

Top things to consider when returning to the workplace, whilst COVID-19 is still a threat

Contents

[Phased return](#)

Page 2

[Social distancing](#)

Page 2

[Hygiene standards](#)

Page 2

[Re-opening canteens/
restaurant facilities](#)

Page 3

[Health and wellbeing](#)

Page 3

[Induction/reorientation](#)

Page 3

[Rebuild workplace morale](#)

Page 3

[Communicate in a united way
with your employees](#)

Page 4

[Educate your prospective visitors](#)

Page 4

[Scenario planning](#)

Page 4

[Embed your learnings](#)

Page 4

[About BASDA](#)

Page 5

Many businesses are looking for support to help plan for a return to the workplace over the coming months whilst COVID-19 is still prevalent and detail of the various restrictions and timings are evolving. BASDA (a leading trade body for business software companies) have produced this guide to help all businesses anticipate and prepare how they safely manage 'return to work' scenarios for employees and to plan now for what is likely to be a be phased return to the workplace.

This should not be read as a definitive guide. As more detail emerges and circumstances evolve so too will this guide. Updates will therefore be published with version number, date and easily identifiable updated narrative.

Re-entry into physical workspaces will be challenging. Meeting the physical safety, social distancing as well as employee situations, preferences, concerns and fears must all be taken into account and will all be critical in supporting employees to rebuild their 'community' at work.

This guide identifies the key areas that businesses might consider based on our members' collective feedback – both as employers and employees (noting that many areas are not mutually exclusive).

It should also be noted that this guide references your premises but there are two key variables:

- Premises which are only accessible to your business; and
- Premises which you may share with other companies, and so will have to work with the office management company/ landlord and possibly other tenant companies.

1 Phased return

Whilst the government are encouraging a return to work for those who cannot work effectively from home, for many businesses a phased return to work for employees will be the best option. Managing the preferences and individual circumstances of employees will be critical to protecting health (both mental and physical). Think about how a phased return can be implemented – will it be on an opt-in basis? It is crucial that businesses recognise that many of their employees have, and are continuing to go through, traumatic experiences and it may take some time and effort for an employer to reassure such employees it is safe to return to the workplace. Businesses must risk assess the return of employees, including re-orientation for such employees, to the workplace to identify health and safety risks and take appropriate steps to remove or minimise any such risks. Recognise that some employees may be classed as ‘vulnerable’ employees and identify how best to treat them. Could they continue to be allowed to work from home and/or if they are returning to the workplace what extra measures need to be put in place as a duty of care?

Employees should work from home if they can (dependent on the nature of the business) or is a staggered reintroduction to the workplace appropriate? Is it feasible to establish new processes such as rotating groups of employees on alternate days or is it necessary to have all employees return to work at the same time? Would it be more appropriate to continue with some employees home working on a medium, perhaps even longer-term basis? What criteria will you use to recall employees? Will it be simply on a business need? Individual personal circumstances must be considered to avoid any discrimination. What approach should be considered for annual leave requests as a business phases back employees – a review of annual leave policy could be timely.

It may be prudent to check in with your key service providers before re-opening a site. Are they still fully operational and able to resume their contractual obligations?

Businesses will need to manage many such scenarios. Success will be dependent on clear and timely communication to all employees. Provide guidance and establish protocols on workplace measures you have introduced and adopted. Think about the best way for information to be communicated to your employees before they return to work and once they are back how those updates will be provided.

2 Social distancing

With longer term social distancing requirements inevitable, every business will need to review the current needs along with the physical boundaries of the building they operate out of and be proactive in reconfiguring workspaces to adhere to strict social distancing requirements. This will impact on individual seating arrangements and communal/shared spaces such as cafeterias, toilets, stairwells, lifts, meeting rooms, printing areas, access points in and out of the building etc.

