

Returning to the Workplace as Lockdown is Easing: Tips for Employees and Managers

As lockdown measures ease across the UK, many workplaces are starting to discuss when and how to return to office-based working. For some, this might mean a return to pre-Covid office working, for others this might mean starting to work in an entirely new way, such as 'hybrid working', blending time in the office with working from home. Many people will be starting to consider what this change means for them personally and facing the impact of uncertainty about returning to work after being furloughed or working from home over the past year. The following are some reflections from our psychologists and some tips for individuals and line-managers.

The way we have been working has been referred to as 'working from home' but it is more precise to say we have been prevented from working in the way we were used to. Some of the negative reactions people are experiencing with working from home are more likely to be linked to the lack of wider social contact, the inability or difficulties with meeting and interacting with work colleagues, and the multiple pressures of the pandemic – rather than just related to working from home.



The new normal is likely to bring a “hybrid” way of working, a mixture of homeworking and office-based work. This can mean taking advantages of the opportunities provided by working in the same location, e.g. for social contact, for support from colleagues and for innovation, whilst also experiencing the improved work-life balance many people are reporting due to reduced commuting. This could also mean that workplaces might change and become spaces that are specifically designed to connect with others and support the social and interactive elements of work, helping us to dialogue, to innovate and to relationship build.

To realise these benefits, we need to support the transition back into workplaces and/or back into work routines more typical of the pre-pandemic period. We need to recognise that not everyone will be enthusiastic about changing their routines, about returning to offices and workplaces. We also know a degree of anxiety is not unusual in people returning to work after prolonged absence due to, for example, long-term sick leave or maternity/paternity leave; the same may be true of people coming off furlough or returning to their place of work after working from home. The workplace and typical work routines can become unfamiliar, and this can fuel apprehension as well as a lack of confidence. If people have experienced work stressors or unhappiness in the workplace prior to the pandemic, returning to the workplace may also mean having to address unresolved organisational issues.

The transition out of lockdown offers many opportunities for a richer, more satisfying work experience; it also offers some challenges. The following are offered as tips for both individuals and managers to help at this time.

Tips for Returning to the Workplace

For Employees

1. Reflect on what has worked and what your preferences for the future might be.

Take time to think about how home-based working has worked for you. Be prepared to get involved if there are discussions about the future of hybrid working in your organisation.

2. Pace yourself.

Allow yourself time to settle into the workplace. It may take time to become accustomed to workplace-based habits and build up your stamina.

3. Be kind to yourself.

Remind yourself that experiencing a degree of anxiety when facing change is normal. You are doing the best you can. If you are critical and harsh on yourself for feeling anxious then you will only increase the sense of threat and raise your anxiety further.

4. Control what can be controlled.

We need to control the things we can and let go of the things we cannot control. Start distinguishing between what you can and cannot control. Have an action plan for the things you might find difficult when returning to your workplace. For example, speak to your manager or a colleague you trust if you feel anxious about certain activities or work shifts.

5. Keep yourself fuelled.

Adjusting to change can be energy depleting. Allow yourself opportunities to reset and to relax. We also know that gentle exercise is good for us and boosts our wellbeing.

6. Bring you attention to the here and now.

Right here, right now, Am I OK? This is an important question to ask ourselves. Often our mind can pull us away from an OK here and now, into the future which may be uncertain and anxiety provoking. Regulations may be changing frequently, and you may hear conflicting media discussions however keep your focus on the moment. While some things are uncertain there is also a lot to be hopeful about. Make a note of small (and big) wins, notice and appreciate the good things as they happen. Everyday mindfulness is also a way of bringing your mind back to the present.

For Managers

1. Provide clarity on the process as well as the outcomes.

Managers should provide as much clarity as they can about how the return to work will happen, when and how decisions will be made and the timescales for the process.

2. Be patient and accept variations in peoples' perception of risk.

Accept that some employees may be keen to return to work while others may feel more anxious. Take time to listen to the staff's concerns and explain how you are making the workplace Covid-secure.

3. Don't expect an instant return to normal.

A lot may have happened in people's lives over the past year. Be mindful that it might take time for people to build up their confidence especially if they have not been working for some time.

4. Listen compassionately and offer support.

Allow time for people to talk. Normalise feelings..."It's understandable..." Consider flexible working, revisit working hours/patterns and discuss reasonable adjustments if appropriate. Build self-esteem and help the person feel they can take control in a positive way: e.g. "I know you are very able to do..."

5. Provide and encourage opportunity for socialising of new members of staff.

Prioritise the socialisation of new people who have joined the organisation during lockdown and have been working from home. Make time for new staff to meet colleagues in person and get to know their team.

6. Take care of yourself.

As a manager you may feel like you are wearing many hats. While offering support to people you may also be thinking about the needs of the business and how this could affect the team. It is important to also pay attention to your needs in terms of self-care. Remind yourself that you do not need to know all the answers. You are offering help but you cannot take responsibility for everyone's problems.

7. Embrace the possibilities that this change can bring.

Talk to your team about what has worked well over the past year and how this can be sustained in the new way of working. Re-think how technology can help people connect and how it could be used to enhance hybrid working models.