

We're heading back into the office... or are we and what does it really mean?

Places of work are opening up, with many riding the wave of optimism in a return to normality and the easing of restrictions around personal behaviours, such as wearing a mask and social distancing, bringing relief to many.

Amidst the complex challenges of the past year there have been benefits - less time lost to the commute, flexibility around family and life commitments and greater opportunity to undertake wellbeing activities, such as a lunch time run, yoga or a walk.

With 'hybrid' the buzz word when it comes to the new way of working, this comes at a cost in the eyes of some. Keeping on top of where people are working, who is in or out of the office and ensuring teams remain glued effectively together is a new and substantial task on top of day-to-day remits. With the Government also proposing legal changes, preventing employers forcing staff back to the office unless they can prove it is essential, there are real challenges on the horizon for employers, potentially adding a whole layer of new administration to the traditional HR function.

A recent Envoy survey (UK Return To The Workplace Report) found that 59% of employees are worried about their safety when it comes to returning to the office.

Employers will need to manage different needs and expectations, with some anxious and others keen to be back, as well as the enduring thread of 'business as usual' with no dip in productivity, no matter where an employee is working. Playing into this, 62% say that their employer is monitoring timekeeping and attendance more closely than ever (People At Work 2021 | A Global Workforce Review) giving rise to a new level of issues around employees' perceptions of fairness and trust as well as undoubtedly fuelling anxiety.

Aside from performance there are cultural risks too, with the potential for a void between those in the office and those at home which, if not managed carefully, could breed resentment between colleagues.

All of these aspects undoubtedly compound the already increased challenges around personal wellbeing. The impact will fall out in different ways and at different levels, including mental health and the exacerbation seen particularly during the pandemic around stress, anxiety and depression.

We must learn to live with Coronavirus, but what does that mean as we move into the future of working, and how do managers and leaders practically support wellbeing as a part of the shifting landscape?

The CIPD (Health & Wellbeing At Work Survey) suggests that in response to this continuing backdrop of uncertainty, along with several priority actions, there is a need to develop a 'strategic and holistic' approach to people's health, safety and wellbeing.

STRENGTH IN VULNERABILITY

Almost everyone has experienced some level of discomfort in their mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic, meaning the universality of experience is more translatable and decreases stigma...but only if people, especially those in a position of leadership, share their experiences. Being honest about mental health challenges as a leader is relatable, human and opens the door for employees to feel comfortable talking about challenges of their own; with research showing that authentic leadership can cultivate trust and improve employee engagement and performance.

COMMITMENT AT THE CORE

An HBR study ([Ways Managers Can Support Mental Health](#)) showed that employees who felt their managers were not good at communicating were 23% more likely than others to experience mental health decline.

A Proactive, rather than reactive, conversation normalises the opportunity for team members to feel more comfortable talking about both their remit and mental health challenges. This type of dialogue also opens the door for managers to begin support up front, rather than reverse engineering, meaning less chance of employees reaching the burnout and productivity decline stage. It's important to consider that the signposts to support can often be missed in a busy inbox, so reiterating what is available and encouragement to utilise it is very valid as a repeat communication across touchpoints.

LEAD FROM THE FRONT

There must be “visible commitment from the senior leadership team to ensure wellbeing is embedded and taken seriously, across the organisation” suggests the CIPD (Health & Wellbeing at Work Survey). CIPD's findings are encouraging. They show a significant increase in the proportion of senior leaders who have employee wellbeing firmly on the agenda when, more than ever, leaders who show compassion and foster a culture of trust and kindness are needed. This is encouraging to promote courage for people to discuss wellbeing concerns in the knowledge that they will be listened to, receive understanding and support; organisations simply saying they support mental health is no longer enough.

It is also important to recognise that managers themselves have been under increased pressure during the pandemic, having to focus on their team's wellbeing along with their own remit, often forgetting to take care of themselves. Managers must be encouraged and supported to proactively ensure they both take and share their own wellbeing actions - a walk at lunch, prioritising time off and workday boundaries, so both they and their teams don't burn out into this new era.

A WORKFORCE FIT FOR THE FUTURE

The return to the future of working presents many challenges, but even more opportunities.

Employers who equip managers and leaders with the ability to hold sensitive and, sometimes difficult, conversations about mental health and wellbeing, acknowledge early signs when employees are struggling and signpost them to accessible help will reap the rewards of a content and productive workforce for the future.

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