



Summary Report:

ACEC-BC **Return to Office Survey**

June 2020

acec-bc.ca



ASSOCIATION OF CONSULTING
ENGINEERING COMPANIES
BRITISH COLUMBIA

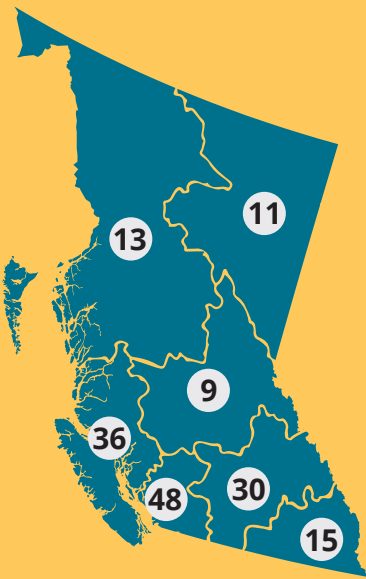


The Voice of Consulting Engineering Companies in BC since 1976.



ASSOCIATION OF CONSULTING ENGINEERING COMPANIES BRITISH COLUMBIA

162 member offices proudly serving every region in BC.



Who we are

Since 1976, the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies British Columbia (ACEC-BC) has been the voice of consulting engineering companies in BC. Our mandate is to advance the business interests of consulting engineering firms in BC by advocating for fair business practices and building awareness of the industry’s contributions to society and innovative technical expertise.

On behalf of our member organizations, our board of directors endorse our strategic direction and ensure our operations are guided by these principles.

Our purpose is to serve the interests of members through advocacy, creating opportunity for collaboration, and building profile of members and the industry. Our member’s wisdom, societal contribution, and geographic reach lend credibility and gravity to this purpose.

Advocacy is our primary mission.

We are a consolidated voice for fair procurement practices, balanced contract language including proportional allocation of risk, and removal of barriers to efficient operation of our businesses in BC.

Values unite our members.

Our members and our governance act collaboratively to promote innovative thinking and investment in our community. Our words and actions ensure an inclusive environment: celebrating our diversity and striving for equity in all that we do.

Lets Connect!

- acec-bc.ca
- [/acec-bc](https://www.linkedin.com/company/acec-bc)
- [@ACECBC](https://twitter.com/ACECBC)

80+ Member firms in BC	40+ Municipalities across BC	10k Employed British Columbians	\$4b Locally to British Columbia
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Report to Members

On June 2, 2020 we launched a member survey supporting return-to-office (RTO) planning. The survey – developed by a working group of ACEC-BC members – was in support of the **Association's COVID-19 response principles:**

1. Protecting the health, welfare, and safety of the public
2. Providing safe and supportive working environments for our team members
3. Ensuring the consulting engineering industry remains resilient through the crisis and as our economy recovers

The working group's intention was that consistency in practice across member firms (insofar as possible) would go some way toward the promotion of all three principles, but specifically would reinforce the resilience of the industry as we lead through the crisis and into a period of economic and social recovery.

Members were asked to complete the survey consisting of three parts:

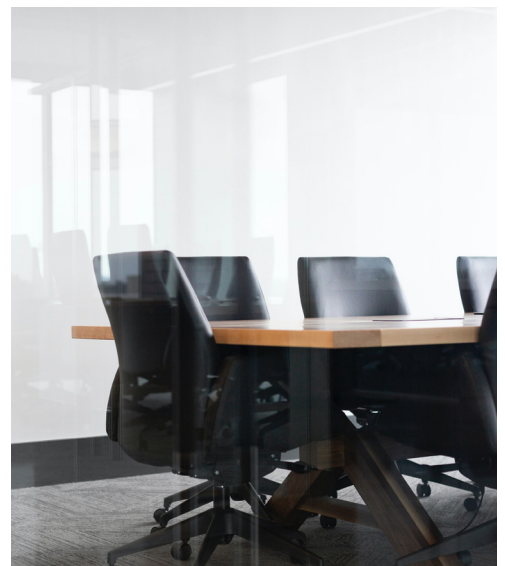
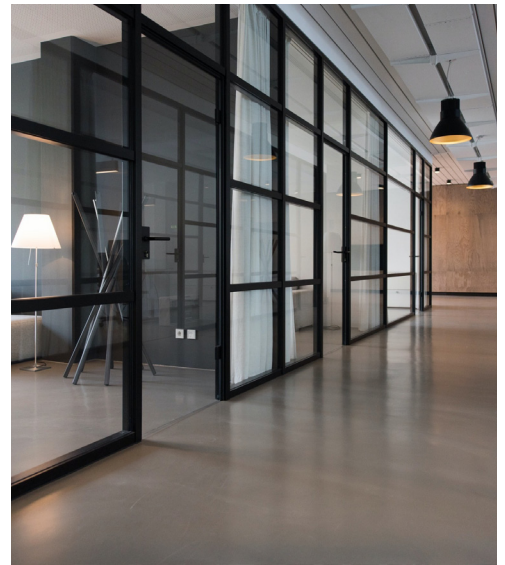
1. Preparing to return to office (timing, facility preparations, PPE)
2. Work practices
3. Firm information (demographics)

