

BACK TO THE OFFICE

MARCH 2021

A report on UK business plans
for a post-pandemic future



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A man with a beard, wearing a red and black plaid shirt and headphones, is sitting in a chair and working on a laptop. The background is a dimly lit office with a patterned wall and a plant.

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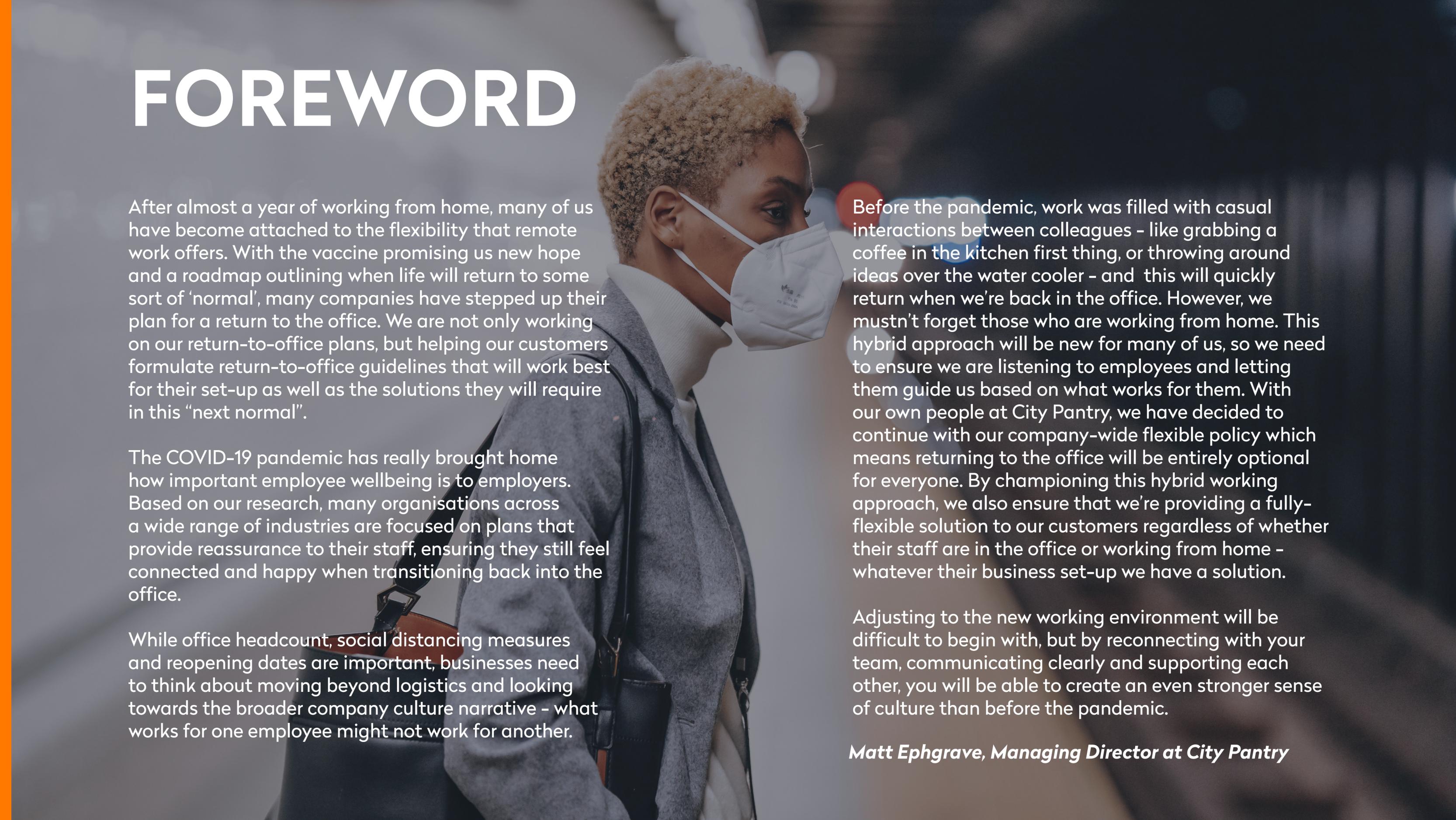
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FOREWORD



After almost a year of working from home, many of us have become attached to the flexibility that remote work offers. With the vaccine promising us new hope and a roadmap outlining when life will return to some sort of 'normal', many companies have stepped up their plan for a return to the office. We are not only working on our return-to-office plans, but helping our customers formulate return-to-office guidelines that will work best for their set-up as well as the solutions they will require in this "next normal".

The COVID-19 pandemic has really brought home how important employee wellbeing is to employers. Based on our research, many organisations across a wide range of industries are focused on plans that provide reassurance to their staff, ensuring they still feel connected and happy when transitioning back into the office.

While office headcount, social distancing measures and reopening dates are important, businesses need to think about moving beyond logistics and looking towards the broader company culture narrative - what works for one employee might not work for another.

Before the pandemic, work was filled with casual interactions between colleagues - like grabbing a coffee in the kitchen first thing, or throwing around ideas over the water cooler - and this will quickly return when we're back in the office. However, we mustn't forget those who are working from home. This hybrid approach will be new for many of us, so we need to ensure we are listening to employees and letting them guide us based on what works for them. With our own people at City Pantry, we have decided to continue with our company-wide flexible policy which means returning to the office will be entirely optional for everyone. By championing this hybrid working approach, we also ensure that we're providing a fully-flexible solution to our customers regardless of whether their staff are in the office or working from home - whatever their business set-up we have a solution.

Adjusting to the new working environment will be difficult to begin with, but by reconnecting with your team, communicating clearly and supporting each other, you will be able to create an even stronger sense of culture than before the pandemic.

Matt Ephgrave, Managing Director at City Pantry

THE SURVEY

An overview of our survey demographics

WHAT?

In February 2021, we ran a survey on 180 UK companies to understand their plans and predictions for their return to the office as well as the impact they've observed to their teams and company culture during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondents were asked questions about their predicted return-to-office date, expected office headcount, plans regarding flexible working as well as how their workplace benefits might change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WHY?

The COVID-19 pandemic and UK lockdowns have undoubtedly affected all our lives, from individual employees to businesses. With the government announcing their roadmap towards the lifting of lockdown restrictions on 22 February, we wanted to understand what other UK businesses were planning around their return to the office.

Many businesses remain cautious about committing to strict plans due to the changeable circumstances of COVID-19. We wanted to better understand some of the challenges and concerns businesses and employees were facing with regards to reopening their office and getting back to the "next normal".

It's been almost one year since the start of the first UK lockdown, with the majority of office-based employees working remotely from their teams. We also wanted to understand the impact lockdown has had on company culture, what businesses have been doing to keep their employees engaged during this time as well as their plans for the near future, when offices reopen.

RETURN TO OFFICE

Planning for the “next normal” - when are businesses returning to the office and their plans to keep employees safe.



BACK TO OFFICE SURVEY - DEMOGRAPHICS

Influence business decisions



Not involved in business decisions



Senior decision-maker



Management



General employees



Director



Head-of-department

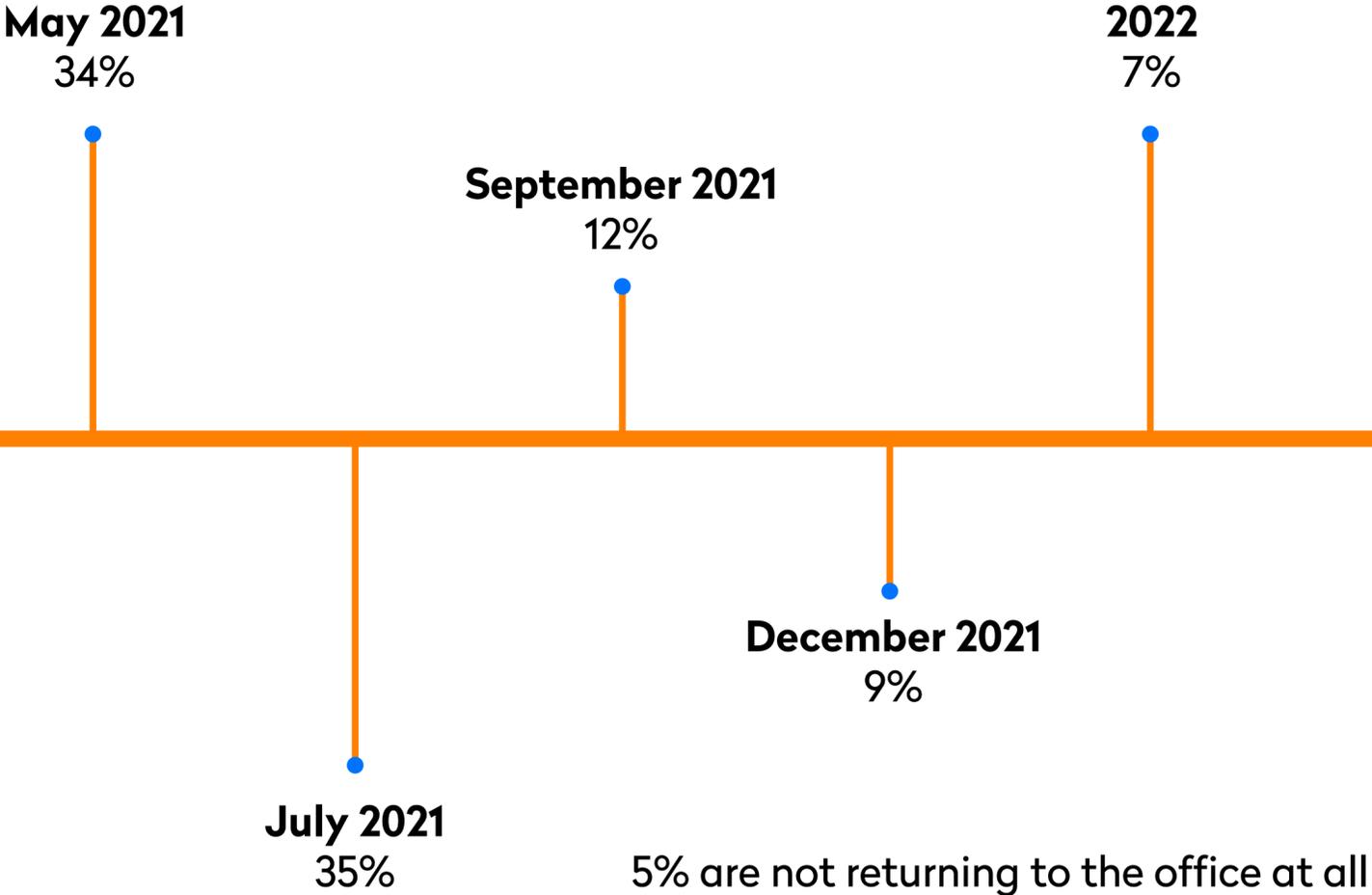


Consultant



*Respondents had the option to submit their job title to the survey

WHEN DO YOU PREDICT YOUR OFFICES REOPENING?



