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# Coronavirus: returning to the workplace guide

This guide will help you plan your organisation's next steps as lockdown measures start easing

As the timing and nature of any relaxation of restrictions is complex, it is sensible for businesses to consider all the options and have the capability to move quickly from one scenario to another. Employers need to plan now for what will be a staged return to the workplace over what will be prolonged periods. Their guiding principle should be how organisations take care of their people and safeguard their health and well-being.

Many people will be concerned and anxious about being in workplaces or travelling to workplaces. They will want to know that their organisation is managing social distancing, retaining their support for physical and mental health and changing their thinking about flexible and remote working. This should be at the heart of any decisions and plans that organisations make.

This short guide addresses managing returning to the workplace.

While identifying how best your organisation can manage its return to work, the current crisis offers a significant opportunity to reassess traditional approaches to flexible and remote working. Hopefully insights from performance during this crisis will have given indicators of where remote working has been most effective, and so decision-making should always address *Why not flexible working?*

## Returning to the workplace

How you manage a return to the workplace will depend on the type of closure arrangements you have been operating. The 3 most prevalent types are:

- Business not trading at all (all staff on short term lay off)
- Business trading on a limited basis (some staff on short term lay off, some working from home or in company premises) or where only 'essential' workers are currently in work

- Business trading fully but all staff working from home.

Whichever of these is closest to your individual business, there are some common issues you will need to address:

- There will be a requirement for some form of social distancing for some time to come. Lockdown restrictions will likely be lifted incrementally, and all staff who can work from home will be expected to carry on doing so. Where certain groups of employees or businesses are part of a sectoral return to the workplace, employers will need to consider detailed risk management approaches to safeguard their health and minimise the risk of infection. It's therefore essential that employers continue to base any plans for returning to the workplace on [up-to-date Government and public health guidance](#) in relation to COVID-19.
- Given that the priority for every business should be managing a safe return to the workplace for staff, it's crucial that you work in close collaboration with your health and safety and occupational health teams wherever possible. Communicate the practical measures you are taking to staff on a regular basis to help reassure them that their health, well-being and safety is your top priority. Make sure employees are clear about what procedure they should follow if they begin to feel unwell, both in the workplace and at home.
- You will need to review your workplace and consider – can staff maintain a 2m physical distance between each other? How will you manage meetings, interviews and other interactions? What about communal areas such as canteens or kitchen areas? How can you implement resourcing strategies to support physical distancing such as 'cohorting' (ie keeping teams of workers working together and as small as possible), having different teams work alternating days, or staggering working hours so that not all staff are in at the same time? Will you need separate one-way pathways for entrance and egress. And how will compliance with this be monitored? Induction and communication will be central to ensuring employees are both familiar and compliant with all these initiatives.
- All of the key protection and hygiene measures will continue to apply to minimise the spread of infection, such as reminding staff about regular and effective handwashing, and providing hand sanitiser. If your premises have been closed for a period of time, you should carry out a deep-clean before you reopen. You should therefore review your cleaning arrangements, for example ensuring all phones/keyboards etc are wiped daily with anti-viral cleaner. You can refer to the [Government guidance](#) for more information.

- Depending on your working environment, you may need to consider providing additional PPE, including gloves, masks or anti-viral hand gel. If you want people to wear gloves/masks, then you will also need to think about training/briefing staff on their correct usage – since both can be ineffective if used inappropriately..
- Staff who travel or visit other company premises may also need additional equipment or briefing. Remote meeting facilities and video-conferencing should be encouraged wherever possible to minimise the need for staff to travel and/or use public transport. You can refer to our series of [tips for making the most of remote working](#) and the recording of our webinar session on looking after your remote teams. Guidance on travel to work will also be necessary.
- The risks to people’s health from this pandemic are psychological as well as physical. These include anxiety about the ongoing health crisis and fear of infection, as well social isolation due to the lockdown. Many will have experienced challenging domestic situations, such as juggling childcare or caring for a vulnerable relative, as well as financial worries if a partner has lost their income. Some will have experienced illness, or bereavement. Even if staff have carried on working and participating in video meetings, they will still need to adjust to working in a shared environment with colleagues. Some may take more time than others and it’s likely that most people will need a period of readjustment. Some members of staff may have concerns about travelling to work on public transport – or it may not be as readily available. Many may find that they are still coming to terms with the significant change which society has seen, and the familiar workplace routines could feel very different. If your business has an Employee Assistance Programme or access to Occupational Health advisers make staff aware of the services they can provide CIPD members can also access a [new well-being helpline](#) for advice and support.
- It will be vital to have a re-orientation or re-induction process for returning staff. Encourage and support every manager to have a one to one return meetings with every employee, where a key focus is on health, safety and well-being. Managers need to have a sensitive and open discussion with every individual and discuss any adjustments and/or ongoing support they may need to facilitate an effective return to the workplace. This is especially important for those who have been on short term lay off, and should cover topics such as changes in company services or procedures, how specific customer queries or issues are being addressed, or changes in supply arrangements, as well as any changes to their work duties or tasks. It could be that some staff require a phased return to their full role, or want to discuss a new working arrangement, especially if their domestic situation has changed because of

the pandemic.