Just over 1/3 of member firms completed the survey, providing a reasonably representative sample and allowing members to use the results as an opportunity to benchmark common controls and raise awareness of plans with respect to client-facing practices.

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Our values of collaboration and community reinforce our underlying principle that we are Better Together. These past few months have exemplified this principle as members, clients, and partners joined together to share tools and information to support the safety and wellness of our teams.

Caroline Andrewes, President & CEO, ACEC-BC





Timing and Access

Return Timing – more than 70% of member firms will be open by the end of June:

While some members' offices remained open during the past few months (10%), members who closed have already started the process of returning to office (18%) or will initiate a partial return this month (48%). The results of this survey are timely to support refinement of RTO plans that are likely to occur as team members re-enter the office and gain experience with new hygiene and physical distancing practices.

Access by Employees – almost 80% of firms will return at less than 50% capacity:

As return plans are initiated, most firms (77%) anticipate that 50% or fewer of their team members will be in the office. Some small firms (<10-employees) may allow more than 50% of their team to return, although no respondents indicated that their entire team would be welcomed back to the office.

Access by Guests – about ¼ of firms will not permit guests to enter their office:

Overwhelmingly, members reported that visitors will not be permitted to their office during their initial re-opening (74%), with some members (7.5%) indicating

visitors would not be welcome into their office until Phase 4 of the BC Restart Plan. This allows firms to ensure that practices are achieving worker safety objectives and to observe societal adoption of new practices. The broad adoption of virtual team environments supports firms in maintaining connection with would-be guests through virtual platforms providing safe and equitable access to meetings.

Client Focus

Meeting in person – almost all team members will be in the field (>90%):

While member firms are not yet ready to receive visitors in their facilities, most firms welcome the opportunity to engage with clients in their office (64%) or in the field (92%) provided the client has a clear and acceptable safety plan available. A small proportion of members will continue to prohibit all in person meetings until team members have more experience with new practices.

Travel to Site – travel continues to be restricted and mode of travel controlled:

Members anticipate maintenance of busy seasonal work across the province. While much of this work can be completed by members in the same region as the project, much of this work requires travel by road or air.

- Most members plan to avoid travel unless no other option is available (44%) or to limit travel within BC or Canada with strict adherence to safety protocols (32%).
- Where road travel is possible members will continue to restrict travel to one person per vehicle and will monitor conditions in the specific region of travel.