What does the most probable return to office look like? Based on our survey, 69% of respondents expect to reopen their offices by July 2021, with the majority planning to return before the end of the year.



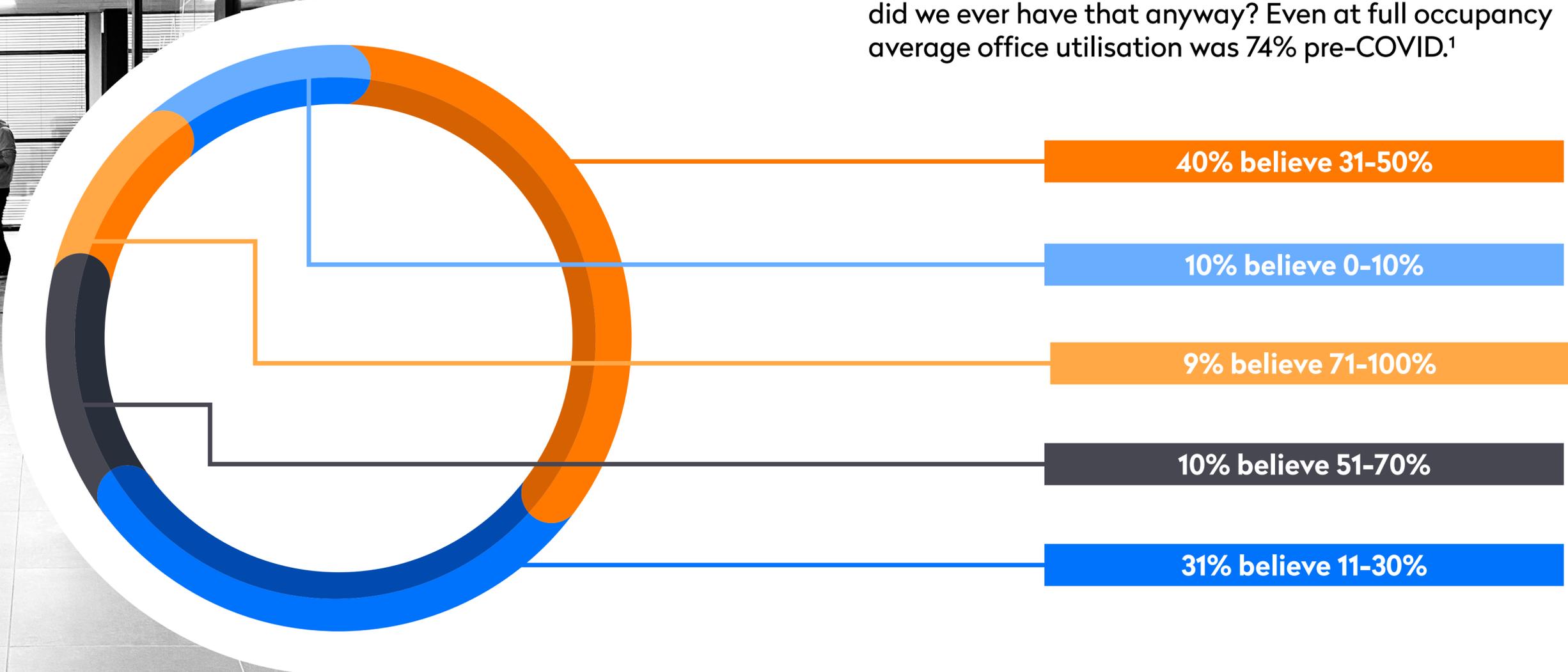
69% of respondents expect to reopen their offices by July 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly changed the way in which we work, with a small percentage of respondents remaining cautious about returning to office before 2022, and 5% not planning any return to office-based work.

WHAT % OF OFFICE CAPACITY DO YOU PREDICT RETURNING?

As businesses plan their return to the office, one of the big questions is “how many employees are going to come back in?”. With social distancing measures still recommended and a vaccine roll-out, there are still precautions that offices will need to take to keep their employees safe and healthy. In fact, the “norm” may not be the norm anymore.

Based on our survey, 81% predict up to 50% capacity when their offices reopen. It’s unlikely we’ll see 100% of staff back in the office at any one time in the near future, but did we ever have that anyway? Even at full occupancy average office utilisation was 74% pre-COVID.¹





WHAT DOES THE MOST-PROBABLE RETURN LOOK LIKE?

Since the UK government outlined their roadmap to lifting lockdown, businesses have been able to start putting their formal back-to-office plans together and assess what works best for their teams.

Based on our survey results, the most likely return is set to be a phased return starting in the next 1 - 3 months, with

TWO THIRDS OF BUSINESSES PLANNING TO HAVE RETURNED TO THEIR OFFICES BY JULY 2021, WITH 81% PREDICTING UP TO 50% CAPACITY AT ANY GIVEN TIME.

Organisations are likely to approach their return slowly, giving their employees time and flexibility to adapt to the change in their working environment and routine.

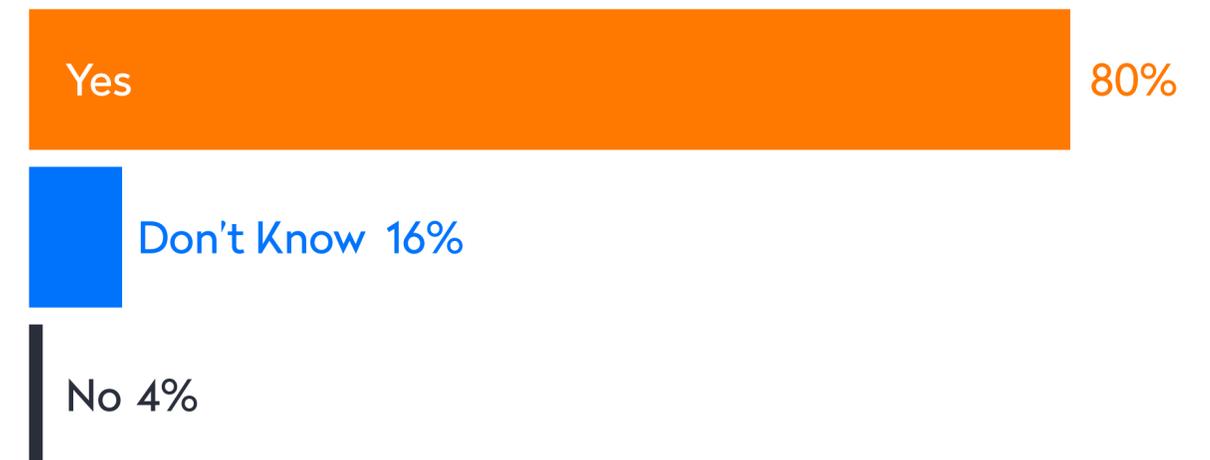
FLEXIBLE WORKING

With businesses planning a return to the office, what role will remote-working play in a post-COVID world and what are employees expecting?