- It will be important for every employer to ensure that the organisation culture is inclusive, and that every employee feels they are returning to a supportive and caring environment. The pandemic has had an unequal impact across the workforce in many ways, as different groups of employees, and individuals, will have been affected in diverse ways according to their job role and individual circumstances. The uneven nature of people's work and personal experiences and the challenging nature of the lock-down and ongoing situation, means there could be potential for some negative feelings creeping into the employment relations climate. Therefore, it's important that the organisation fosters an inclusive working environment, and managers are sensitive to any underlying tensions and confident about nipping potential conflict in the bud. You may wish to refer to our [report on managing conflict in the modern workplace](#) for advice.
- People's expectations around work, and how they fulfil their role, and reconcile work and domestic responsibilities, could have changed dramatically. This is an ideal time for employers to think more creatively about effective ways of working, and harness more agile and flexible working practices to meet individuals' changing expectations. This approach could also help employers to develop more effective people management practices that are more productive for the organisation. This may require employees to review existing or produce new policies on flexible working; you can refer to the [CIPD's flexible working page](#) for advice on how to improve flexible working whilst maintaining team cultures.
- What criteria will you use to recall staff? Will it be simply business need? How will you consider individual personal circumstances? The management of certain age groups, such as those over 60, those with health issues or at-risk dependents, will need careful consideration, and ideally reasonable accommodations would be agreed. Recalling certain cohorts while others remain out of work will need clear business criteria to minimise the risk of employee relations issues. Remember not to use discriminatory criteria; be fair and inclusive and keep in mind your organisational values and diversity and inclusion aims.

CIPD Ireland members can seek individual advice from the employment law helpline on 1800 812 603.

## Dealing with varying circumstances

Since not all restrictions will be lifted at the same time, there are some other issues that you will need to consider:

1. Staff who are advised to stay home or self-isolate
2. Staff who have suffered a bereavement
3. Managing holidays after the return.

Some of your staff may still be required to stay home because they are vulnerable and at particular risk from COVID-19 infection. Others may be very concerned because they live or care for someone who is classed as high risk. If individuals are still cocooning as restrictions begin to be lifted, you should allow them to continue to work from home if possible.

Staff who develop symptoms of COVID-19 - or who live with someone who does - will still need to self-isolate for 14 days. The rules around this have not changed and information can be found on the HSE website.

It is likely that you will have employees who have suffered the bereavement of a partner or other family member. While there is no statutory right to bereavement leave, other than in the case of the death of a child, you should be sympathetic to requests for additional time off during this period, and if you can we recommend that you pay normal pay.

Remember that, while all deaths affect individuals, in the case of COVID-19 family members may have been unable to see their loved one for some time before death, and not been able to attend the funeral. Employees who have suffered a bereavement are likely to need ongoing flexibility and support to grieve. Provide bereavement guidance, to support bereaved employees and their colleagues on how ways to be supportive and manage the return to work process, Make sure you make them aware of any mental health support (such as Employee Assistance Programmes) you offer, and that managers are able to have sensitive and supportive conversations with people.

You may have an employee who has died from COVID-19. You will need to support their colleagues and again, signpost staff to any mental health support you offer. You will also want to be in contact with their family to offer support, especially where you offer Death In Service benefits.

In relation to annual leave:

- Encourage staff to take previously agreed holiday dates - even if working from home, people still need time away from work.
- Have a clear policy to allow as many people as possible to take leave this year while still maintaining key business services - perhaps relaxing normal rules around maximum numbers allowed off at once.

## Other issues to consider

- If your business operates internationally, you will need to plan based on the restrictions and/or guidance of different countries. Some may maintain stricter arrangements than the Ireland; others may lift restrictions sooner. Adopt a consistent approach while ensuring you are aware of local circumstances.
- International travel is likely to remain disrupted even when other restrictions are lifted. Some countries have strict quarantine rules for those entering, which may prevent travel. Even if this is not the case, some staff may have concerns about travelling to other countries where the risk of COVID-19 is higher. Be aware of your health and safety responsibilities and keep business travel to an absolute minimum. As many have realised during the current lockdown, many (though not all) business meetings can be done via video-conferencing.
- In addition to health and well-being, employers should bear in mind the importance of diversity and inclusion in any decisions or plans made. From ensuring that decisions don't discriminate against certain groups of employees (e.g. decisions about flexible, home or part time working due to school closures where women could be disproportionately affected leading to sex discrimination claims) to fostering an inclusive working environment that takes account of the different experiences people have had during the pandemic.

## Conclusion

Changes to the current lockdown restrictions are likely to be slow and gradual. They are also likely to fluctuate. While the specific steps will to be taken to start to lift the lockdown will vary, there are certain principles and measures that every employer will need to consider. Organisations therefore need to use this time to prepare and plan their next steps.

Communication with your staff is key. Keeping people informed of what your business is doing – whether it is good or bad news for individuals - will help them to make their own decisions and give them some degree of security in very uncertain times. Knowing they are valued and supported by their employer – and that you continue to prioritise their health and safety – will be pivotal to their well-being.

Pay specific attention to staff who have particular requirements (e.g. health issues, disability, childcare or other caring responsibilities). They may not be in a position to return as quickly to 'normal' working. Be aware that some employees who had a reasonable adjustment before may need a different one on their return to a workplace.

Similarly, many individuals who didn't previously have a mental health condition may have experienced mental health challenges and need to discuss changes to help them overcome any barriers and fulfil their role.

A guide such as this cannot possibly cover every business situation, but it should help you think about the sort of issues that all businesses will need to consider as restrictions begin to be relaxed. Keep checking the CIPD Ireland [coronavirus hub](#) for further resources and advice and keep up to date with the latest government advice.

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