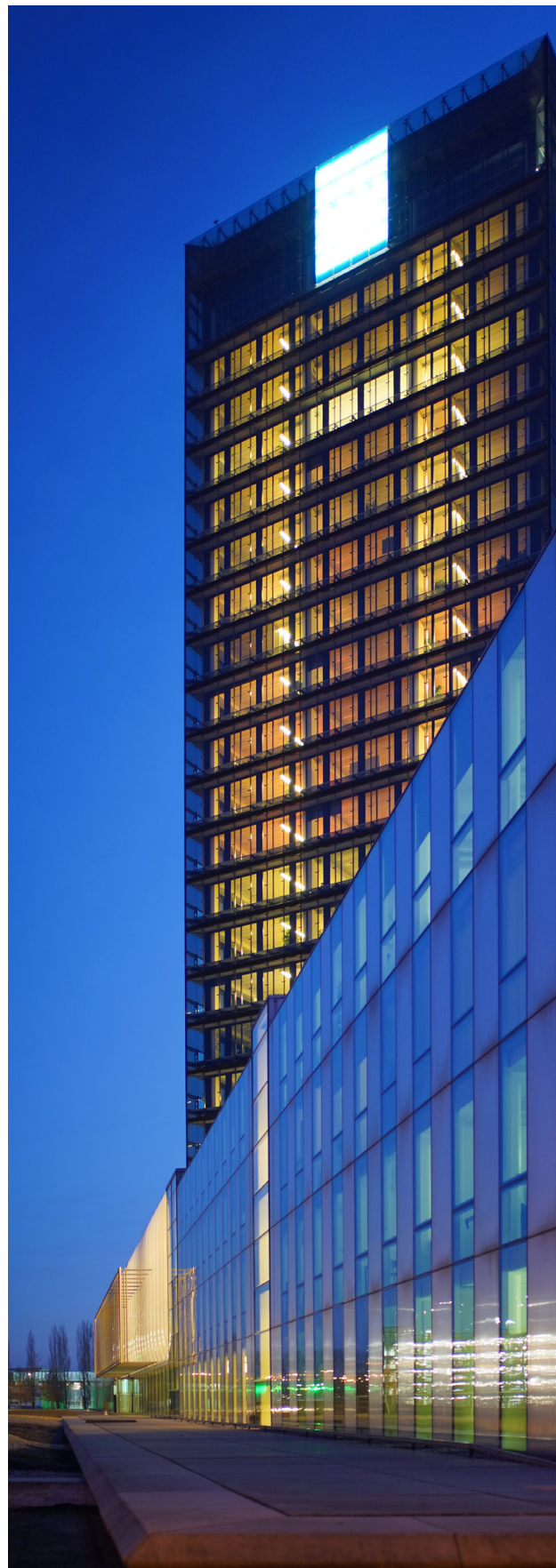
Regardless of the nature of travel, upon return some members (20%) will require team members to stay at home for 14-days while others (76%) will apply this measure only if required by public health guidelines.

Design Review – more than 50% of members have already developed virtual design review practices:

Design review is an important, collaborative practice between consultant and client and continues to be central to member safety plans. For 40% of members, implementation of virtual design review protocols with key clients has already occurred while approximately half of members (52%) continue to determine appropriate practices with clients on a case by case basis

Benchmarking

The summary results that follow are principally intended to support benchmarking of common controls and to raise awareness of industry norms. Members recommended in their comments – and we agree this is important – that we refresh the survey results in the fall once most or all firms have initiated and experienced their return-to-office plans.



Preparing to Return-to-Office

All member firms are considering some modifications to their office environments to support physical distancing and encourage hygiene. However, it remains to be seen if these practices support team member confidence.

- **85% of members have surveyed their team** prior to making return-to-office (RTO) plans.
- The survey results indicate that **more than 50% of team members still prefer to work** from home on a full or part-time basis.

Firms will limit which team members and how many team members return through a mixed approach including:

- **Limiting access** only to specific team members (42%)
- Shift or team **rotation** (30%)
- Reducing **density** (19%)