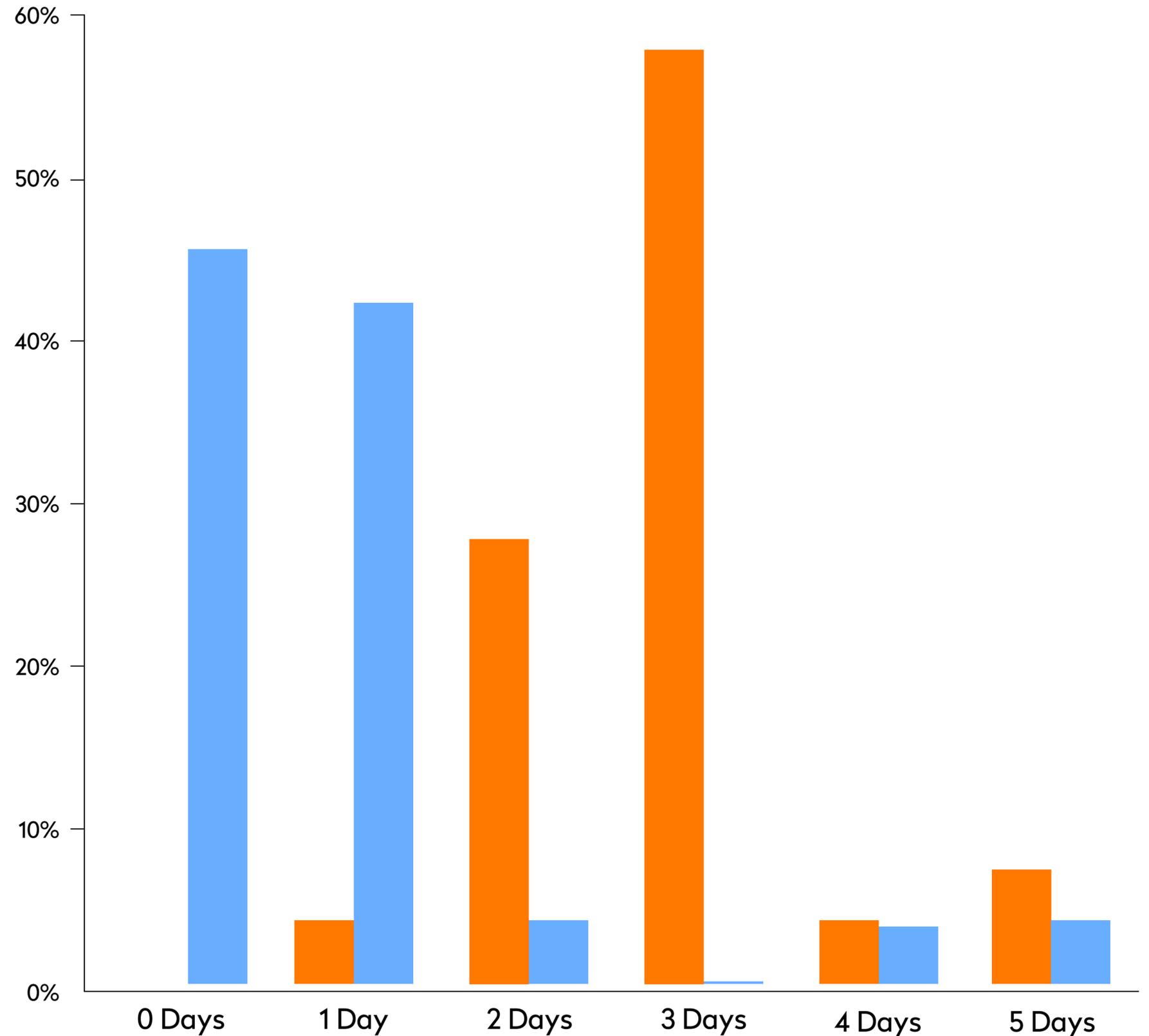
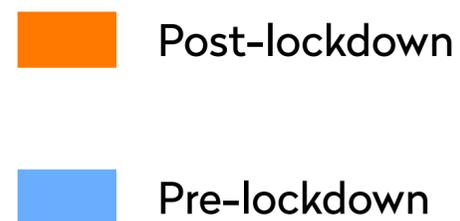


WILL YOUR OFFICE CONTINUE OFFERING “WORKING FROM HOME” WHEN THE OFFICE REOPENS?



We're all remote right now, and some companies intend to stay that way. According to our survey, 80% of businesses will continue to offer working from home even after their office reopens. This could be attributed to a number of factors, namely, social distancing measures are likely to remain in place for some time therefore offices won't be able to accommodate 100% capacity and employees may simply prefer flexible working. The role of the workplace is changing and businesses need to ensure their offices are places people want to visit, not have to visit.

HOW MANY DAYS DO EMPLOYEES WORK FROM HOME? - PRE & POST-COVID LOCKDOWN



Over half of our respondents believe their colleagues will continue to work from home for at least 3 days a week, even after offices reopen. Further emphasizing that “working from home” is here to stay, for the immediate future at least.



80% of businesses will offer working from home after their office reopens

80%

89% believe working from home at least 2 days a week is optimal

89%

4% of businesses expect their employees in the office for 5 days a week

4%

When compared to where we were just over a year ago, 46% of respondents did not work from home at all, with 43% working from home for only one day a week on average.

Prior to the pandemic, only 1% of employees worked from home for 3 days a week, whereas if we look to our immediate future, 57% of employees report that working from home 3 days a week is optimal.

The COVID pandemic has significantly changed the way we work, with flexible working becoming the “new normal” expectation from employees.

DID YOU REOPEN YOUR OFFICE IN 2020?

Over half of our survey respondents did reopen their offices in 2020, and 9% didn't close their offices at all.

Yes

51%

No

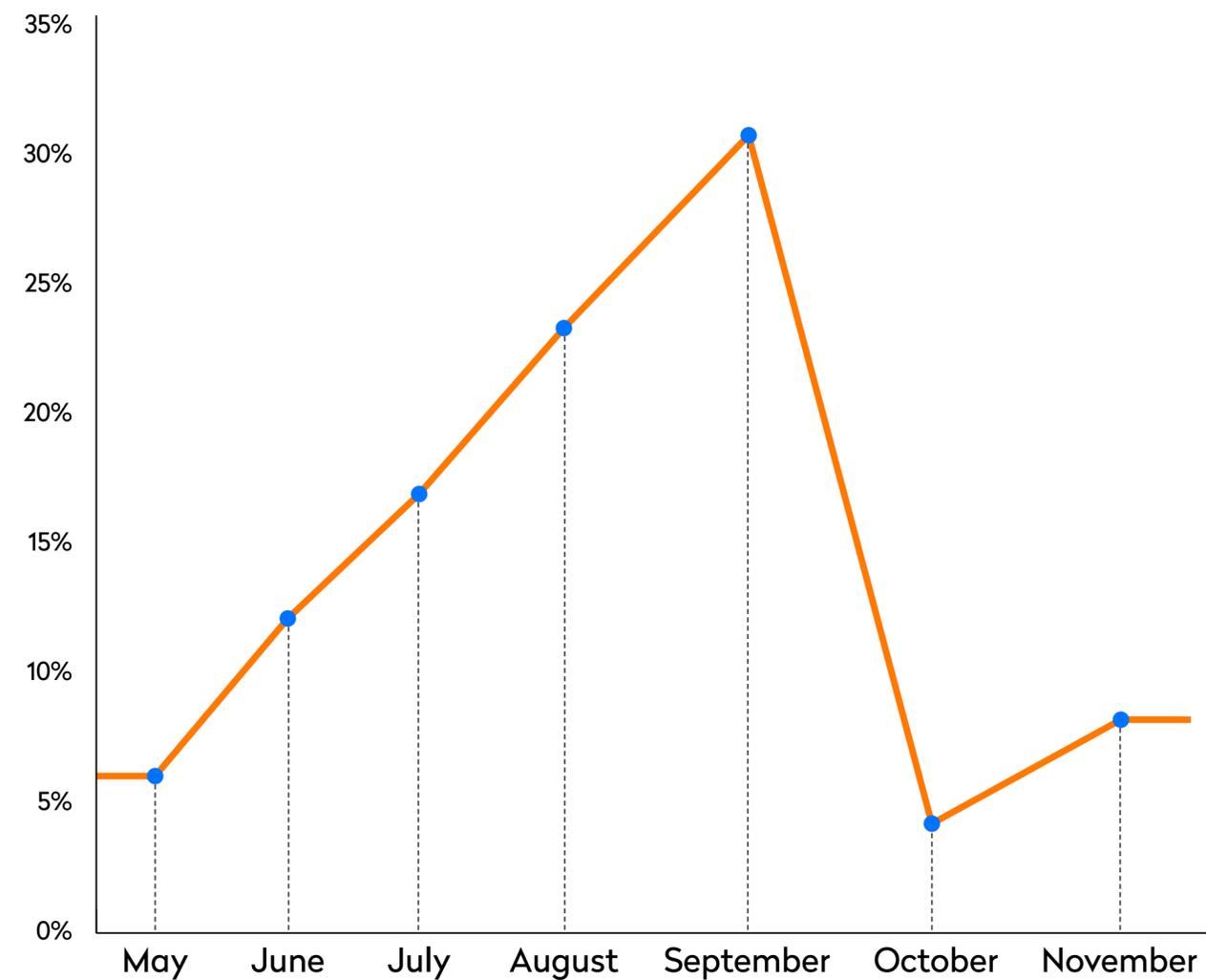
40%

We never closed

9%



WHEN DID YOU REOPEN YOUR OFFICE IN 2020?



Of the 51% that reopened their offices in 2020, 18% opened in Q2, 71% in Q3 and 12% in Q4.



September was the most common month with just over a third of respondents reopening their offices then.

WHAT % OFFICE CAPACITY DID YOU HAVE IN THE OFFICE DURING THAT TIME?



0 - 10%

48%

11 - 30%

31%

31 - 50%

17%

51 - 70%

13%

71 - 100%

8%

Of the offices that did reopen in 2020, the majority only saw up to 30% of their usual office occupancy, with almost half seeing under 10% of employees returning to the office at any given time.

This should come as no surprise with the COVID pandemic continuing throughout 2020 and into 2021. During this time, most employees stayed home as per government recommendations; avoiding travel in and out of the office and maintaining social distance from others when outside of their homes.

PREPARING THE OFFICE

Understanding how businesses are preparing their offices to be a COVID-safe environment for all their staff and the challenges of planning formal guidelines.

