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# Tips to manage a return to the workplace

As workplaces plan to re-open, and regardless of whether individuals are coming back to an onsite or hybrid working model, supports and guidance on the new workplace will be necessary

In planning for a return to the workplace, individuals are starting to move on from the experience of the last year or so, which has not been a normal form of working. As time has gone on throughout this pandemic, people have had to adjust to new ways of living.

Our life experience may not have been as rich as before the pandemic, but we have developed new habits and adjusted to new routines and ways of working. We return as different people to a different workplace, so nervousness and anxiety can be expected. And that is alongside the need to protect from any health risk, as per the [Workplace Safety Protocol](#). Below are key issues to address.

## Anxiety

Unlike pre-COVID-19, when only a handful of employees at any given time might have had stressors impacting their work, first returning to workplace, in whatever structure, will be a stressor connected to a very big change in routine. In the transition back to a new routine post-pandemic, virtually all employees will likely have personal challenges competing for their energy and attention. Preparation and showing care, kindness and wellbeing will be key success factors. Ensure managers are ready for this, and know what supports are available.

## Induction

With everyone socially isolating for over a year, there will need to be an induction and integration process to support people on returning to the workplace. Regardless of whether individuals are coming back to an onsite or hybrid model, how things work, COVID-19 response, where things now are, use of desks and equipment will have changed for many.

Plan an induction process for everyone, even those who may be infrequently onsite. Videos and guidance shared in advance will help people feel more comfortable and informed. Keep health and safety and COVID-19 protection at the heart in all of this. When onsite allow time for formal and informal sessions, and have resources / tools there to remind and support individuals to comply with the safety rules. Reinforce the expected behaviours in the workplace, the need for respect, patience, listening, and allow for time-out space where people can get a break.

## Collaboration

Big gaps emerged during the pandemic around team working, collaboration and innovation ([CIPD HR Practices in Ireland 2021](#)). These have to be purposefully built into time onsite and blended working models, so time at the workplace provides face-to-face engagement, both formal and informal. If everyone is working blended, things like face-to-face meetings, team collaboration, have to be planned so the right people are on site on the right days.

Make sure an office redesign maximizes the space for collaboration and innovation. Managers will need to work with teams to put some structures and schedules in place so the days in the office are most meaningful and focused on connections, both scheduled and opportunistic. Purposeful collaboration and creativity have to be central, along with time for the casual conversations that happen before and after meetings or from just meeting people that you might otherwise never see when walking around or grabbing a coffee. While retaining some of the efficient practices in virtual meetings, there is also a need to create time blocks, for the random connections that are critical for developing team and organisational culture.

## Equality

Equality and parenting/caring issues will have to be closely managed. Our [CIPD HR Practices in Ireland 2021](#) research identified that more women than men took time off to care for children during the pandemic and that women's careers are most likely to be negatively affected. This will require close monitoring and interventions to deliver equality and fairness, and attract and retain minority groups. Hybrid working is a positive way to enhance flexibility. Employees have more choice over when, where and how they work, and employers will be able to attract and retain a more diverse pool of employees and those with skills in demand.

When you have onsite roles, consider how you can maximise the flexibility for these individuals, so they too get benefit. Recognising these equality issues and talking about how flexible working and other ways of supporting employees will be critical on returning

to the workplace.

## Hybrid working

Where hybrid working is being introduced, this will be new from so many angles, and expectations need to be managed. The key principles around its implementation should be developed, and it is worth calling out that we will not get it right first time. Future blended working patterns needs to be based on customer, team and organisational needs, not just an individual's preference. Balancing these in a fair way will be key to long-term success. A period of trial and testing should be introduced, then reviewed, and trialled again, as flexibility and a change of work patterns will emerge. Individuals will change their mind, will realise that what looked like the best option from afar is not working out in practice. And new business needs will continuously emerge.

Hybrid working is now becoming central to talent strategy and can give the best of both worlds. Individuals can be task focussed working from home, but a blended approach can balance this with the requirement for team collaboration, innovation and development on site. The case for productivity during remote working has been made and employees will be seeking choice over where and how they work. Employers who do not offer that choice will struggle to attract and retain key skills. Senior leaders may challenge this, and will need to be given the evidence to demonstrate that forcing everyone onsite will not work for the future. In our [CIPD HR Practices in Ireland 2021](#), research 69% of organisations reported that productivity had either improved or stay the same as a result of remote working.

Reducing long commutes will save individuals significant time and money and result in a positive health and productivity impact on a nationwide basis. It presents more options to employees as to where they can live and work, and provides a much more sustainable approach from a commute and environment/ housing perspective.

## Culture

One of the biggest challenges for leaders and managers will be the culture – bringing people together again around a common mission, purpose and ways of working. A gap has already emerged between those working remotely and essential onsite workers in some companies so getting everyone to re-engage on a common agenda will be critical (remote working had a negative impact on culture for 37% of respondents in our [CIPD HR Practices in Ireland 2021](#), and a third reported a positive impact). As many business processes have moved to be virtually delivered, further work has to be done on upskilling, development and career management to be effective in a remote and blended working world.

**Finally,** In their 2021 bulletin on Remote Working on the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council confirmed that remote working can secure productivity and competitiveness benefits, and deliver a broader pool of talent, better retention of staff, and improved cost-effectiveness through more sustainable ways of working. However, it also recognises that some enterprises may struggle with additional costs to establish these arrangements and if they had to equip another workstation for employees.