



Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



Although we may not be in the position for businesses to reopen, workplaces must begin to consider what this post-pandemic work-life means for them and their employees. There is palpable anxiety about returning to old and familiar ways of working and engaging with others. The sense of worry is both natural and expected, and many people are currently experiencing it as they anticipate and engage in their return to work.

By taking a thoughtful approach to return to the physical workplace, organizations and their management teams can use readily available resources to make their post-pandemic plan comprehensible while considering employee's limitations and concerns.

- Will the physical spaces around the workplace need adjustments to prevent infection rates from COVID-19 or other communicable illnesses in the future?
- Will workers be enthusiastic about returning to the office, or have they embraced remote working?

- Must all employees return to work as it was before, or does a hybrid model present more benefits?

This article asks employers to consider the different elements that need to be addressed in return-to-work planning.¹ It should also help them assess how new ways of working will help both employers and employees remain happy, healthy and safe in this new reality.

How the pandemic has changed the way businesses operate

The COVID-19 crisis has brought many changes² in the way companies in all sectors and regions do business, and many companies expect changes, like remote working, to endure far into the future. According to a study of Canadians, 29 percent of those who worked from home during the pandemic would prefer to continue working remotely indefinitely, with 44 percent preferring a hybrid of in-person and at-home work and only 27 percent would prefer to return to the worksite full time. It seems Canadians aren't the only ones setting this trend.

- One survey of employees in the US showed that 55% want to return to a hybrid model of home and office working.³
- UK employers expect regular remote work to increase, from 18% pre-pandemic to 37% post-pandemic.⁴
- In China, one employment expert has predicted that in 10 years,⁵ there will be a 60/40 split of on-site/remote work.

Of course, not all businesses can accommodate remote work for all employees. Thus, we are seeing return-to-work (RTW) being put into place, with some additional changes being made to the daily processes around the workplace.⁶ Some potential changes could include:

- New technologies and processes that aid the flow of communications without putting employees at risk of contracting COVID-19 or other illnesses.
- New policies governing how we all interact in the workplace.
- Research-based steps which can help to improve the engagement and productivity of all workers, remote or in-office.

Implementing return-to-office for employees who were working from home

Are you planning to transition employees back to the office once safe to do so? A return to work (RTW) plan that specifically outlines how employees should safely and comfortably return to work after the COVID-19 pandemic is going to be one of the most valuable documents you create right now.⁷

An RTW plan includes the following elements:

- The RTW goal. The primary goal of RTW planning is to return employees to work in a way that is both suitable and safe. Appropriate work is productive and consistent with the current requirements put in place during the pandemic.
- The specific actions and activities required to achieve the RTW goal.
- Each employee, supervisor or manager, on-site health professional, union representatives, and any other personnel and their specific responsibilities.
- Time frames for achieving the primary goal(s).
- A clear definition of what is considered progress.
- Health care needs and safety expectations which align with the current COVID-19 health and safety requirements set out by organizations like the CDC.⁸

How to ease employees back to the workplace

The companies that reimagine their policies, operations and workforce will perform best in the new version of “business as usual.” What looks and feels different at first can positively affect productivity, team resiliency, and employees’ happiness. The key for employee comfort is that they know they are returning to a psychologically safe workplace.⁹

- Communicate and support your plan.
- Rebuild employee engagement (online and in-person).
- When possible, introduce a hybrid or stepped approach in returning employees to work.
- Understand precisely what employee concerns exist in your team—they will likely vary.
- Consider mental health as one of the keys to a holistic RTW strategy.
- Focus communications on the well-being of employees, not the work itself or the level of productivity.

Managers must understand the everyday challenges their team members face, from isolation to distractions to lack of face-to-face supervision. That way, they can better support workers as they ease back into the workplace with the help of proactive communication.¹⁰ Some key tips include:

- 1) Regular, structured check-ins.
- 2) Multiple communication options (and established expectations for each).
- 3) Opportunities for social interactions.
- 4) Ongoing encouragement and emotional support.

Dealing with employees who may not want to return to the office

Most professional organizations are planning or engaging in their return to work transition, although they will undoubtedly encounter employees who may find the prospect anxiety-filled. Families dealing with COVID-19 have experienced high stress over this period of time and this is particularly true for employees who are parents,¹¹ who found themselves adjusting to working remotely and home schooling. Even after the pandemic is behind us, employees can expect to meet further disruptions and adaptations, which is why individual and team resiliency is vital.