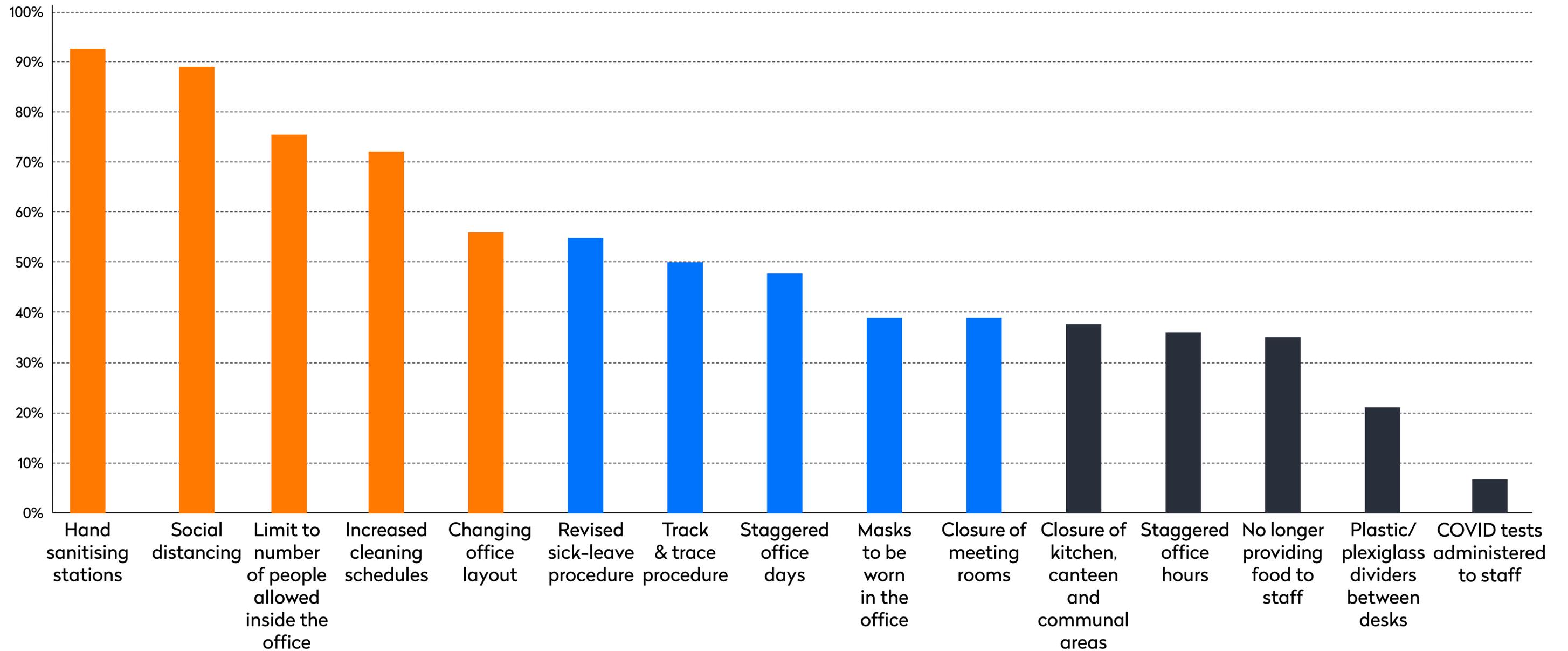


DO YOU HAVE FORMAL COVID-SAFE OFFICE GUIDELINES IN PLACE FOR RETURNING TO THE OFFICE?

The majority of respondents have some form of COVID-safe office guidelines in place, ready for employees to return to the office. However, 11% indicated that their business did not have guidelines set out yet.



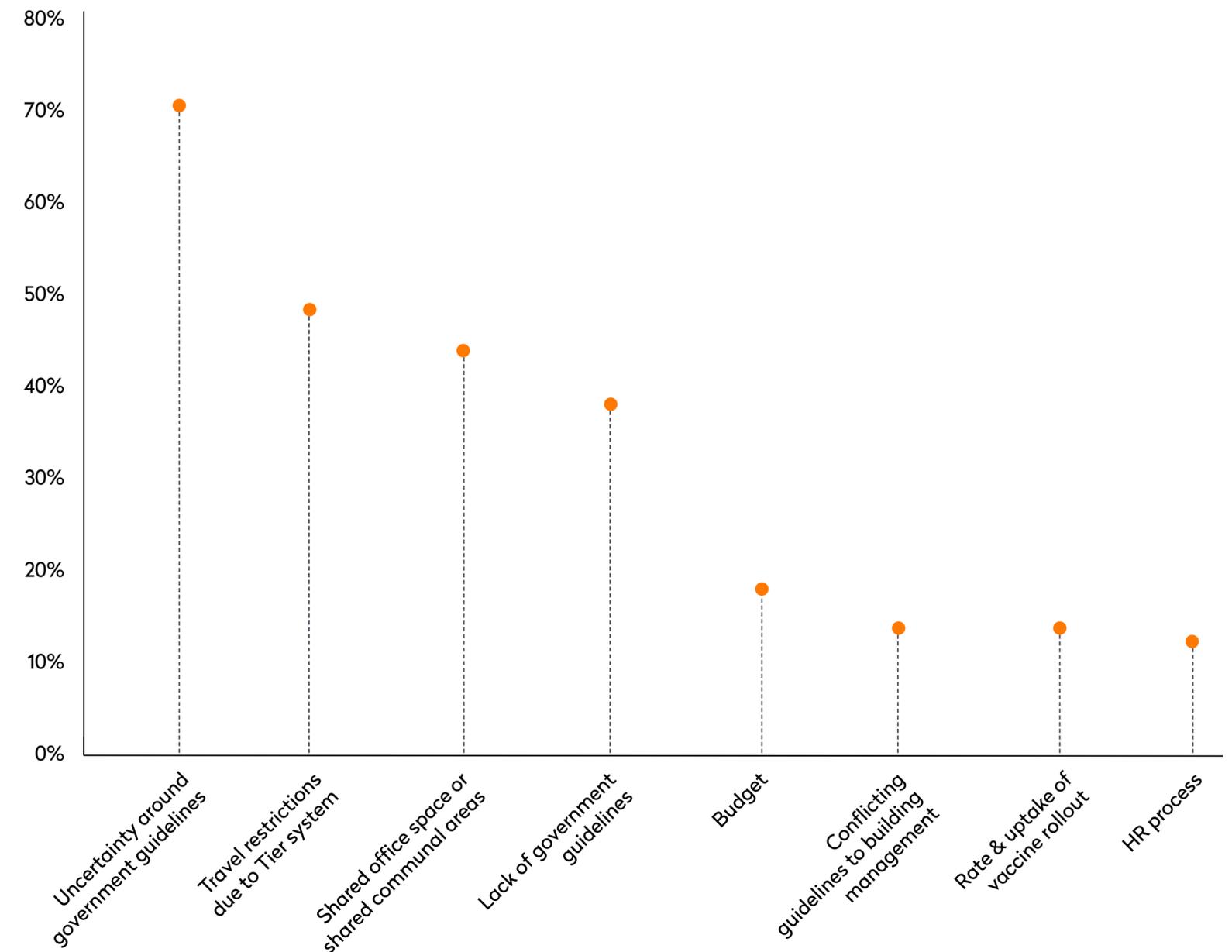
WHAT MEASURES ARE INCLUDED IN YOUR COVID-SAFE OFFICE GUIDELINES?



WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES WHEN CREATING FORMAL OFFICE GUIDELINES?

The biggest challenge businesses are facing when creating formal COVID-safe office guidelines is the uncertainty around government guidelines (71%).

Following the government announcement on 22 February, there was a better understanding of the roadmap ahead regarding lifting of lockdown restrictions, however there is clearly some uncertainty around what that may mean for businesses.



RETURN TO OFFICE & COMPANY CULTURE

A look at how employees feel about returning to the office and understanding the impact it may have on company culture and engagement.



ARE THERE CONCERNS ABOUT RETURNING TO THE OFFICE?

In spite of the official government announcement on 22 February, there are still uncertainties around what the lifting of lockdown may mean for offices, with 63% of respondents indicating that there are still concerns among employees about returning to the office.

Yes

63%

No

24%

Don't know

13%



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CONCERNS ABOUT RETURNING TO THE OFFICE?



Of the 63% of respondents who responded that there were concerns about returning to the office, the main reasons cited were that employees prefer working from home, were worried about travelling to and from the office as well as concerns about being able to maintain social distancing in an office environment.

Other comments submitted were focused on the cost of maintaining an office space if it was not going to be used fully - *"We're not sure having a permanent office is worth the money"*

Prefer working from home

72%

Travel to and from the office

69%

Unable to maintain social distancing

52%

Confidence in office sanitation

31%

Childcare

30%

Other

3%

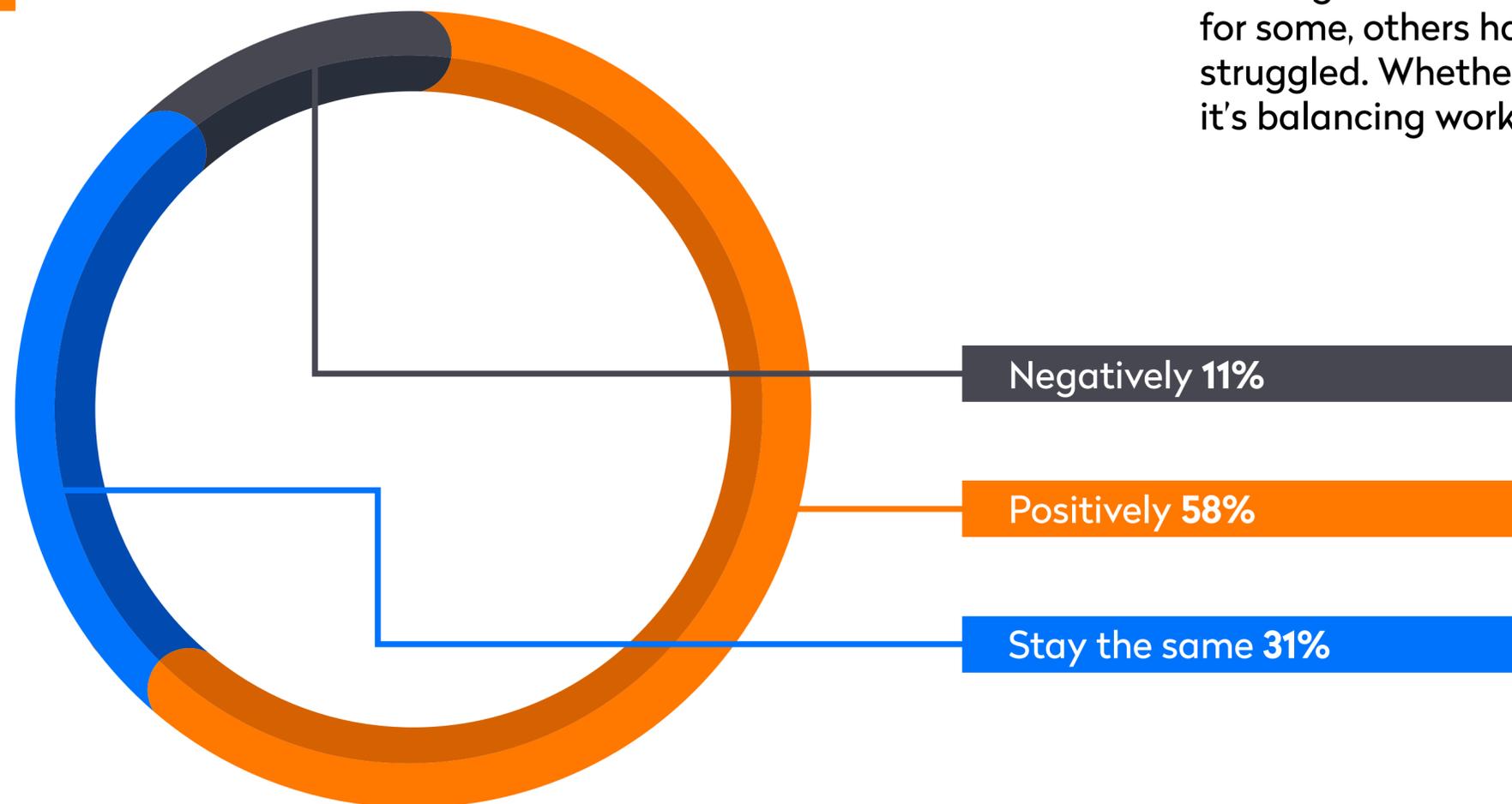
HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR COMPANY CULTURE WILL BE AFFECTED WHEN OFFICES REOPEN?

