

Returning to work: Practical steps to support your employees

While the COVID-19 pandemic has reached a stage in which some companies can begin to call employees back to work on site, don't expect "business as usual" to resume the minute doors reopen. Leaders face a host of challenges to regaining momentum.

"Managers should be respectful of an uneasy and potentially fearful workforce," says Arran Stewart, CVO and co-founder of Job.com. "Understandably, workers know that there is still a likelihood they could fall ill. This will undoubtedly impact productivity in the near future. This anxiety will be coupled with a 'sleepy' workforce, who for the last few months have become used to the safe confines of their home and not straying more than a few feet from their bedroom to the laptop. People are going to need to gradually gear up before being able to return to their previous routine."

How can managers assist in readjustment? Consider these supportive strategies:

Communicate clearly

The chaos of the past few weeks likely has affected company procedures and shifted priorities. Get everyone up-to-date and on the same page. Workers need to know where to focus their attention, how management wants them to perform tasks under current conditions, and what goals they are expected to reach.

Since the confusion and emotion of the crisis has many people struggling with concentration and recall, keep instructions easy to follow. Encourage asking questions if ever in doubt.

Build trust

In the absence of actual information, people tend to fill in the gaps with their own speculations. Transparent communication slows the rumor mill and helps employees feel more secure.

Don't let your own lack of knowledge keep you from talking. Share what information you possess at the present time, admit that you don't have all the answers, and promise that you'll issue updates as they become available. While not perfect, this approach helps staff members feel in-the-loop and stops the radio silence that makes people anxious.

Address health concerns

Inform workers of the measures the company has taken to ensure their safety and what they can do to contribute to a healthy environment. Create and enforce policies on face masks, distance, using communal areas, and the like. Ask for further suggestions, as employees may discover additional possibilities as they return to daily duties.

Also, clearly outline the procedures in place regarding what needs to happen if an employee or his family

member falls ill. While staff members likely have heard a great deal of general info about symptoms, quarantine, sick days, testing, and paid time off, your HR department can offer easy-to-understand specifics on how it pertains to your company.

Stay flexible

Returning to the office definitely is a step closer to normalcy, but other aspects of your employees' lives may remain quite unusual. For example, public transportation may operate on a limited schedule, or workers with children may continue to confront e-learning and babysitting issues.

While employers still need to hold employees accountable for productivity, try to stay flexible. Allowing someone to shift hours to accommodate an altered train route or offering some work-at-home opportunities to lighten the childcare load eases stress and builds loyalty to the company.

Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation

Finally, don't pretend these aren't strange times. Yes, companies do want to get back on track as quickly as possible, but expecting employees to stifle concerns and feelings will only lead to adding more problems to an already tense environment. Instead, work on building a sense of having each other's back.

"Empathy is going to be the key here for managers, with considerations for employee safety at the heart of everything they do," Stewart says. "We're still in a precarious situation health-wise nationally and globally, and we're all still very vulnerable for at least the near future. The last thing an employer needs to do is be a catalyst for more panic, fatalities, and a resurgence of hotspots. Remember to consider your employees and the broader community you serve as you seek to reopen and reintroduce your workforce."

Notice some folks having a particularly hard time? Remind people of your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). These voluntary programs offer short-term counseling and other measures designed to aid with mental health issues and emotional well-being.

The phrase "we're all in this together" has been used extensively throughout the COVID-19 crisis. The reopening of a company certainly is a time to employ those words again - and truly mean them.