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Post Covid Resources

Returning to Work – Mental as Well as Physical Challenges.

Overview

Many people have spent a significant amount of time away from their normal work environment. Some were working from home using a variety of technologies whilst others who were furloughed may have had very little contact for months and no work to do.

Key Points

1. Safety and feeling safe is paramount.
2. Work spaces have changed
3. Some may not want to return to the workplace
4. Attitudes and expectations of a “working day” are different
5. Relationships have changed
6. Rebuilding trust

Safety and Feeling Safe is Paramount

We are all more conscious of our environment and our own safety. Even when infection and death rates fall many people are anxious at the prospect of coming back to work. As an employer you have a duty of care to maintain a safe work environment and there is a plethora of guidance on this. Employers have already worked on re-arranging working areas to allow extra spacing, increase cleaning and created procedures to limit staff gathering and bottlenecks. Beyond this employers need to make sure they effectively communicate all of the plans and measures put in place so that staff can see and feel the measures. Staff also have a duty of care with regard to safety and employers also need to encourage staff to identify potential risks and suggest improvements to safety measure. This kind of engagement is good for all and breeds a sense of ownership and understanding of the risks and safety measures.

Work spaces have changed

As mentioned much has been done to increase spacing and introduce barriers to infection such as partitioning, screens and increased PPE. In addition to making the workspace look rather alien to returning staff these measures also can create a barrier to workflow and personal interaction. In some cases it may have been easier for staff to interact remotely than it is in person. Everyone is adjusting so it is important to give it a little time and work with staff to identify the bottlenecks and blockers and adapt working methods and practices to accommodate this new environment.

Some May Not Want to Return to the Workplace

We are not talking about people not wanting to work, although there may be some of those, but people who for a variety of reasons want to stay working remotely. Some may have health issues and fear the risk of infection. Others may have found eliminating lengthy commutes has allowed them both to be more productive and have more time to themselves. Each case should be looked at on its own merits but we believe the COVID lockdown has ushered in a new era of flexible and remote working. Of course there are roles, particularly in production, where staff physically have to be there. There are roles where face to face collaboration and the “buzz” of an office have an incredibly positive impact. We know some people will point to the various virtual platforms for collaboration but it should be remembered that often the “spark” of inspiration or light bulb moments come not from the formal “meeting”, physical or virtual, but from the informal off the cuff comment or something over heard. The bottom line is that going forward there may be an increase in a hybrid model of remote and flexible working. This will bring its own challenges and will require employees and employers to think of new ways of providing guidance and motivation as well as performance monitoring.

Attitudes and expectations of a “working day” are different

Linked to the above factors for many the pattern of the day whilst working remotely became very different. Without any loss in productivity people have been able to cram far more into the “working day” leaving them much more quality time with family or for other pursuits. A trivial example is that in the time it takes to make a cup of coffee, time lost in the office waiting for a kettle to boil, some people have ordered groceries on-line or put a load of laundry on. Commuting achieves new levels of misery for some people having worked from home for several months. In some cases 2 hours plus of dead time commuting each day has become demoralising. Employers still need employees to work and it is unlikely that

we will all retain the levels of freedom to format our days that we have enjoyed for the last few months, but it is clear that there are opportunities for new ways of working which will benefit both employer and employee. Again a hybrid remote / flexible model will probably increase in some sectors and roles.

Relationships have changed

No matter how good virtual platforms are there is no substitute for personal, face to face interactions for building relationships. For most people during lockdown the number of other people they interact with will have dramatically reduced. Think of your “normal” journey to work and the number of people you interact with, during your commute, grabbing a coffee on the way, greeting the receptionist in your building, your co-workers, popping out for lunch or “water cooler” chats. The main benefit of much of this is in mental well being but it is important to remember that support, collaboration and a sense of team benefit most from the informal communication over that the formal. The often sanitised virtual “meeting” has restricted these informal interactions. Even where there have been social events these relationship building and strengthening interaction are limited. Going forward both employers and employees need to recognise the value of being in contact with others continuously over an extended period of time. For us this is one of the key benefits of a hybrid model rather than full remote working.

Rebuilding Trust

The element of trust is a massive issue, particularly for furloughed employees. Whilst everyone recognised that this was a global pandemic beyond any employer’s control, suddenly being “out of work” even if temporary was quite a shock and wake up call. In addition, suddenly dropping to 80% pay was a blow that caused real hardship. A good number of employers chose, and importantly had the funds, to top up the furlough payment to ensure staff still received full pay and so they will have at least had a sense that employer had made an extra effort to take care of them. Some employers were much less supportive.

However, even on full pay, furloughing has created a new sense of vulnerability making staff lose trust in their employers. This loss of trust raises question about their immediate loyalty to the employer and also in a wider sense to the career they had chosen. Many will now question whether it is something they want to be so committed to in future. Lockdown may have been an epiphany for some that will change they way they view work and employment; more though have had their confidence shaken so employers need to work to rebuild their trust and confidence. Involving staff in the return, the new world order and the rebuild of the business will be central to that. Involvement, being listened to and delivering on promises are crucial to building trust.



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