



## Google to Keep Employees Home Until Summer 2021 Amid Coronavirus Pandemic

Search-engine giant pushes back return to normalcy



Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai in January.

PHOTO: DENIS BALIBOUSE/REUTERS

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SAN FRANCISCO—Google will keep its employees home until at least next July, making the search-engine giant the first major U.S. corporation to formalize such an extended timetable in the face of [the coronavirus pandemic](#).

The move will affect nearly all of the roughly 200,000 full-time and contract employees across Google parent [Alphabet Inc.](#), [GOOG +0.55%](#) and adds pressure to other technology giants that have slated staff to return as soon as January.

Businesses from factories to salons and restaurants are grappling with [if and when to reopen](#) amid a stubborn rise in Covid-19 cases around the country. Though some offices have added plexiglass barriers and other social-distancing protections, the risk of outbreaks among workers remains.

Even for those industries where work from home is relatively manageable, the return has been slow. In New York, fewer than one-tenth of Manhattan office workers are back to the workplace, a full month after the city gave businesses the green light to reoccupy buildings vacated in March.

“People are being rightfully careful,” said William Rudin, chief executive of Rudin Management Co. and head of one of New York’s most prominent real-estate families.

Google's July date plants the company firmly in the cautious camp of those debating the efficacy and wisdom of remote work.

Alphabet Chief Executive Sundar Pichai made the decision himself last week after debate among Google Leads, an internal group of top executives that he chairs, according to a person familiar with the matter. A small number of Google staffers were notified later in the week, people familiar said.

Mr. Pichai was swayed in part by sympathy for employees with families to plan for uncertain school years that may involve at-home instruction, depending on geography. It also frees staff to sign full-year leases elsewhere if they choose to move.

"I know it hasn't been easy," Mr. Pichai wrote in a note to staff Monday, after The Wall Street Journal reported the impending extension. "I hope this will offer the flexibility you need to balance work with taking care of yourselves and your loved ones over the next 12 months." The extended timeline applies to company employees in most of its major offices, including the headquarters of Mountain View, Calif., and other offices in the U.S., U.K., India, Brazil and elsewhere. Until now, Google had told its employees to expect a return to the office beginning in January.

Silicon Valley technology companies were early to send workers home in March, and they have steadily pushed back the time frame. Google's move, however, takes it beyond many peers. [Microsoft Corp.](#), for one, has told staff in [cities like New York](#) that they may return to the office as soon as this fall. [Salesforce.com Inc.](#)'s remote work order expires at the end of the year. [Apple Inc.](#) opened, and then closed, [some of its retail stores](#). [Facebook Inc.](#) founder Mark Zuckerberg has said he expects half of the social network's employees to [work from home in the next decade](#).

The uncertainty [has upended the housing market](#) in the San Francisco Bay Area and elsewhere, as employees consider alternative living arrangements outside the expensive metropolitan areas where major employers are often based.

In New York City, only 8% of the employees who work in downtown office buildings managed by office colossus [CBRE Group Inc.](#) have returned from sheltering in place from the pandemic. The figure, as of last week, was based on unique card-swipes at security turnstiles. CBRE manages 20 million square feet of space in Manhattan

Workplace experts say financial-services firms, especially those in businesses that require sophisticated trading floors and other technology that can't be replicated in most home offices, have a stronger incentive to return workers to offices. "In a digital age, speed is key and working from home will slow down the process," said Joseph Biasi, an analyst with data firm CoStar Inc.

The jobs at tech firms, on the other hand, may lend themselves more easily to remote working. "Collaboration is certainly important," Mr. Biasi said. "But a coder does not get a competitive advantage from receiving information quicker than a coder in another firm."

Tech firms have been more circumspect. October would be the earliest that Microsoft would reopen its New York offices, pandemic dependent. For now, “we continue to recommend that most employees work remotely,” a Microsoft spokeswoman said last week. Other firms haven’t decided yet when to have workers return to the office.

A [Twitter](#) Inc. spokeswoman said the company doesn’t have a definitive opening date, and will only return to 20% capacity when it does. Twitter has told employees they may work from home indefinitely if they choose.

Alphabet’s Mr. Pichai has been interested in learning about the health and social ramifications of the novel coronavirus, even before health officials declared the virus’s spread a global pandemic. He began reading research papers on the virus in January and spearheaded the initial March decision to close company offices.

Google has partially opened some smaller offices in countries relatively unaffected by the pandemic, such as Australia, Greece and Thailand.

Mr. Pichai wrote Monday, “We are still learning a lot from our experiences of working from home and will use that knowledge to inform our approach to the future of work at Google.”