Based on our survey, 58% of respondents believe a return to the office will have a positive impact on company culture, with 31% believing it'll stay the same.

Lockdown has undoubtedly taken a toll on us all, while home-working has been easy for some, others have struggled. Whether it's balancing work

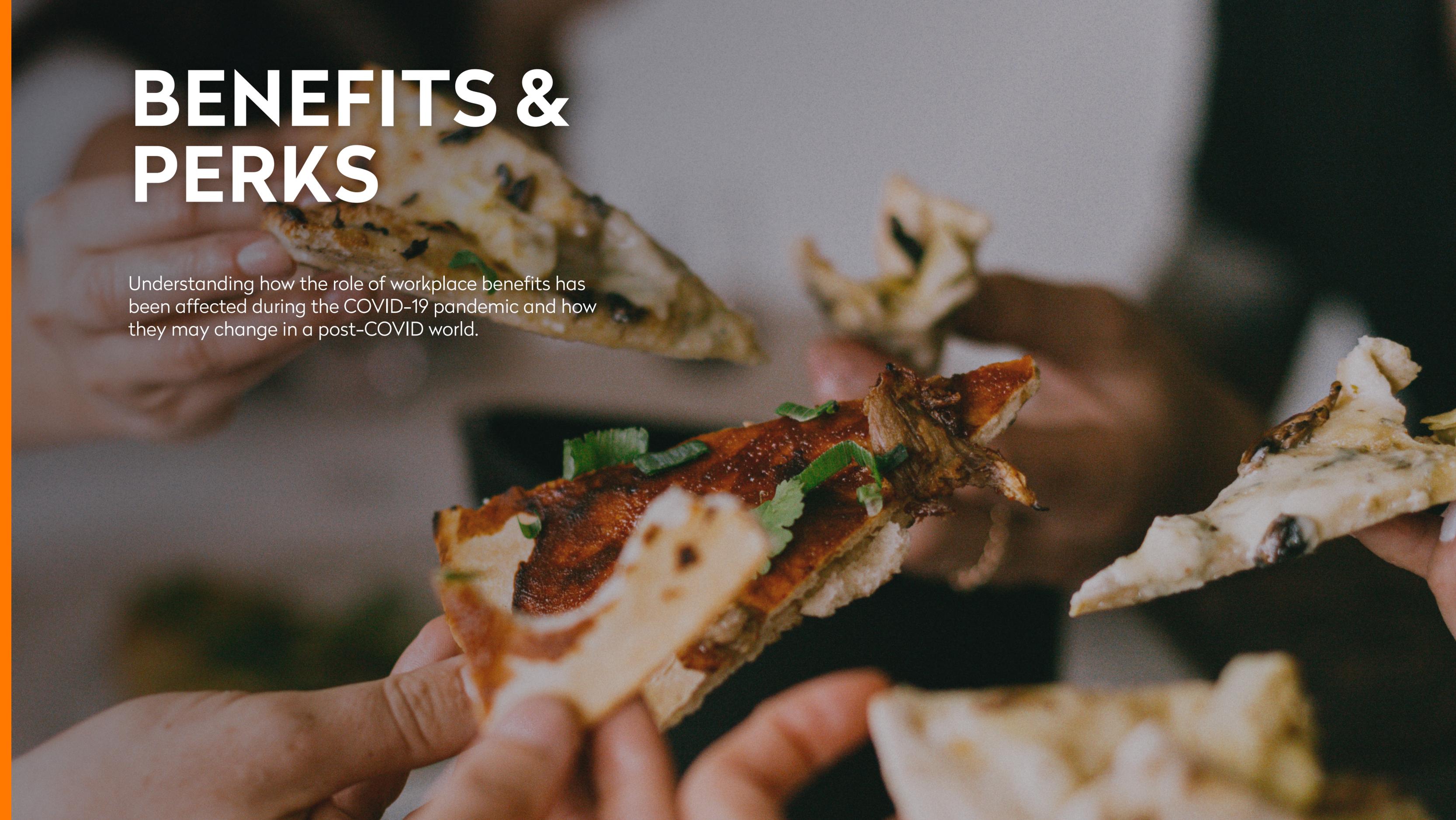
with home-schooling, struggling with isolation and social loneliness or loss in motivation and productivity. The more time we spend apart, the more important it is that we come together again, once it's safe to do so.

The role of the workplace may have changed but that doesn't mean the office is gone. The majority of companies still want to have space for collaboration and cultural engagement because maintaining company culture is going to be vital. Especially as we know being around colleagues can improve morale 40%² and 78% of workers have said that the pandemic is negatively affecting their mental health³.



BENEFITS & PERKS

Understanding how the role of workplace benefits has been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they may change in a post-COVID world.



DID YOU PROVIDE FOOD PERKS IN THE OFFICE PRE-COVID?

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 75% of respondents' businesses were offering food perks to their employees.

Yes

75%

No

22%

Don't know

3%



HOW DID YOU PROVIDE FOOD PERKS IN THE OFFICE PRE-COVID?



Of the 75% of our survey respondents whose businesses offered food perks, the most popular method of providing these perks pre-COVID was via delivered-in food (67%) followed by snacks and pantry items (63%).

Delivered-in food

67%

Only snacks / pantry

63%

Canteen

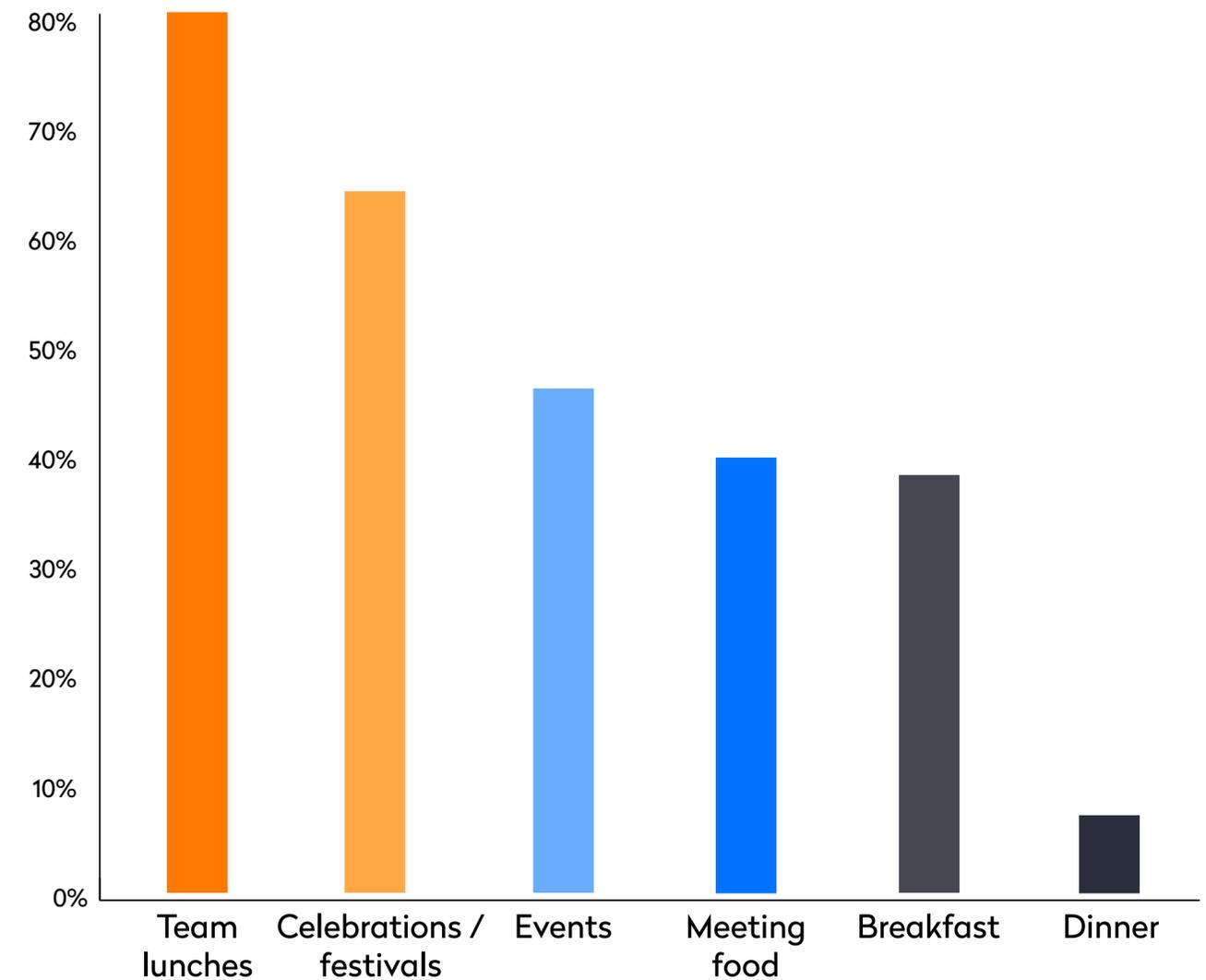
17%

Expenses

13%

WHAT OCCASIONS DID YOU PROVIDE FOOD PERKS FOR PRE-COVID?

