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# Returning to the workplace – a resource for managers and team leaders



With the easing of restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations have reopened. This means a return to work after a long period of furlough or returning to working in the physical workplace.

This transition will involve a change for many employees, which can often be accompanied by feelings of worry and potentially uncertainty and stress. A recent study indicated that early intervention and planning can prevent staff from developing negative coping habits in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article outlines some practical steps team leaders and managers can initiate to assist staff returning to the workplace.

## **Increase communication and open dialogue**

Where employees are returning to working onsite, managers/team leaders should ensure open channels of communication so that any concerns and issues are discussed and resolved – ideally prior to returning to work. Look for opportunities for employee input and involvement, as employees may provide some useful ideas to assist the team in readjusting to the new norm.

## **Provide as much notice as possible**

Where possible, leadership teams should consider a reasonable period of notice to give employees to make necessary plans for their return to the workplace. Coming out of a long period of lockdown, it's likely that most employees would have adjusted to a new normal, which requires time, organisation and planning to reorganise (e.g. alternative arrangements for childcare).

## **Organise return to work meetings/support**

Where possible, organising return to work meetings may assist in re-orienting employees back into the workplace, which may look different as a result of COVID-19. These conversations provide the opportunity for positive communication and for employees to discuss any difficulties or concerns. These meetings may take place over video conference prior to returning to work, or at the commencement of returning to the workplace.

## **Discuss with staff who should go back and when**

For many organisations, there will be limits on the number of employees who can occupy a workspace, in order to comply with government requirements and social distancing measures. It is important to consider the needs of employees when returning to work, beyond operational considerations. Employers may go through a consultation process to collect important information about personal circumstances and needs prior to making decisions about who returns to the office and when. There may also be considerations regarding roles that are best suited to returning to the office.

## **Supporting employees who are reluctant to return to the office**

Some employees may not want to return to the workplace. This can be a challenging situation for a manager to face. Managers/team leaders in this position should seek to work collaboratively, increasing transparency and communication with these employees. There are several reasons why some employees may be hesitant to return to work, and the first step in managing these scenarios is identifying the factors at play. Common reasons include:

- Enjoying the flexibility of working from home
- Non-COVID-related health concerns
- Child-care arrangements
- Fear of contracting infection
- Fear of infecting vulnerable family members in the household.

Once managers have identified the reasons for an employee wanting to remain working at home, they can work with staff to develop a plan that meets the needs of both the employee and the organisation.

### **Promote access to support**

It is likely that employees would benefit from engaging in individual support during this transition. Employers are encouraged to increase awareness and opportunity for employees to utilise their Employee Assistance Program and any other organisational supports available such as Peer Support Networks.

### **Provide reassurance**

Some employees will experience concerns about their health and safety when returning to the workplace. Employees will want to know what steps/precautions have been taken to ensure the workplace is safe. Employers are recommended to provide clear, concise, and sufficient information about how they will maximise health, safety and wellbeing. Employers are encouraged to communicate these steps prior to employees returning to work, in order to ease stress or anxiety, and reduce resistance relating to the transition. Employers are also encouraged to work collaboratively with their employees in developing safety precautions. Encouraging staff participation in this process maximises a sense of shared responsibility and will foster a sense of control and involvement in decision making.