HR Guide:
How to help employees who are anxious to return to the workplace

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Introduction

As lockdown eases and the government begins to relax restrictions, many businesses will need to prepare for bringing employees back into the workplace. Whilst this is a positive step for both businesses and the economy, there is a risk to employee mental health and wellbeing if not handled with enough preparation and care.

In a recent poll undertaken by the CIPD, it was found that 44% of employees are anxious about returning to the workplace.[1]

As a HR professional, this guide is designed to help you ensure that employee wellbeing is at the heart of any 'Back to the Workplace' plans.

COMMUNICATE

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ACKNOWLEDGE

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LISTEN

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GUIDE

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OFFER

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AMEND

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PREPARE

1

Communicate Expectations and a Timeline

One element that has been most unsettling for employees throughout COVID-19 is the uncertainty surrounding 'what happens next'. Communicating with frequency to employees about what is expected of them over the coming months, and the plans that your organisation have put in place, will go a long way to reassure your workforce that there is a clear plan and that they are well informed of the journey ahead.

One way to help employees feel reassured that they know what's going on is to provide them with a timeline of the proposed phased return to the workplace. This will give employees an expectation of when they will return and most importantly, provide them an opportunity to give feedback on their feelings surrounding the proposal.

Visually this could be as simple as a calendar roadmap, month by month, indicating the plans for opening up the workplace and what this means capacity wise, for example, reminding employees of the guidance around team meetings and room capacity, so as not to breach any COVID-19 social distancing rules which may still be in place.

2

Proactively Acknowledge the Anxiety your Employees Might be Feeling

It goes without saying that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health of the workforce. Whilst lockdown was a challenge for the mental health of many, we cannot assume that returning to the office will be the antidote to that anxiety. It can be hard to know where to begin or know what to say to support your team with any anxiety surrounding the return to the work; so we have developed a guide which you can download and share with your employees **here** and **here**.

3

Listen to Employee Concerns

It is so important that your employees have the opportunity to voice their feelings and opinions regarding the return to work; and their views should help you shape what the return might look like. Many people will find the notion of returning to the regular workplace unsettling - it will be a disturbance to the new routines that have been built - and as such, asking what their specific concerns are will help you support employees effectively.

Everymind at Work is offering a live 'Check in Session' whereby we can act as a third party to check in with your employees in real-time over a wellbeing session. During these sessions we host breakout rooms and live polling to get an in-depth understanding of the opinions and emotions that are coming up. Having a third party host such a session can often be more effective than hosting it internally, as employees are reassured that there is a level of anonymity in their responses. You can book a live check in session **here.**
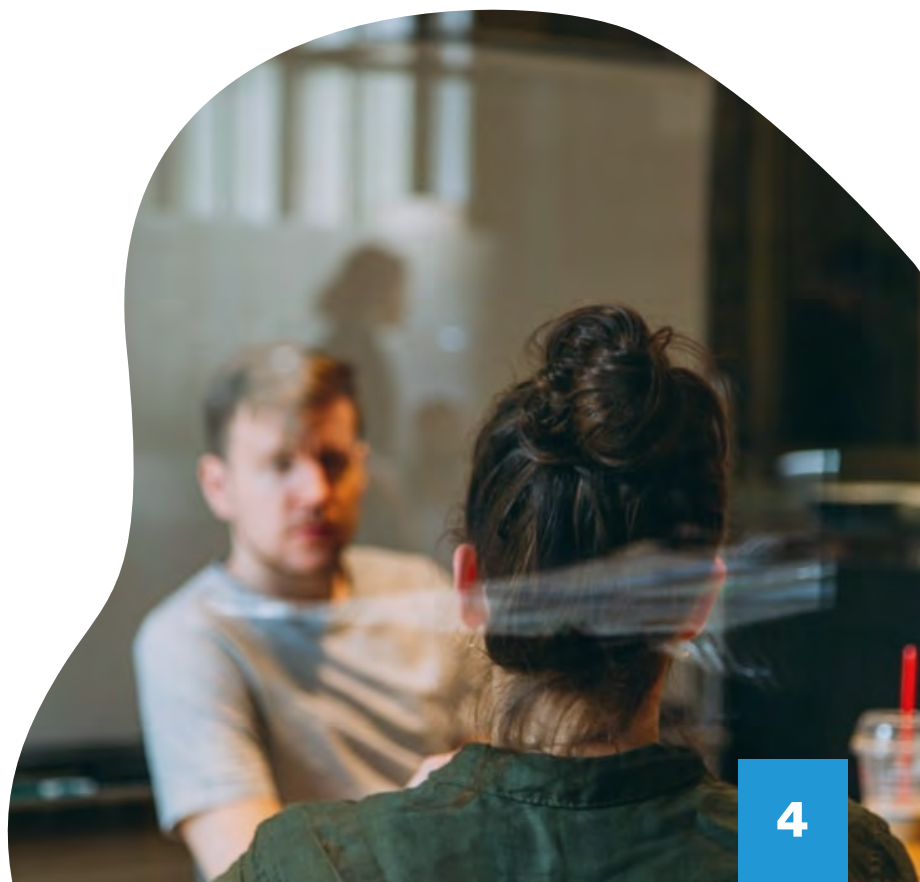
4

Provide Guidance

Many employees will have created their own routines to support their self-care throughout lockdown. By reintroducing a commute, socialising and in-person meetings, it would be wise to assist employees with guidance on how to establish new routines and coping mechanisms for adjusting to a 'new normal' (again!).