Out of the 75% of respondents who provided food perks to employees pre-COVID, 80% offered team lunches to their workers. The second most-popular occasion was for team celebrations or festivals such as Christmas, Halloween or Pancake Day.





HAVE YOU PROVIDED FOOD PERKS WHILE THE OFFICES HAVE BEEN CLOSED?

Since the start of the pandemic, with offices closed and teams working at home, many businesses have not been able to provide their employees with regular in-office benefits, such as food perks. 65% of our survey respondents stopped food perks all together when their offices closed. However, almost a third of respondents did continue providing food benefits to their at-home teams during this pandemic.

No

65%

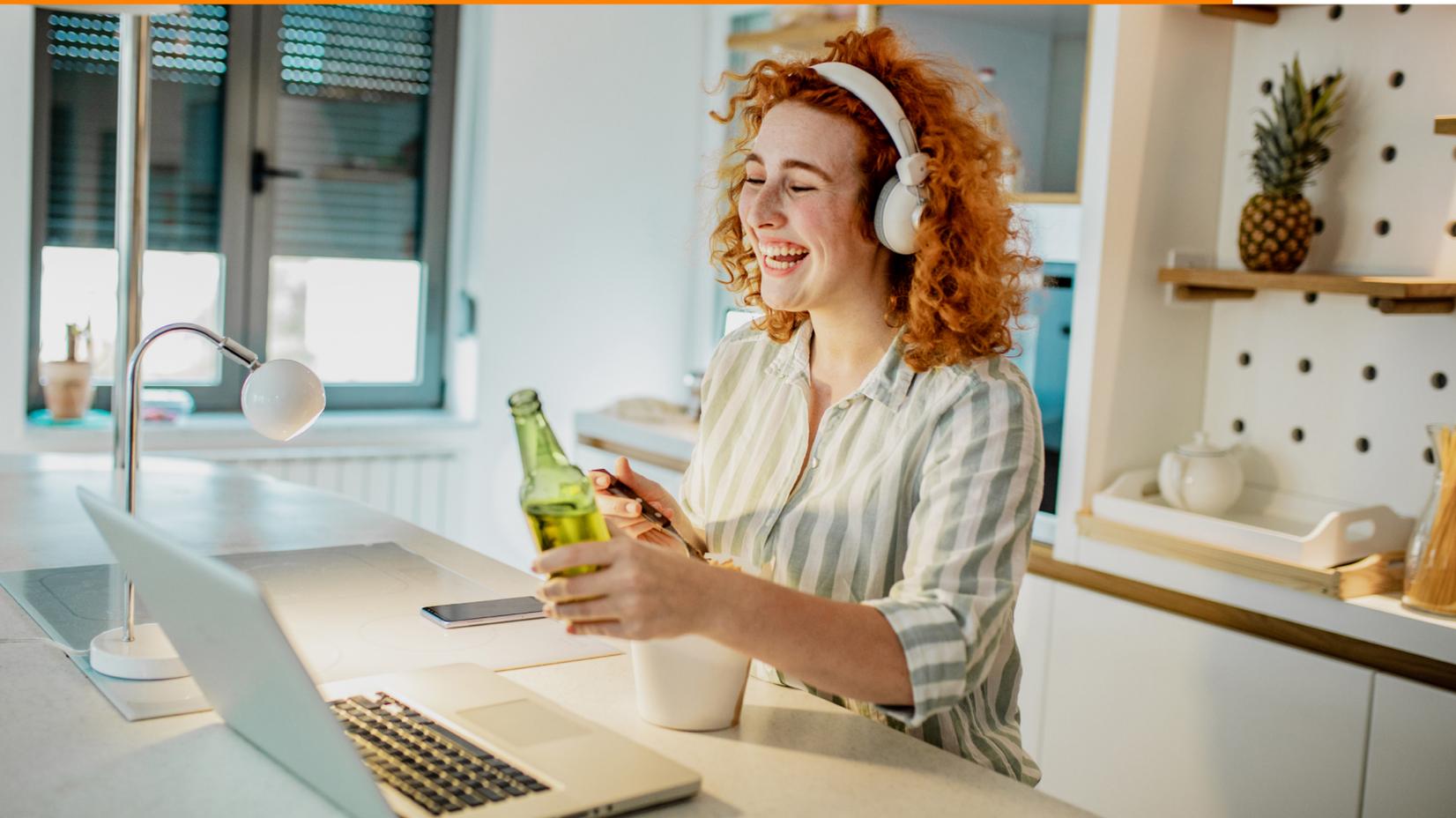
Yes

29%

Don't know

6%

WHAT HAVE YOU PROVIDED TO EMPLOYEES WHILE OFFICES HAVE BEEN CLOSED?



Virtual Parties

55%

Vouchers / Gift cards

55%

DIY or Recipe kits

52%

Food / produce boxes

41%

Expenses

7%

Of the 29% of respondents who continued providing food perks to their at-home teams, the two most popular methods have been virtual parties (55%) and food gift cards (55%), followed by DIY and recipe kits (52%) and food or produce boxes (41%).

Many businesses have been working hard to find ways of continuing company culture going while teams work from home as well as maintaining engagement and providing their teams with a morale boost. The popularity of these different types of food perks during this pandemic highlights how important this has been for businesses during these challenging times.

WILL YOU OFFER FOOD PERKS TO EMPLOYEES WHEN OFFICES REOPEN?

Over half of respondents (52%) plan to provide food perks to employees when offices reopen, which demonstrates the focus businesses are putting on employee engagement and satisfaction.

Maintaining company culture is going to be vital as businesses begin their return to the office, regardless of which version of the office it may be. Shared moments between employees act as key to engage and retain team culture, and food is one of the ways businesses can spearhead positive company culture.

Yes

52%

Don't know

29%

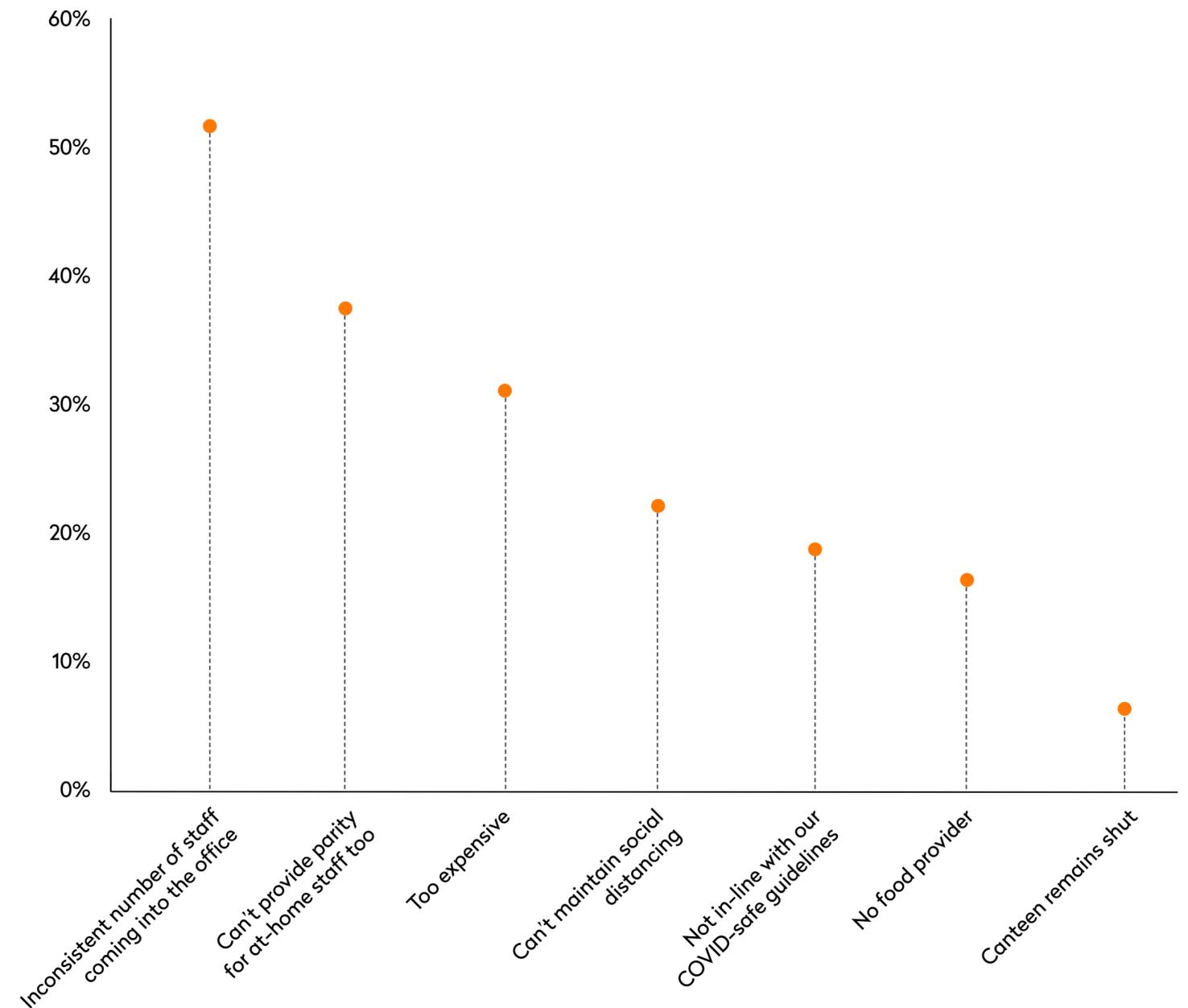
No

19%



[FOR THOSE THAT ANSWERED “NO” OR “DON’T KNOW”] WHY WON’T YOU PROVIDE FOOD PERKS WHEN OFFICES REOPEN?

