know this, and we pay attention to it.

**We're masters with tech:** We've developed a specific suite of options around remote training, remote onboarding, and security of proprietary information handled by WFH agents.

## THE PROS AND CONS OF THE HYBRID MODEL

The best chance is that many organizations will offer some type of hybrid model in 2021 and beyond, because this benefits the most possible parties: those who enjoyed working from home, those who like an office environment, those who are paying for the real estate, and clients/partners.

Obviously the model has notable pros and cons. Some of those include:

### The pros of a hybrid model

- Appeases multiple stakeholders
- Allows for recoup/justification of real estate costs
- Employees can use their in-office days for connection and meetings, and their out-of-office days for advancing projects and true productivity

### The cons of a hybrid model

- Are you trying two things at once, but doing neither that well?
- Is it worthwhile to pay for HQ real estate if it's only being used by a percentage of employees a percentage of their time?
- Lack of employee connection, spontaneous idea generation (much harder on scheduled video chats)

If decisions are coming down to the intersection of cost and value, hybrid makes some sense -- you get dedicated real estate when you need a bigger group together, but you also allow people autonomy in their work (relative to client engagement), and employee autonomy tends to foster engagement. Increased engagement tends to boost client-side metrics and improve retention. Everyone wins, and your HQ costs still make sense (maybe you reduce your square footage in a given area).

We've actually expanded our physical office capacity since COVID, adding 1,008 additional

seats in two new Philippines locations -- as well as 300+ in multiple other global locations -- in order to absorb ongoing growth. We believe we might be moving back into offices more consistently by summer 2021, although long-term we will become a hybrid workplace player: allowing staff, depending on client approval, to work part time from home and part time in-office.

## THE BOTTOM LINE ON WHEN TO RETURN

All these decisions vary by:

- Geography
- Spread rate
- Vaccination rate
- Industry
- State of regulations for your industry
- What your employees are saying
- What your clients and partners are saying

You will know best what to do in your specific situation, although we're definitely available for consulting and bouncing ideas off of.

Consider what's most important to your relationships and value proposition. What do your clients and partners expect from you? What do investors expect from you? What do employees want? What could help drive retention?

And, above all, what's safe? That means both physically and digitally. What would make your company the safest in the short-, intermediate-, and long-term?

If you think through some of these questions and look at in-market data for your markets, you will come to the right timing. And if you need guidance, we're always available for a discussion.





Contact us at [sales@conectys.com](mailto:sales@conectys.com)

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