Additional considerations exist for those businesses operating in shared office space where liaison with landlord and other tenants is critical to ensure all communal areas support the required health and safety measures for your employees. Further considerations could include whether there is a requirement for transparent shields for dividing desks and reception, floor markers directing foot traffic, visuals to signpost directional routes (particularly prevalent on main/busy staircases), hygiene reminders etc. How can a business ensure single person use of vending areas, lifts etc.? Is it practical and/or possible to implement a one-way system to minimise potential cross contamination? Would minimising the number of times employees can enter and exit the workplace and, where practicable, designating one entry and one exit point be practical? Where this is often not possible, providing a list of clear guidelines around distancing in key areas is essential, and ensuring these are prominent and visible throughout the premises and/or on the intranet if applicable. Regular reminders of social distancing are imperative as it is human nature to be social and interactive. Should these be monitored to enforce social distancing?

Consider re-visiting DSE requirements as employees may be working in new positions. Also consider other health and safety implications to suit revised floor designs e.g. designated fire wardens, fire risk assessments etc.

3 Hygiene standards

If your building has been closed for a period of time arrange for a robust clean before reopening. Future cleaning arrangements should be reviewed to ensure all phones/keyboards, door handles, lift buttons, vending machines, etc. are wiped daily with anti-viral cleaner. Maintaining and demonstrating a rigorous cleaning schedule and continuing hygiene procedures will be vital to employees' wellbeing and safety. With stocks of anti-bacterial products and face-masks limited, look at purchasing these well in advance of re-opening. It is important to be able to provide employees with hand sanitisers and possibly face masks should some want to use them. Prices of these items are also much higher than normal, so ensure there is sufficient budget to purchase for the next 2-3 months.

Are signs/posters throughout building required to remind employees about regular and effective handwashing? Are there sufficient sanitising dispensers in prominent places around the workplace including hand sanitiser, hand-washing facilities, anti-bacterial wipes for surfaces and equipment? Are these being regularly refilled? Are bathrooms big enough to facilitate social distancing? If not, what alerting process can be put in place to advise on the ‘1 in, 1 out’ basis and if anyone is ‘in’ at any one time? Assess “locking off” cubicles and urinals to allow social distancing to take place. Determine how many facilities are required to be operational based on the number of employees during each phase of the return to the workplace.

4 Re-opening canteens/restaurant facilities

Consider when this is appropriate to do based on the numbers of employees returning to work. Offering a food service of some description discourages employees out of the office to the high street, therefore reducing risk.

When re-opening canteen/restaurant facilities initially carry out a risk assessment with your catering provider and arrange for a thorough clean if the canteen has not been operational for some time.

A number of checks should be carried out such as ensuring stock is checked for sell-by dates, checking that catering/cooking equipment is safe and operational, making seating unavailable until social distancing restrictions have been lifted fully or you can guarantee employees will sit 2m apart, supplying take-away cartons and cutlery only, adding floor distancing stickers at till points and sneeze screens at checkout points.

Consideration could be given on opening for longer hours to accommodate a call/collect operation or reviewing the logistics where perhaps an email/telephone ordering system with a limited menu could be made available with individual collection times.

5 Health and wellbeing

The risks to an individual's health from this pandemic may be psychological as well as physical. Many will be anxious about the potential return to the workplace, have had financial constraints or have experienced self isolation challenges during lockdown. Some may also not be 'social animals' by their very nature and so require very specific support (in their overall wellbeing). Expectations are that employees will need variable times to adjust to working back in a shared environment with colleagues. Some employees may have notable concerns about travelling to work on public transport (which may be greater than any they have regarding their workplace especially as the government is discouraging the use of public transport due to social distancing and therefore challenges with capacity). This should be taken into consideration when deciding, if undertaking a phased return, which employees come back first.

Is it appropriate to consider flexible working hours and travel arrangements to minimise stress and risk of exposure? Is it possible to provide transport (with all the appropriate cleanliness, distancing and insurance requirements)? Are there sufficient facilities for those who want to cycle to work (as encouraged by the government)?

Continually communicate what is being done as assurances will be needed for some/many employees.

Consider how best to support line managers as they are the first point of contact in dealing with the challenges and so check-in with them and be prepared to give them support required to enable them lead, motivate and support their team.