Everymind at Work have developed a set of practical guidelines. You can download them **here** to share with employees.

5

Offer Flexibility & Reasonable Adjustments

Despite some organisations requiring employees to be office-based, many have now adjusted well to remote working. Where many employees are now accustomed to this new way of working, there is no immediate rush to have everyone back in immediately for the full working week.

To minimise disruption to employees' work, it can be useful to ask employees to self-elect for an immediate return to the office, and to assist other employees to phase back their return at a slower rate.

This shows a level of respect for employees' preference and those who are keen to return will be able to do so confidently, allowing HR attention to be directed to those who need perhaps more reassurance or a slower approach.

Another example of a reasonable adjustment would be to alter start and finish times so that employees can avoid commuting in rush hour, or scheduling lunch breaks slightly differently so that people can choose a quieter time if they so wish. A recent study showed that 31% of employees were anxious about the commute to work[1] - that's a lot of people!

The benefits of flexible working and making small adjustments is the significant impact that it has on employee morale and feelings of being valued. An anonymous survey of employees from 115 companies, conducted by Wildgoose, discovered that 39% of those who worked flexibly had benefited from better mental health.[2]

6

Be Aware of Reduced Visibility

With the above point in mind around flexibility, it might mean that the visibility of your workforce is reduced. Without as much face to face contact, it can be harder to spot the signs of fatigue, low mood or poor performance. To this end, there is greater importance now placed on the role of regular check ins, to minimise the risk of problems going unnoticed or undiscussed.

Sickness, be that mental or physical illness can also be easily masked when working remotely, as the normal process of informing their manager may be omitted when working from home. In such instances, hours worked may be flexed and in theory managers may not even know there is an issue, until it becomes serious.

One way to support employees remotely is to measure wellbeing with the use of an external tool. The Everymind at Work app is a good example of how employees can self-support and monitor their mental health whilst also providing real-time insights to HR to stay in the loop with how people are feeling. **Get in touch to find out more about the Everymind at Work app.**

7

Management Training

Quite often, line managers will be the first people to be informed of, or notice, any anxiety or concerns around returning to the workplace. Being on the receiving end of conversations that could be particularly heavy, places a huge expectation on managers who are likely to be processing their own adjustment to the workplace.

Knowing the right things to say to employees who are experiencing anxiety is key, and so you may wish to consider management training for your top level leaders so they can build resilience and feel better equipped to support their team. This is something that we offer at Everymind at Work and you can enquire about what is involved with such training **here.**

8

Culture and Conversation

If we are to expect employees to be open and honest about their feelings around returning to the workplace, we must first create a stigma-free environment whereby they feel safe and comfortable to share their true thoughts. Now more than ever is the right time to work on the culture of the organisation and create a space within the workplace that people feel safe to be vulnerable. This responsibility doesn't have to lie solely with the HR team.

Empowering employees at every level to challenge the stigma that might still exist in the organisation is a very effective approach; by helping them feel equipped to support themselves and their colleagues. You can do this through training your employees in the tools and questions to use when approaching a colleague who they think might be struggling. Everymind at Work has developed the Everymind Champion Course for this very reason and the best bit - it's completely free for employees to undertake this course! You can sign up using this **link.**

9

Making Changes to Policies and Procedures

As many circumstances have changed in the work environment, it may be necessary to update HR Policies and Procedures and communicate these to employees accordingly. An example of this could be in policies surrounding sickness and absence.

The nature of working from home makes it harder for managers to see when employees are ill – so they are less likely to encourage people to take sick leave. Therefore, in order to avoid presenteeism, there is a need to actively advise employees to take time away from work when necessary.

This could assist in the transition back into the workplace, particularly for those who are already concerned about returning to their workplace on a full-time basis.

However, be mindful of how you'll deal with requests to work from home on a full-time permanent basis, given throughout lockdown this has been considered a temporary measure. You'll have additional contractual, H&S, wellbeing and engagement considerations to weigh up if your employees are permanently working from home.

Whilst this might not necessarily be assisting with the specific topic of anxiety about returning to work, it is a clear example of how things are changing and how policies and procedures need to align with these changes.

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Risk Assessment

...and we don't mean your typical H&S 'practical' risk assessment! Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, every employer has a duty to ensure that, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of employees are protected. Employers must conduct a risk assessment to identify the measures necessary to comply with the Act and other regulations. This assessment must also cover mental health, including workplace stress. To help you, we have created a free template which details the key areas you need to focus on and provides potential remedial actions. This can be used as a starting point to identify potential well being risks upon your return to the workplace. Download the template using this **link**.

References

[1] CIPD (2020). 4 in 10 people anxious about returning to the workplace as government prepares to publish guidance.

[2] Wildgoose (2019). The 2019-20 Flexible Working Survey.

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As we transition from one way of working to another 'new normal', we hope this guide has been useful and that you feel well equipped to support your employees.

If you would like further support from the Everymind at Work team please email info@everymindatwork.com

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