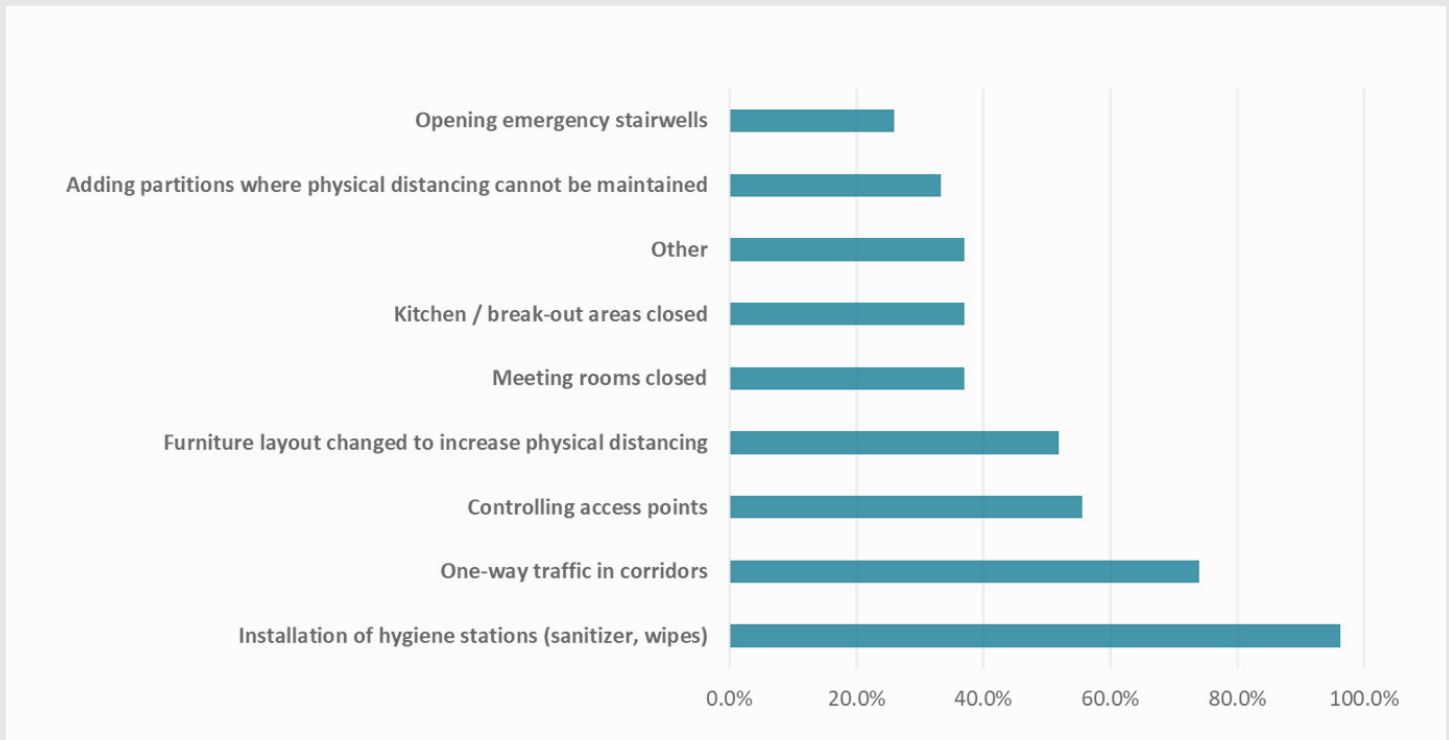
Other strategies reported include **exclusively working from home** (i.e. no RTO), and **staging RTO** over a longer period to give time to observe and adjust practices.

For firms with more than one office, **RTO plans are substantively the same for each facility** (77%) with minor differences to account for facility attributes like parking, elevators and entry.

Facility Modifications

All members plan some modification to their office (**Figure 1**) to support safety and hygiene, including layout (50%), room closures (37%), and the addition of hygiene stations (96%). Where members plan to allow access to all facilities (including shared spaces), strict occupancy limits will be imposed to significantly reduce the capacity of shared spaces including kitchens, meeting rooms and washrooms. Modifications to support safety and hygiene are modest, with almost all members reporting **no plans for significant renovation**.

Figure 1: Facility modifications



Facility Hygiene

The frequency and efficacy of cleaning is a primary component of all member RTO plans.

