

Returning to work after COVID-19 – a guide for leaders

While it may feel like we've only just got into a new routine of working from home, it is now time to start considering, and planning, the transition back to work.

While many of us moved to working from home rather rapidly, organisations may want to take a considered approach to transitioning teams back to work, remembering that things may not go back to how they were before. Here are a number of areas for you to consider.

Take a considered approach to transition and communicate well and often

It may be beneficial to prioritise and categorise which teams need to transition back into the work environment first. These decisions are likely to be made from an organisational perspective based on business need and in consideration of those roles which are able to continue working flexibly the longest, until the whole business has moved to the new normal. Once the transition plan and new ways of working have been decided, clearly communicate the transition order and timeframes to all teams to set expectations.

For many employees, there may be an expectation around flexibility going forward based on having been able to work from home over the last few weeks and months. Be clear about which teams may continue to have some level of flexibility to work from home, so that managers can discuss this with their team.

Understand what the experience has been for your team

Take time to understand what employees' experiences have been during this period. Your organisation might conduct a survey, but it is beneficial to ask each of your team as well. What have they enjoyed, what elements of work have been improved by being remote, what has been less effective? Ask your team about this both from a workplace perspective, and personally too.

Be mindful when asking employees about their experience, and what they're hoping for in the transition back, to frame this within the context of any agreed ways of working which have been set by the business. If employees cannot continue working from home make that clear, in case there's an expectation of that. Equally if the business decision is to continue working from home in the future, be clear with teams that that's the plan going forward.

Be aware of your own feelings about returning to work

Consider and process your own feelings around returning to work, including acknowledging what you are looking forward to and what may be more of a challenge. Be mindful that your values may be different to those of your team. However, remember to separate your own feelings from that of your team and ensure you are not contributing to feelings of trepidation or distress that your team may be feeling about coming back.

Prioritise those who are anxious about returning

During conversations with your team get a sense of anyone who is ambivalent about returning, and especially those who may appear anxious about returning. The mental health and wellbeing of these employees is more likely to be at risk during the transition period. Therefore, knowing who is worried about the transition will assist you in how to prioritise and support your team with returning to work. Ensure you spend more time connecting with those who appear concerned about coming back and checking in regularly.

Continue regular connection

If you increased contact with your team during COVID-19, through regular individual or team calls, continue this even after you have transitioned back into the workplace. However, expect that the content of these check ins might change gradually. Expect the focus to shift from conversations about everything that's happening at work, to priority areas and escalations. Encourage autonomy slowly with time.

During the first week or two of returning, organise an informal team breakfast, lunch or morning tea to get the team physically together again. This will assist the team to feel connected to each other and the organisation.

Anticipate an increase in personal sharing

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a significant increase in stress and anxiety levels for many of us. Whether it is concerns around the virus itself, or the economic impact, transitioning back to work indicates that the threat of COVID-19 to society is abating. Therefore, we may expect to see relief in employees which could be expressed through different emotional responses.

For many of us, whilst working from home we were able to "see" into the lives of our colleagues and leaders, virtually meet pets and children who we may never have seen before, as well as being more exposed to personal stories within our team. As a result, expect that team dynamics and relationships between team members and you as a leader, may be different to what they were before.

Create an environment of predictability and stability

To foster a feeling of psychological safety within your team, and to promote good habits from the start, set expectations or new ways of working early, and implement these from the start of the transition back to work. This will be important, since after such significant uncertainty and change, employees will need stability and predictability from leaders and the organisation as we create the new normal.

Seek professional support for employees in need

For those employees anxious about transitioning, take time to understand what is contributing towards their anxiety about returning to work (travel, working in open plan etc). Provide them with the relevant support options including your EAP. The Assure team are here to guide you through the entire return to work process.