So how can employers, managers and team leads give the support necessary to those who do not want to return to the office?

- Survey your remote staff before requiring them to return to work.
- Understand the various roots of their re-entry anxieties.¹²
- Reassure employees that they are the top priority.

The re-entry and recovery phase of the pandemic can be a positive time where leaders learn to engage and strengthen overall personal connections with employees. It's also an opportunity to overcome the stigma of mental and emotional health that are typically taboo topics for workplace discussion. The feelings of isolation and grief have touched us all somehow, and healing occurs when we are open about these feelings. For team managers, the key to creating more positive in-person interactions at work is recognizing and addressing the core human emotions of grief, loss, and anxiety to help rebuild organizational health, productivity, and talent retention.

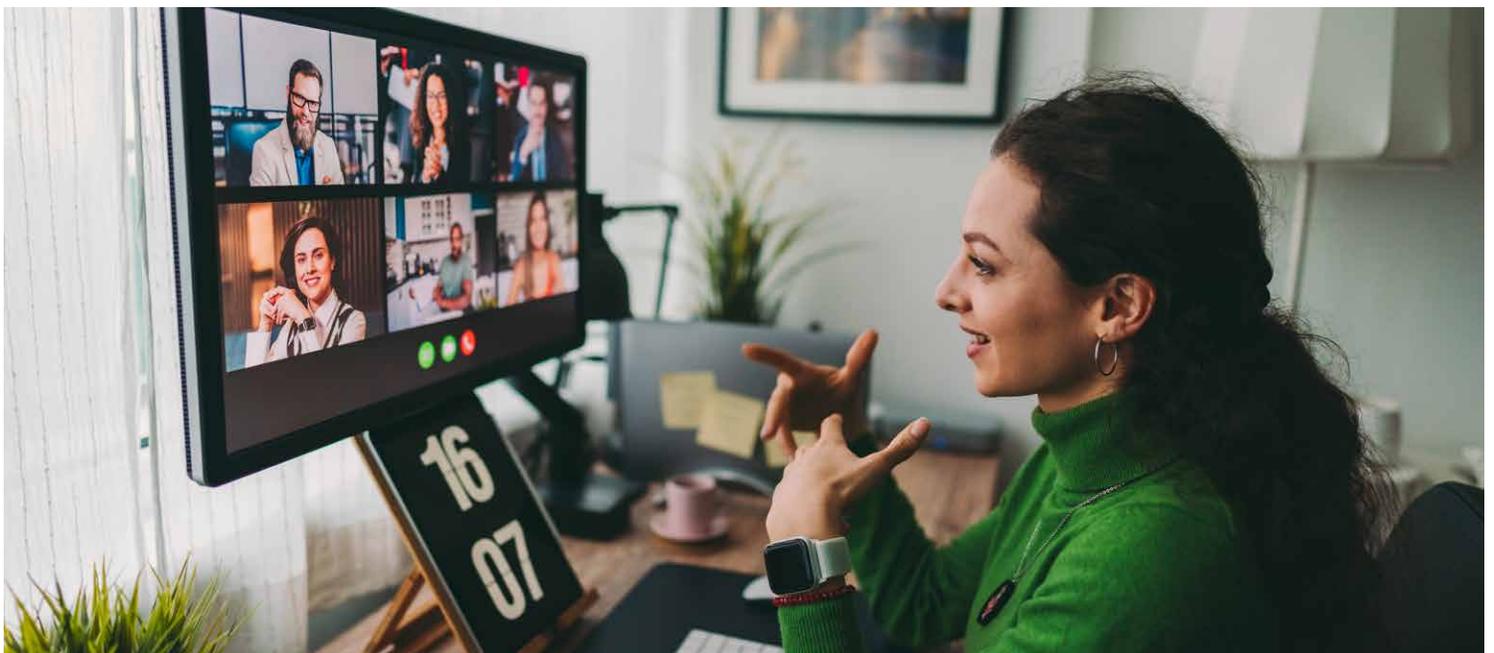


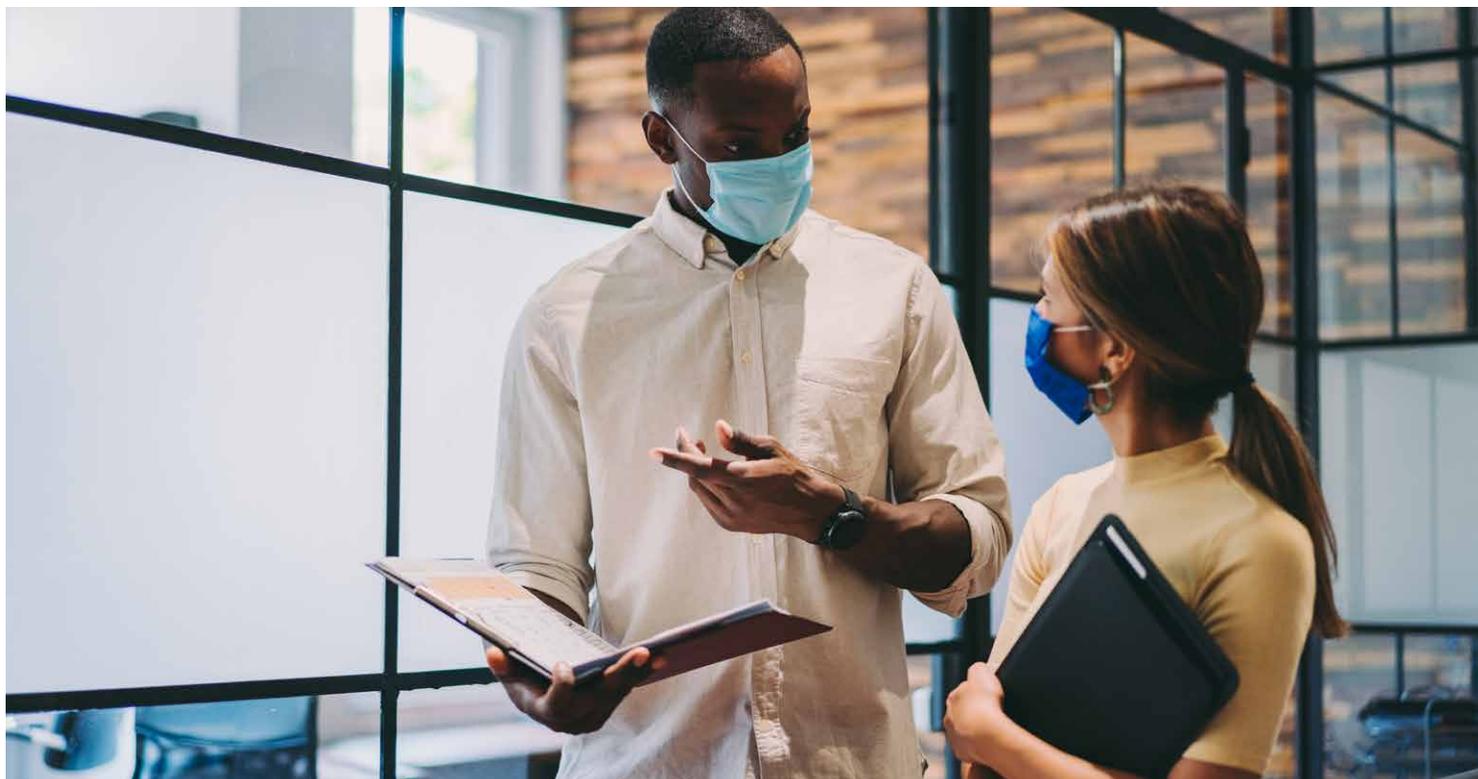
The importance of in-person interaction for employees/managers

When the COVID-19 crisis first erupted, organizations worldwide were plunged into spontaneous uncertainty. Now that the horizon offers some clarity, leaders are shifting from whether they can return to preparing their teams to do so.¹³

Straightforward and inspiring communication is central to making this next unsteady phase a success. Employees have been viewing corporate leaders as a trusted source of information since the first days of our respective lock-down periods, especially when federal and municipal institutions have been less reliable in their responses. Companies that have pledged to support their workforces throughout re-entry and return-to-work will be admired for their reliability. If this describes the company you are with, now is the time to continue maintaining and building that trust, as the focus shifts from public health in general to the specifics of each organization's recoveries.

All of the suggestions in this article stem from employees' need for precise, empathetic communication that keeps them optimistic, hopeful, and yet resilient and prepared for adversity.¹⁴ Your company's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes it has necessitated in your organization will challenge your team as they shift from a more constrained way of working to a more adjusted "new normal," focused on forward-moving strategies. You won't know all of the answers, but as long as you keep the lines of communication clear and consistent, employees should feel their safety and comfort is a priority for their employer.





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