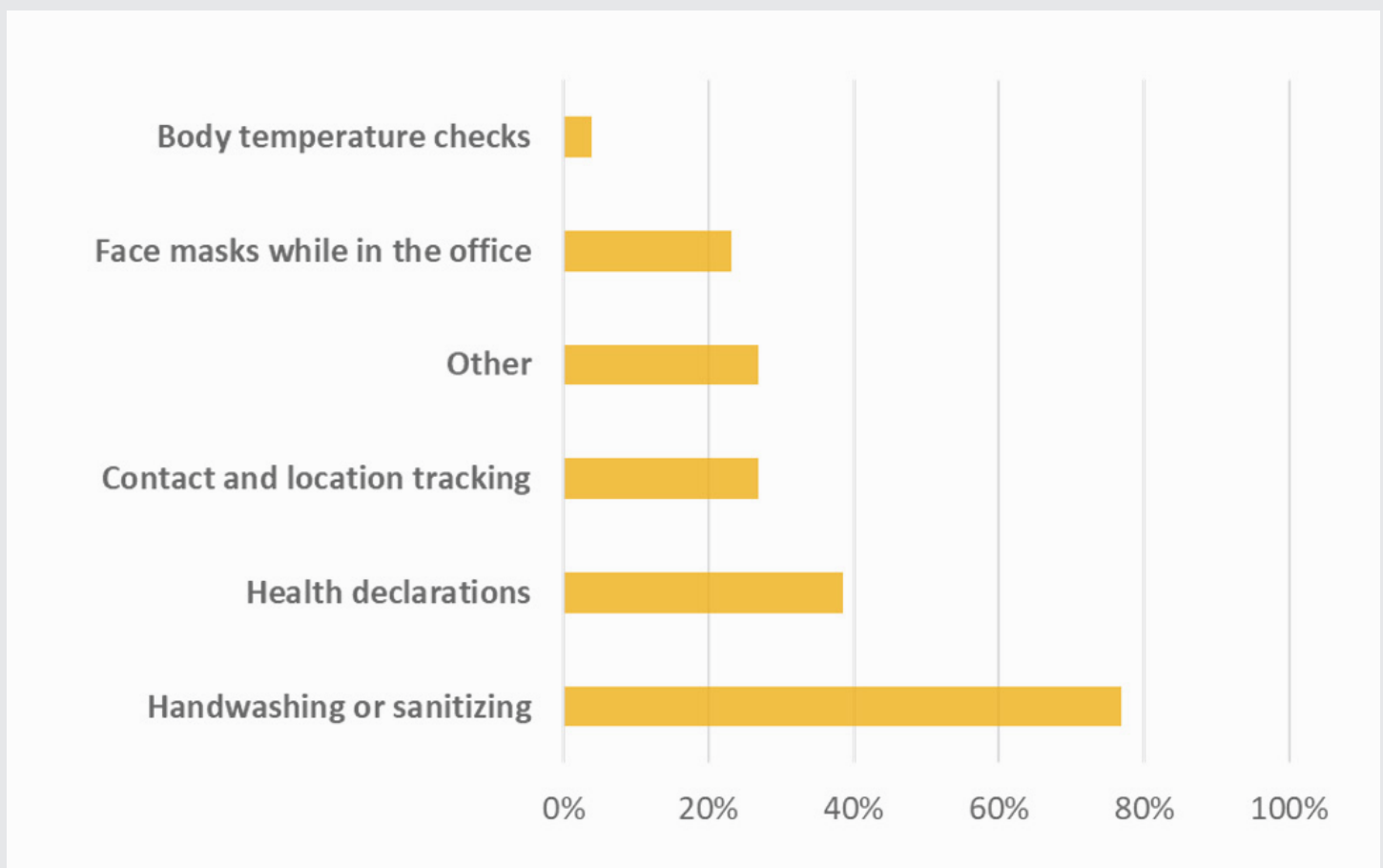
- Use of **existing professional services** will increase in scope and frequency (70%)
- Team members will be required to **support cleaning** to augment services (63%)
- Some firms (19%) have engaged **additional professional services** to support facility hygiene

Regardless, most firms (75%) plan to conduct regular, formal office inspections to monitor and ensure on-going conformance to the RTO plan.

Health & Safety Protocols

A safety culture exists at every member firm, so it is no surprise to find that members are reconsidering their protocols in light of COVID-19 (**Figure 2**). Initially there was a great deal of discussion regarding the efficacy of temperature checks. As we approach summer and considering the practicality of employing this protocol, it was not surprising to find that almost no member firms are considering implementing this protocol.

Figure 2: New Health & Safety Protocols



Overwhelmingly the hygiene practices recommended by the Provincial Health Officer – namely regular hand washing for 20-seconds or more – will be formalized in RTO procedures. Few member firms will require face masks in the office (<25%), however many will require use of face masks in shared spaces like elevators and when physical distancing is not possible (50%) and some firms will ask team members to wear face masks during field work (15%).

Use of masks:

The BC Centre for Disease Control indicates that “masks can have a role to play in preventing the spread of COVID-19”¹ and recommends the use of masks for individuals who are sick or caring for someone who is sick. The use of masks by people who are or appear to be healthy is considered optional but has been cited as a potential “behavioural nudge”² that helps remind us of the dangers of the virus and our role in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