Of the 48% of respondents who don't plan to offer food perks or are unsure of if they will offer food perks once offices reopen, the most-cited reason why is due to inconsistent number of staff coming into the office (52%), followed by the inability to provide the same perks for at-home staff as their in-office staff (38%). There's no doubt that COVID has changed the way we work, and with these changes come new challenges for businesses.



[FOR THOSE THAT ANSWERED “YES”] HOW WILL YOU PROVIDE FOOD PERKS WHEN OFFICES REOPEN?



Of the 52% of respondents who plan to offer food perks once offices reopen, the most popular method will be delivered-in food (75%), followed by just providing snacks and pantry items (60%).

These results further highlight the fact that health and safety of employees will undoubtedly be top priority for businesses as they reopen their offices. Employees want reassurance that coming into the office will not put them at risk. Which is why businesses are looking to a delivered-in food model, where meals come individually-labelled and packaged from high-quality and hygiene-rated providers, delivered by as few drivers as possible, all adhering to COVID-safe best practices.

Delivered-in food

75%

Only snacks / pantry

60%

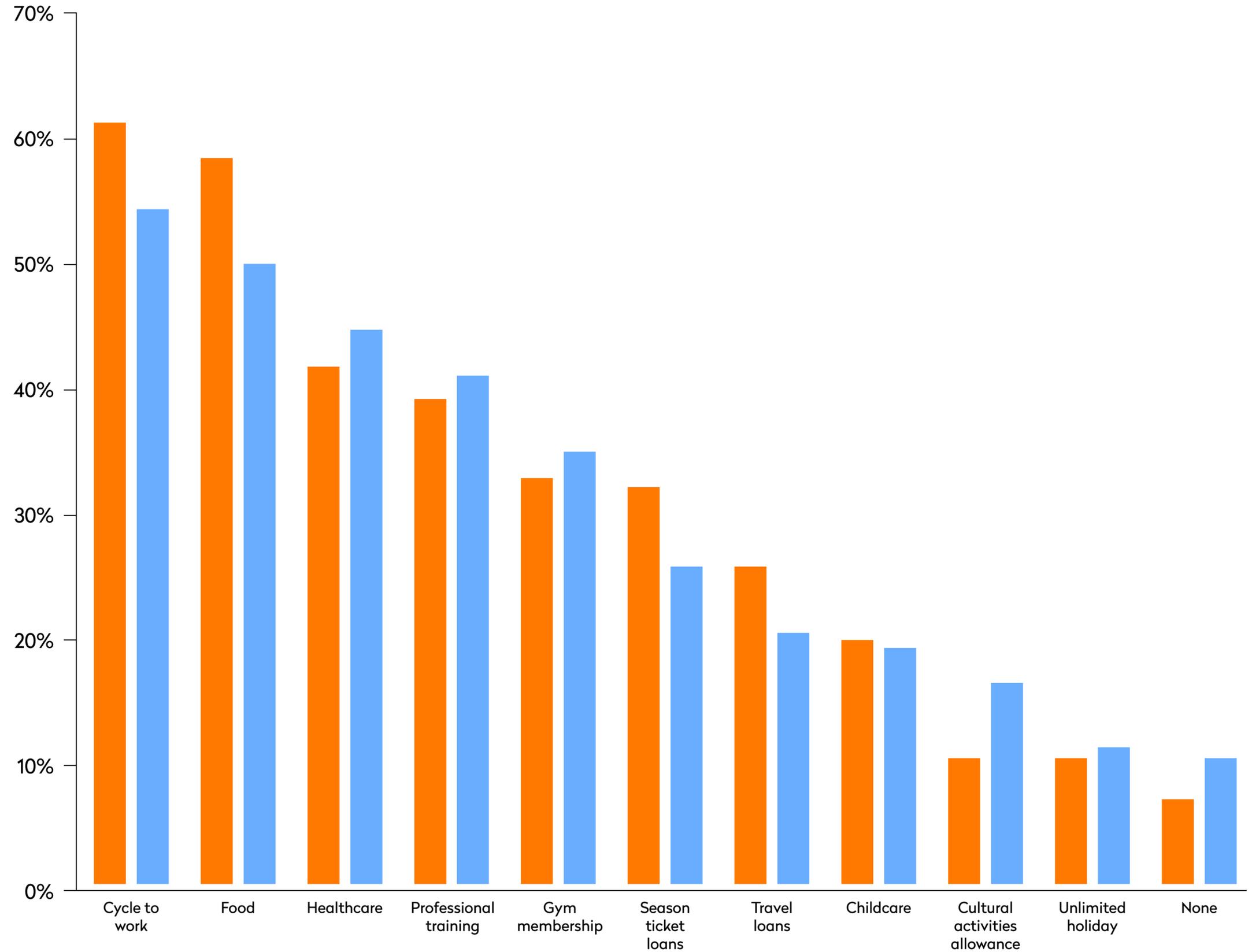
Vouchers / Gift cards

38%

Expenses

11%

WORKPLACE BENEFITS: PRE & POST- LOCKDOWN





We asked respondents to select which common workplace benefits their businesses offered pre-COVID and which they plan to offer when their offices reopen.

The benefits that saw the biggest increase post-lockdown were professional training (+5pp), cultural activities allowance (+5pp), gym membership (+2pp) and healthcare (+2pp). Interestingly, the companies that opted not to offer any benefits after offices reopen also increased by 5pp.

Benefits focused around individual progression and health & wellbeing appear to be the most popular. This could be a direct effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, with businesses prioritising the physical and mental wellbeing of their employees.

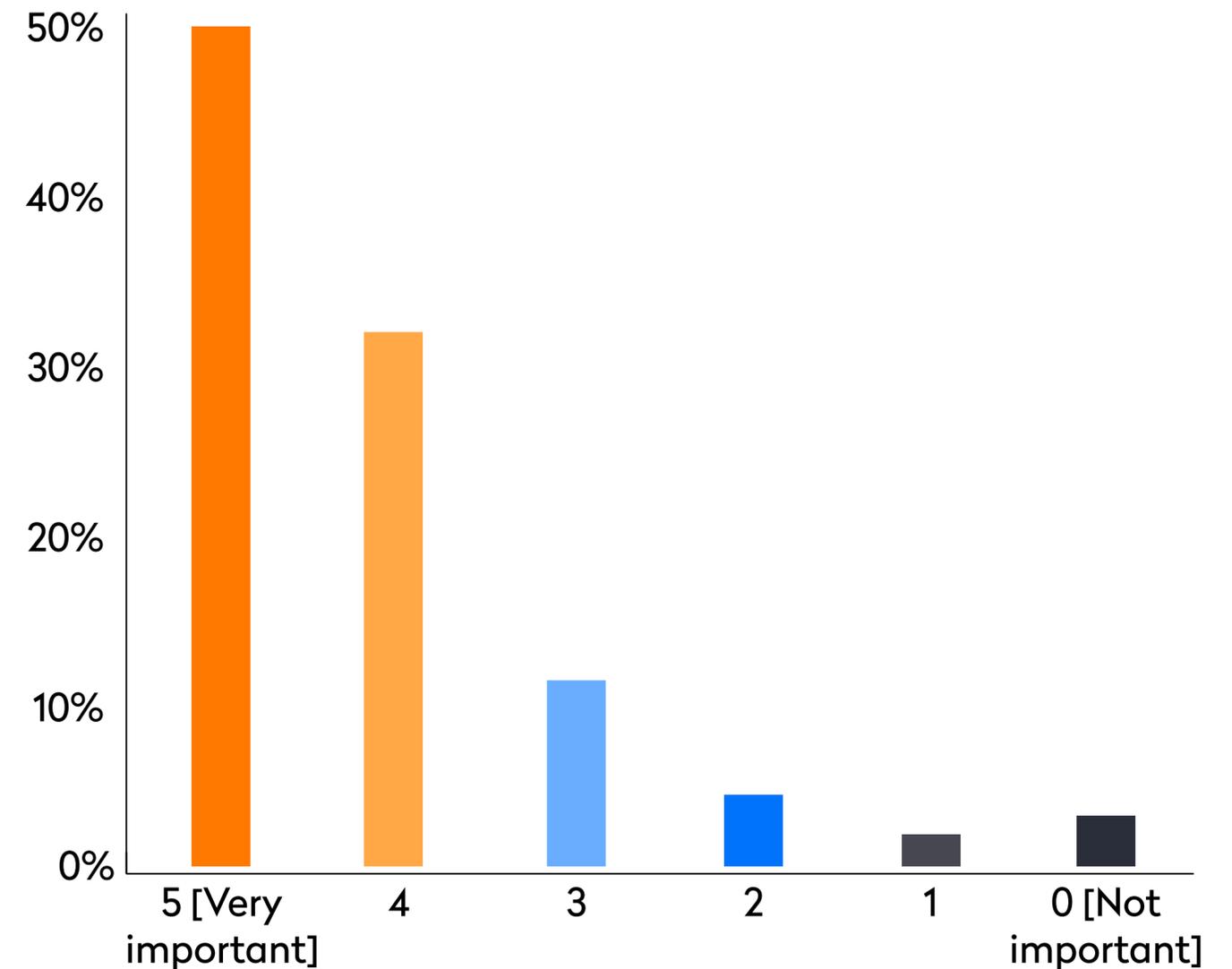
The benefits that decreased the most were food (-8pp), cycle to work schemes (-7pp), season ticket loans (-6pp) and travel loans (-5pp).

This predicted shift in workplace benefits may be indicative of the uncertainty of the role the office will play in the immediate future. This correlates with 48% of our survey respondents not planning to or unsure of if they will continue with food perks once the office reopens. And the most-cited reasons for discontinuing food perks being inconsistent office capacity and businesses unsure of how to offer parity to their at-home and in-office employees.