6 Induction/reorientation

As different cohorts of employees (those that continued to work at the office/workplace, those that worked from home, those that were on furlough) return they will face new ways of working, new policies and new measures on health and safety and so an induction/reorientation process should be undertaken.

Managers and those in leadership roles should have open dialogue with every employee to discuss how to support an effective return to the workplace. This is particularly relevant for those who have been on furlough and may have been out of the business as policies or processes have changed or indeed may need to return into shift, staggered hours or other new workplace patterns.

It could be that some employees require a phased return, or want to discuss a new working arrangement, especially if their domestic situation remains changed because of the pandemic. Is this the opportunity now to think more creatively about effective ways of working and harness more agile and flexible working practices to meet individuals' changing expectations?

Businesses should be particularly sensitive when reintroducing remote and furloughed members of their team to the workplace. Considerations should include how their safety will be managed when returning to work as these individuals will have spent time out of their regular working patterns, may feel out-of-touch on company practice, and in some cases resent the decision to have been put on furlough in the first place. It will be important for businesses to re-orientate, provide sufficient time for readjustment and create an environment where there is a sense of belonging.

If a business is considering external recruitment new methods of interviewing (virtual), induction, training and assimilation into the team could be considered at an early stage.

7 Rebuild workplace morale

The psychological component of returning to office life requires as much focus as the practical one. For employees that have been away from their workplace a period of time after returning may feel unsettling. Much may have changed in the interim. Invest efforts to rebuild workplace morale. Acknowledge any employee concerns and dispiritedness and treat announcements regarding the new operating environment with sensitivity. Create morale boosting events and support networks through the team and HR (whether that is virtual or through events adhering to appropriate social distancing guidelines).

8 Communicate in a united way with your employees

Ensure all employees in leadership or management roles have consistent messaging and communicate regularly and openly with employees about the situation, how it is impacting the business and what this means for them. As part of this, businesses should take time to consult their employees and understand their concerns in returning to the workplace. This “two-way” process ensures your employees are listened to and know that they can make suggestions that could support and/or lead to changes. It is this two-way communication that builds trust during this time. Consider dedicated forums/feedback mechanisms (i.e. email) to feedback where everybody has the opportunity (whether privately or publicly) to be heard.

9 Educate your prospective visitors

Ensure you are updating all visitors on the steps you, as a business, are taking to keep them safe. Consider how to minimise non-essential visitors to a business premises.

Do they need to visit a physical premises? Do employees need to visit customers? Consider whether a face-to-face meeting or event is needed. Minimise ‘in person’ meetings. If they are necessary, implement rules so that social distancing can be maintained. Could it be replaced by a teleconference or online event? Could the meeting or event be scaled down so that fewer people attend? In fact, is a meeting required – instil this discipline in all to help keep down overheads in these challenging times.

10 Scenario planning

Businesses should prepare for the potential shut-down scenario if an employee tests positive at one of their work locations. Develop a plan and process allowing speedy implementation on what to do if someone becomes ill with suspected COVID-19 at your business premises.

Is the Business Continuity Plan fit for purpose and been tested to confirm it can cope with any future implications should a second wave (and a second shut down) or other market factors occur to impact your operation? Could your business consider ways to take temperatures checks and have testing facilities with instructions to send any employee home who tests positive?

11 Embed your learnings

The changes enforced by COVID-19 will have identified many gaps and challenges; however, do not overlook any benefits that may arise. Many businesses have uncovered stronger collaboration within teams, more productive working routines and a reinforcement of positive health practices. Smart businesses should identify lessons learned and embed such learnings into how they conduct business in future including the fact that Disaster Recovery is no longer purely moving a number of key roles into another building somewhere.

Return to work programs are essential for businesses to develop now in order to enable to enable seamless transition and integration of employees back into the workplace. Businesses are encouraged, as early as possible, to embrace the likely ‘new normal’.

About BASDA

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BASDA
The Voice of UK Business Software

Published by:
BASDA – Business Application Software Developers' Association
PO Box 118, Dursley, Gloucestershire GL11 9BU
T +44 (0)1494 868030 E marketing@basda.org