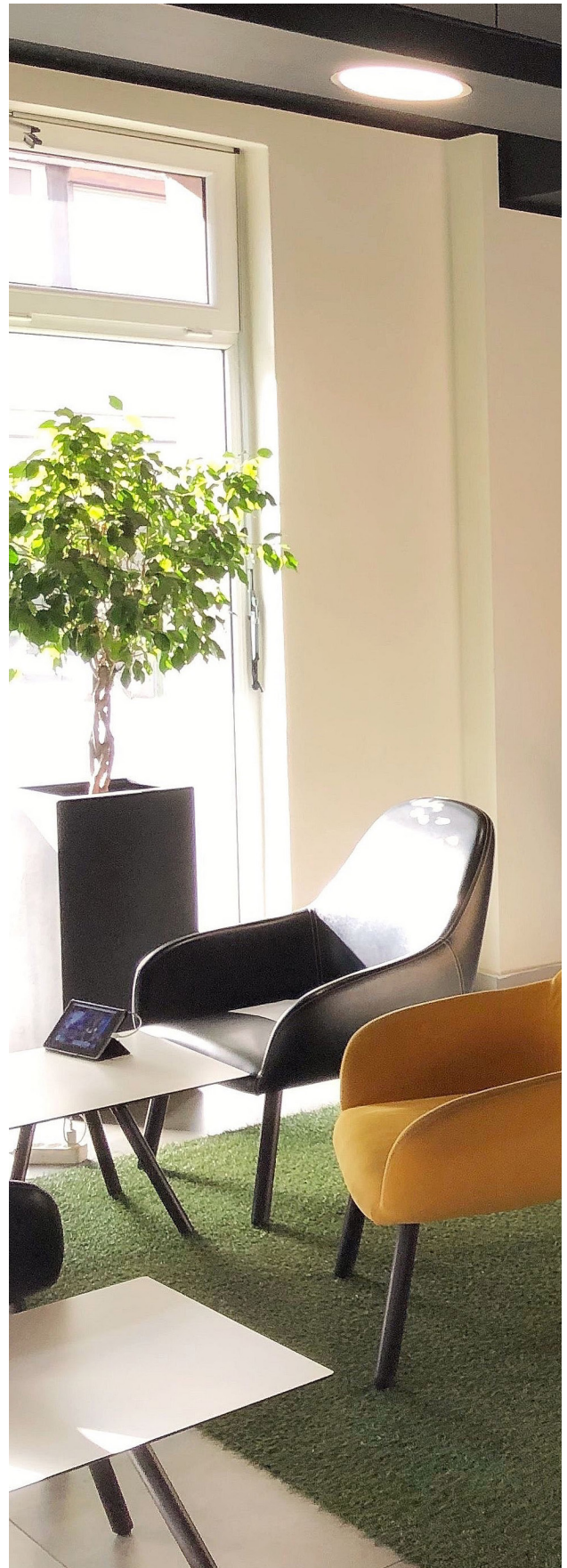
Regardless of company policy, some team members may choose to wear a mask some or all of the time. To support our values of equity, diversity and inclusion, the RTO working group encourages all members to **accept the personal choices of their colleagues** and not draw attention to a team member(s) who choose to wear a mask.

Work Practices:

How we engage in the office is likely to change as a result of RTO plans including physical distancing, reduced density and use of personal protective equipment. While some changes are procedural or structural, others relate to the heightened focus on employee mental and physical health and how our protocols impact a firm’s ability to ensure an inclusive working culture.

¹ BC Centre for Disease Control, Health Info – Masks: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/prevention-risks/masks>

² BBC World News, “Coronavirus: Why some countries wear face masks and others don’t”: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52015486>



Allergies and Illness

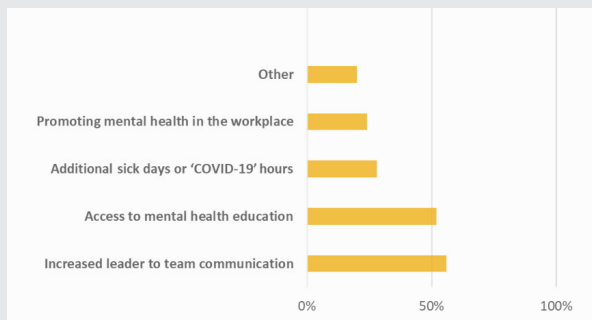
Without exception, **team members who feel unwell are required to remain at home.** For most firms (80%) this requirement extends to **team members with seasonal allergy symptoms** which can appear similar to COVID-19 symptoms (i.e. sneezing, coughing, runny nose). Ultimately, if a team member appears or feels unwell, they will be encouraged or required to stay away from the office.

More than 70% of members have already established a plan for managing a symptomatic or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the office. While good hygiene and effective distancing should protect team members, the RTO working group strongly encourage all member firms to have a plan for managing a confirmed positive case of COVID-19 in the office.

Benefits

More than half of the firms surveyed plan to make some changes to their employee benefits (**Figure 3**) including (support for leaders) to promote mental health and modifying terms associated with short term disability (i.e. waiving the waiting period).

