

The Office: Physical, Virtual, or Hybrid

NE/SAE THINK TANK | AUGUST 2021

ABOUT THE THINK TANK

NE/SAE's August 2021 Think Tank focused on the association office environment.

Attendees had the opportunity to discuss various association office environments as well as how their association staff was working prior to and during the pandemic. This resource summarizes the opportunities and challenges that come with working in a physical office, in a virtual office, or in a hybrid way.

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

At the start of the session, participants were asked the following questions:

- How was your association working prior to the COVID 19 pandemic?
- How is your association currently working? In the office? Completely virtually? In a hybrid form?
- What are the positive aspects of how your office is working?
- What have been the challenging aspects of how you've been working?
- How has the pandemic reshaped the way that you think about the office?

Associations were working in many ways, physically, virtually, and hybrid even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic did shift association operations to virtual office environments and associations are looking ahead to continue to serve their members and stakeholders in the best way possible in the current normal.

THE VIRTUAL OFFICE

Many attendees reported that they had converted to a fully virtual office prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Others reported that, though they had not gone virtual, they had been considering doing so or downsizing physical office space prior to the pandemic.

Attendees reported that going virtual in the pandemic did not cause major disruptions for their staff. Tools that they have implemented have eased the transition for staff (see below).



Community boards and other opportunities for members to engage with each other virtually remain helpful in operating in a virtual office. They allow members to interact with each other, and with staff, in a virtual capacity. Associations should consider the rules, best practices, and antitrust statements needed for these community platforms.

Helpful Tools

Microsoft Teams | [Learn More](#)
Poly | [Learn More](#)

Vonage | [Learn More](#)
Zoom | [Learn More](#)

Note: The tools and solutions listed above were identified by participants of the Think Tank. NE/SAE does not endorse these companies and makes no representations, warranties, or guarantees as to, and assumes no responsibility for, the products or services provided by them.

THE HYBRID OFFICE

Some attendees reported that they had been working in a hybrid office prior to the pandemic. Staff would be in-person for some work days, and virtual for other days. Other attendees reported that their hybrid environment included some staff working in the office full time, and some staff working fully virtually.

Some attendees that worked for associations with physical offices prior to the pandemic reported that they have returned to the physical office a few days a week.

Many reported that plans to return to the physical office more frequently have been temporarily put on hold due to the current phase of the pandemic.

Attendees working for hybrid associations noted that being in the office on the same days as their coworkers was helpful for productivity as well as for personal satisfaction.



THE PHYSICAL OFFICE

The key takeaway from the discussion is that despite the advances in virtual and hybrid offices and the lessons learned through the pandemic, associations have not been able to replicate the collegiality, networking opportunities, and personal satisfaction that connections among staff and members in a physical office allows.

Other processes such as phone answering, access to faxes, mail distribution, check signing, and receiving credit card payments can be done more easily with a physical office space.

CONSIDERATIONS AMONG THE VARIOUS OFFICE ENVIRONMENTS

Costs Associated with Different Office Environments



Attendees agreed that a fully virtual office could bring significant cost savings to associations by eliminating rent fees and downsizing physical space. A fully virtual office also has the potential to save staff money by eliminating costs related to commuting. However, other costs must be considered such as the cost of office equipment for home offices and the potential need for upgraded software and systems to support hybrid or virtual work.

Attendees expressed interest in shared office space that could allow for a smaller physical presence but still provide the infrastructure of a physical office including conference space, access to printers, scanners, phone lines, and other tools that are necessary for associations.

Differences in Work Preferences



Attendees noted differences in work preferences impacting the office environment. While some felt that working virtually decreased productivity because of the multiple distractions in the virtual environment, others felt that it could increase productivity because hours could be more flexible and commute times could be eliminated.

While staff have a variety of work preferences, board members, committee members, volunteers, and other stakeholders may also have preferences for their association's office environment. Associations need to consider these preferences as well as they consider their future office environments.

CONSIDERATIONS (CONTINUED)

Differences in COVID-19 Policies and Protocols



In addition to differences in work preferences, attendees also noted that various organizations have different COVID-19 Policies and Protocols related to their offices. Attendees reported that prior to the pandemic, they would often host meetings with attendees from various organizations. With a partial return to the physical office, not all organizations are allowing their staff to attend meetings at outside organizations. Similarly, member organizations that would offer to host association meetings at their offices, may no longer be allowed to host outside visitors. Associations that are considering downsizing or eliminating their physical offices must consider these differences if they plan to host in-person meetings.

Documents and Files



Members shared challenges with retaining documents and files in a fully virtual office. There were questions on how to store documents safely when there is no physical space to do so. A member shared that his office had been fully virtual for a few years prior to the pandemic and with the help of a consultant they were able to create a document storage system and record retention policy that worked well for their association.

Webinar Recommendation: Post-COVID Return to the Workplace: HR and Office Considerations for Associations

Presented by Jeffrey Tenenbaum for the Association Societies
Alliance in August 2021 | [WATCH HERE](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic shut down most nonprofit workplaces in 2020 – with remote work becoming the norm for associations – but as vaccine distribution has become widespread in 2021, many employers are planning their post-pandemic return to the office, especially after Labor Day. This very timely ASA webinar on one of the hottest issues facing the association community will focus on human resource and physical office considerations as many associations plan their return to the workplace.

ABOUT NE/SAE THINK TANKS



NE/SAE Think Tanks are monthly virtual discussion opportunities for members to discuss timely topics, assess emerging trends, and share challenges and success stories with one another.

Registration is FREE for members, but pre-registration is required. [MORE INFO.](#)

The next topic is Returning to In-Person Events: Opportunities and Challenges. If you have additional ideas for topics you would like to discuss in a Think Tank please email us at office@nesae.org.

ABOUT NE/SAE

The New England Society of Association Executives is the association for associations in New England! Our members are individuals involved in the management of professional societies and trade associations as well as their suppliers. Members represent associations of all sizes and include CEOs, Executive Directors, Membership Directors, Meeting Planners, and other areas of association administration. Industry partners represent hotels, conference centers, function facilities, CVBs, webinar companies, AMS providers, lawyers, lobbyists, exposition companies and other providers of services to the association community.



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