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Key takeaways from Maine's COVID office impact survey

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Chris Paszyc
The Boulos Co.

Christopher Stephenson
The Boulos Co.

In September of 2020, The Boulos Company began surveying professionals throughout Maine, with a focus on Portland, to help answer the question “Where’s Maine Working?” Our goal was to provide Maine’s business community with concrete data regarding how companies and business decision-makers have responded to COVID-19. Additionally, we looked to gain insight into how it has impacted their relationship with the work place and what their plans are for their office space

going forward. Our survey included questions regarding whether or not people were working from home, when they planned to re-enter the office, and how new workplace arrangements have affected their productivity. Supplementary survey questions regarding their demographics allowed us to gain context as we analyzed the results, for instance, most identified themselves as decision makers regarding their office lease. While much of the data we collected aligned with our expectations, we were certainly surprised by some of the trends that we observed in the data. Below are four key takeaways from the survey results:

1. Workplace Re-entry is Under Way:

Only 33% of respondents answered “yes” to the question “Are you currently working from home” – the majority are either “sometimes” working from home or not working from home at all. This indicates that the majority of respondents’ companies have already begun at least a staggered re-entry to the office.

2. No “One-Size-Fits-All” Re-entry Plan:

Thirty-eight percent of respondents indicated they plan to fully return to the workplace by the start of Q3 in 2021. That being said, over half opted to answer “Other” and gave more elaborate, open-ended answers regarding when those they will fully return to the workplace. Many of surveyed indicated that the safety and comfort of their employees would be at the forefront of these office re-entry decisions .

3. Less Feel More Productive While WFH Than Expected:

Only 21% of respondents felt more productive while working from home. Seventy-nine percent either felt less productive or experienced no change in productivity. The factors that influence productivity are highly nuanced. Many feel that the lack of unscheduled office chats and check-ins lead to less collaboration and teamwork, thus making them less productive. Others felt that same lack of office chatter left them less distracted with more time to get work done. Even still, other survey respondents felt more distracted than ever while working from home – battling noise and interference from kids, pets, spouses, etc.

4. Companies are Keeping Their Offices:

Seventy percent of those surveyed indicated that their companies have no plans to alter their office’s square footage footprint because of COVID. However, 38% noted that up to 20% of their staff would work from home permanently moving forward. So while the majority of companies plan to keep their office space, many of them do not plan to have all of their employees there at any one given time.

Ultimately, it seems most of Maine companies will maintain the square footage footprint of their office spaces, rather than eliminate or reduce office space, but they may keep some staff working from home and increase the amount of square footage per employee. While working remote will

likely become permanent for many, home office drawbacks like inadequate technology and working conditions at home, coupled with a loss of company culture and collaboration, indicate that the need for office space is still very real.

Chris Paszyc, CCIM, SIOR, partner & broker and Christopher Stephenson, VP of operations & marketing, The Boulos Company, Portland, ME

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540