Figure 3: Planned Changes to Employee Health Benefits



Managing a Distributed Workforce

With all firms planning to maintain a mix of work-from-home and return-to-office, there may be the need to consider work practices like use of meeting rooms not just in the context of safe physical distancing. Whether a team member chooses to stay at home or is required to stay home, their feelings of inclusion may be impacted.

When all of us are in the office or all of us are at home, the ability to conduct meetings that ensure all team members feel included is simpler. But with a hybrid workforce, the team member that is remote can find themselves feeling excluded from sidebar conversations and use of gestures or other non-verbal communication.

More than 70% of member firms indicate they plan to allow in-person meetings in the office provided physical distancing is maintained, while 24% of members will continue to exclusively hold virtual meetings regardless of the location of team members. While this may be perceived as an abundance of caution, **the practice of maintaining virtual meetings may in fact promote inclusion by placing all team members on a 'level playing field' in terms of communication.**

Members are encouraged to view practices like meetings both in the context of physical safety and ensuring an inclusive culture that supports all members of their team.

Conclusions

The survey results offer a broad perspective on member plans, reinforcing in particular the careful attention paid to assure the health and safety of team members, suppliers, service providers and clients.

Results indicate that firms are faced with difficult choices, many of which are uncomfortable and may be perceived as overly cautious or unnecessary. A risk framework supports policy direction and actions; we can also borrow from Kaizen quality principles of plan, do, check, act to support modification of our mitigations over time. Clear and frequent communication will be the foundation of each organization's plan.

At the recommendation of ACEC-BC members and the RTO working group, the survey informing this report will be re-run in 4 – 6 months to provide insight into strategies considered effective and those that have been abandoned. In the interim we welcome your feedback and perspective on how things are going and how we can help.

Still need more?

Members who may need additional support to develop and implement a return-to-office safety plan are encouraged to contact ACEC-BC to be connected with other members who have offered their support. We are all in this together and all members are committed to the health and safety of everyone in the industry.



Reference: Respondent Demographics

Reference information was requested to help the RTO working group feel confident that survey results were sufficiently representative of ACEC-BCs member firm diversity.

Firm size and location:

- Most respondents are **based in BC (82%)** with the other 18% of responses received from firms with a headquarters in another part of Canada or the world.
- Approximately **55% of employees are based in BC**, with the proportion of firm headcount in BC ranging from 5 – 100% of global headcount.
- Responses represent approximately **130 offices located in all BC economic regions**, with a range from 1 office to tens of offices. All responding firms had at least one office in the Lower Mainland.
- The total size of firms responding (by headcount) was approximately

Client Mix and Forecast:

Most firms have a mix of public and private sector clients:

- On average, respondents have a mix of approximately 50/50 public and private sector.
- **Public sector clients account for 20 – 90%** of revenue for firms who work with public sector clients.
- **Private sector clients account for 30 – 100%** of revenue for firms who work with private sector clients.
- About a quarter of reporting firms indicated that **up to 20% of their business is a mix of non-infrastructure / research**.

We asked survey participants how they were feeling about their business relative to pre-COVID-19 forecasts (February 2020).

- **More than 70% of firms felt their current forecast is worse** than in February 2020. For responses in this category, most felt their forecast was slightly worse (55%), while the remainder (18%) described their forecast as much worse.
- Only 5% of firms felt their current forecast is better than in February 2020; the remainder (22%) indicated no change in their forecast.

Use of Government Emergency Funds:

The Government of Canada and the Province have developed a number of emergency funds to support businesses experiencing financial hardship relating to COVID-19. Additionally, some pre-existing programs were highlighted or temporarily modified to help manage reduced demand for employee time (i.e. workshare, temporary layoff).

Survey participants were asked to identify if they accessed any programs:

- **Programs Accessed:** Work-Share 36%, Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) 14%, Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA) 9%, Student / Co-op funding 9%
- **Programs Not Accessed:** Business Credit Availability Program (BCAP), Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA), Large employer Emergency Financing Facility (LEEFF)
- Some firms indicated they **did not qualify** for any programs (20%), while others indicated they **qualified, but did not pursue** emergency programs (14%).

Both ACEC Canada and ACEC-BC as well as a number of other Associations have highlighted that businesses like consulting would have difficulty qualifying for emergency programs as a result of the nature of billing cycles. The concern is that consulting (or similar) businesses may experience delayed financial hardship at a time when emergency programs have ended.