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR YOUR COMPANY TO PROVIDE BENEFITS TO BOTH IN-OFFICE AND AT-HOME EMPLOYEES?

Based on our survey, the majority of respondents (81%) believe it's "important" or "very important" for businesses to provide benefits that are accessible to their in-office and at-home employees.

With hybrid working looking likely to stay for the near future, it highlights the importance for businesses to identify how they can ensure employee engagement is maintained and thriving, regardless of where their staff are working. From policies and processes to service providers and partners, flexibility is key.



CONCLUSION

Summary of our findings and key takeaways



A PHASED RETURN

Businesses and individuals are eager for a return to some kind of normality, however it's clear that a more considered approach is how many are looking at the lifting of lockdown. Based on our survey, a third of respondents are predicting their return to office within the next 1 - 3 months, with 69% planning to reopen by July 2021.

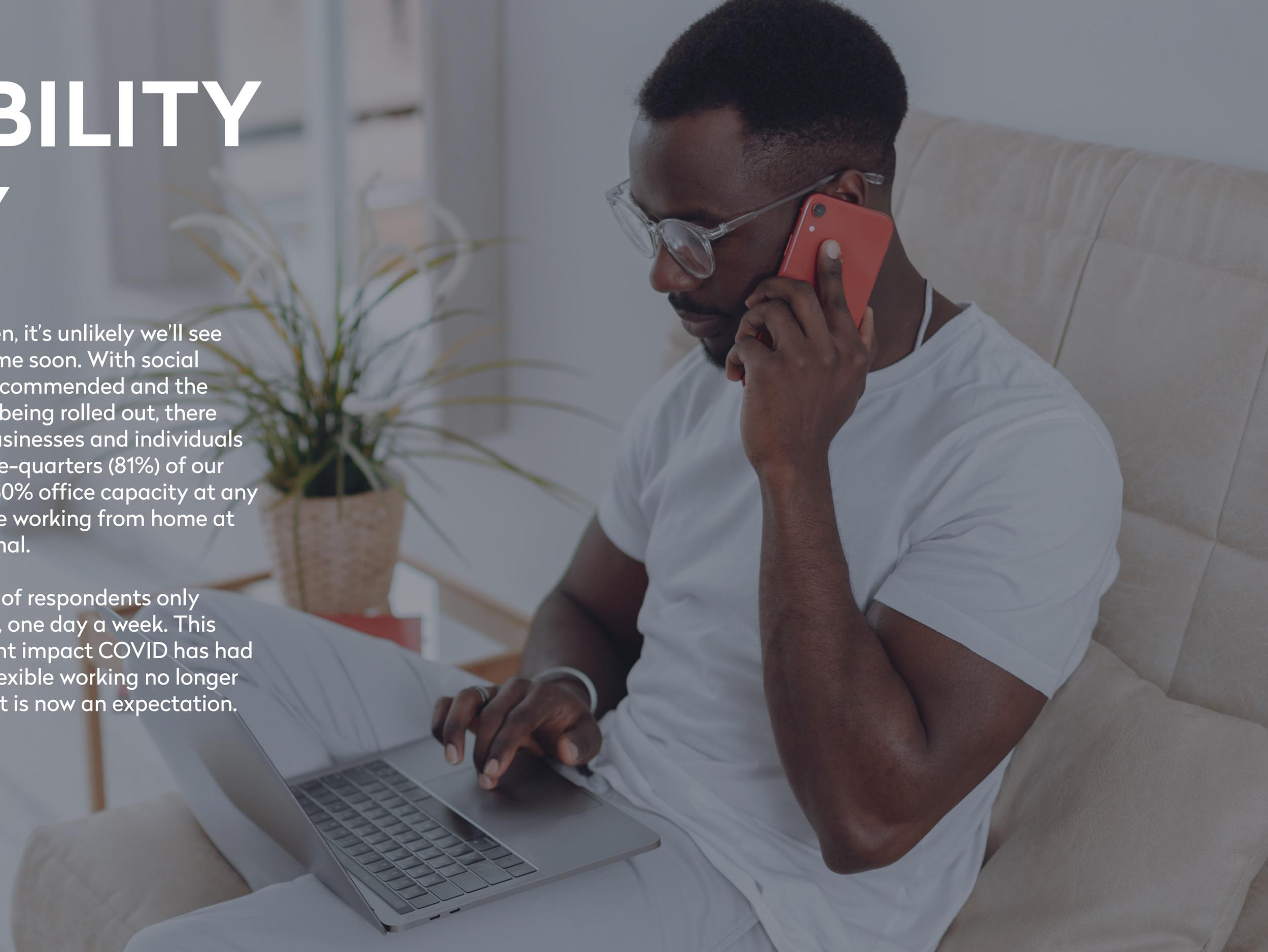
The majority expect to be back in the office before the end of 2021, however a small percentage remain cautious and do not expect to be back in the office until 2022.



FLEXIBILITY IS KEY

Even after the offices reopen, it's unlikely we'll see 100% office capacity anytime soon. With social distancing measures still recommended and the COVID-19 vaccine steadily being rolled out, there are still precautions that businesses and individuals will want to take. Over three-quarters (81%) of our respondents predict up to 50% office capacity at any given time. And 92% believe working from home at least 2 days a week is optimal.

Prior to the pandemic, 89% of respondents only worked from home at most, one day a week. This demonstrates the significant impact COVID has had on the way we work, with flexible working no longer viewed as a special perk but is now an expectation.



THE OFFICE ISN'T GONE

Over half of our respondents believe that a return to office will have a positive impact on company culture. The more time we spend apart, the more important it is that we come together again when it's safe to do so.

The role of the workplace may be changing, but regardless of where staff are based, the office should become a place that people want to visit, not have to visit and businesses need to be mindful of this as they plan their return to the office.

The majority of businesses want the office to be a space for collaboration, cultural engagement and peer connection even if their staff plan to continue working from home a few days a week. Shared moments, common ground and universal needs act as key moments to engage and retain team culture.



SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES

While a large number of people believe that a return to the office will have a positive impact on company culture, our survey also revealed that over two-thirds of workers also have concerns about returning to the office. Driven by concerns about travelling, office sanitation as well as re-adjusting to an office routine after more than a year working from home, it's important for employers to support employees during this transitional period.

If employees are anxious about going back to the office, employers and team-leads should share their support with them and encourage their teams to communicate with one another so no one is struggling alone.

Encouraging employees to take regular breaks, exercise and healthy eating as well as investing in mental health resources (many of which are free), are great ways to foster a supportive environment.

Adjusting to a new working environment is going to be difficult for some to begin with, but by reconnecting with your teams, communicating clearly and supporting one another, businesses will be able to create an even-stronger sense of culture than before the pandemic.



WORK CULTURE IS CHANGING

People want flexibility and businesses need to adapt to meet the needs of their employees if they want to recruit and retain top talent.

Maintaining company culture is going to be vital as businesses begin their return to the office, regardless of which version of the office it may be.

Not only will we see changes to the office, but workplace perks may be changing too. Based on our survey, it's possible we will see businesses investing more in perks that benefit their employees individually, such as in professional training or providing gym membership, as well as cultural activities that bring teams together to bond and socialise.

Over half of our respondents plan to provide food perks to their employees when their businesses reopen. Employees want reassurance of their health and safety, which is why 75% of respondents identified the delivered-in model as their preferred method as meals come individually-labelled and packaged, from high-quality restaurant providers, delivered by as few drivers as possible, all adhering to COVID-safe best practice.



PERKS THAT BENEFIT ALL

We've all been working apart for a long time. Coming together again in an office environment is going to take time and businesses need ensure they're supporting the needs of their teams to ease this transition.

Initiatives that keep morale high, provide support and maintain company culture should also be a focus alongside introducing practical measures to ensure health and safety. Shared moments between employees act as key to engage and retain team culture, and food is one of the ways businesses can spearhead positive company culture, which is why over half of our respondents (52%) plan to provide food perks to their employees when offices reopen. Whether it's providing lunch in the office for employees, sending morale-boosting treats to enjoy at home or keeping meetings fueled with brain-boosting snacks, food perks are an easy way for organisations to provide parity to their in-office and at-home workers seamlessly.

It's important for organisations to work with partners and providers that can adapt to this new flexible demand and provide a hybrid approach to the "next normal".

SOLUTIONS FOR EVERY SET-UP

Flexibility is going to be crucial as businesses plan their return to office. Not only will their processes need to adapt to at-home and in-office teams but their partners and providers will also need to adapt to support their employees wherever they're working.

Food perks play a big role in maintaining positive company culture. Providing a shared moments between colleagues, food can be the social glue that brings people together, both physically and symbolically. This will still be the case in the "next normal".

At City Pantry, we deliver individually-packaged and labelled meals to in-office employees, providing variety, convenience and reassurance that their food is delivered contact-free by as few drivers as possible, all in accordance with COVID-safe best practices. Our teams@home solution provides all of the benefits of office-based food delivery, but with the ability

to provide parity of benefits for staff at home. Our flexible solution means staff are kept safe and well-fed regardless of where they're based, and businesses no longer need to worry about food wastage on reduced office capacity.

We help businesses engage their staff and retain culture, before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Whatever the business set up, we have a solution.

ABOUT US

WHO ARE CITY PANTRY?

City Pantry is the UK's leading office food delivery platform, with the mission to make working lives better through great food. We're also one of the leading providers of direct-to-consumer food box home delivery services.

We connect corporate customers to 600 of the best restaurants and caterers around to provide their employees with delicious food, drinks, and snacks.



Whether their teams are working from home or in the office, we have solutions to suit every company. With safe, contact-free delivery available nationwide, City Pantry helps companies keep their staff well-fed and connected, however far apart they may be.

We're also part of the world's largest food delivery group outside of China, Just Eat Takeaway, which operates in 24 countries.



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REFERENCES

1 AWA Workplace Utilisation Report

2 Work from work: a return to normality

3 AI@Work Study 2020