What every leader must do to help employees readjust to office life

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As restrictions loosen, companies around the world are slowly reopening and bringing people back to the workplace. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, companies around the globe resorted to working from home for months. Bedrooms turned into office spaces and dining tables accommodating online meetings, showcasing that people are highly adaptable. For the most part, the pandemic has revealed that many companies can function effectively without having all their employees on the premises.

But as in most countries, lockdown restrictions are loosening, companies around the world are slowly reopening and bringing people back to the office.Business leaders are also investing in new health and safety protocols and wellbeing initiatives to support their people to navigate a much-changed work environment.

Employees who suddenly moved to remote work as COVID-19 spread experienced a loss of control over many aspects of daily life. They coped with high levels of uncertainty about their personal, professional and financial future. Phasing workers back into the office may create new uncertainties about personal safety and how to adapt to new routines. Thus, employees are now faced with their next challenge that is adapting to a new office setting, or work environment. The feelings surrounding the transition are mixed. Some may be ready to get out of their house, others are anxious and prefer to continue with remote working.

Seventy per cent of more than 1,100 American workers surveyed by PwC said numerous factors are preventing them from returning to the office or work site. With 51% citing fear of getting sick (the US continues to have one of the highest rates of infection), 24% are worried about using public transportation and 21% have concerns about lack of reliable solutions for childcare or homeschooling.

Returning to the office, much like the move to work from home, will impact everyone differently. For some, it may take minutes to adjust back to office life but, for others, it may take days and even weeks.

Prepare for the return by supporting employees now

Leaders must recognize that every employee had a different experience and reaction to the pandemic and remote work, each facing unique stressors. Employers and leaders can set a tone that emphasizes concern for employee well-being by offering compassion, honesty and openness. Managers must check in with employees and actively listen, so they feel heard. Communicate consistently to reduce employees' uncertainty and build emotional support.

Employees feeling stressed and anxious about the return can implement several tactics to help ease the tension. These strategies include being patient and flexible, managing expectations and monitoring anxiety levels. *Harvard Business Review* suggests paying close attention to stress and anxiety levels and, if they begin to creep up, find someone to talk to about it.

Australian mental health organisation, Beyond Blue also advises viewing the return to the office as an opportunity to reconnect with colleagues. The organisation recommends taking the time to have that one-on-one conversation with a colleague, visiting a regular cafe. "They might seem small, but these actions can help with establishing some normality back into your routine," Beyond Blue states.

Take an individualized approach

Now is the time to think beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to how employees work. Managers and employees will lead the most effective strategies for returning to the office and adapting to changes. Provide autonomy to managers and direct supervisors to help employees develop individualized plans. Employees returning to the workplace may need new approaches to routines that they have lost, supervisors play a role in helping staff structure their day.

Managers also play a key role in supporting mental health and well-being and are the front-line of recognizing employee mental health struggles. Provide managers with the training and resources that they can use to help their staff. For example, improve mental health literacy with psychological first aid or training in how to talk about mental health. Let them know how to work with the employee assistance program as a tool for connecting employees for services.

Empower employees with work flexibility

"Create an environment where people feel like they want to be, but also give the choice of whether your team would like to be there onsite or work remotely," Clayton Howes the founder of MoneyMe. Employers can create a favourable environment by encouraging employee control over decisions about where and when they work. Consider if the employee can continue to work remotely or set their working hours. Employers can also consider providing a dedicated flex hour, beyond lunch, that is devoted to outdoor activities, recreation or exercise. This extra time can serve as a coping strategy to help people recharge and transition from remote work to office work. In another PwC survey, 47% of employees who were forced to stop working or work remotely feel that safety measures like wearing masks or layouts that promote physical distancing will make them more comfortable in the office. Create an environment where people feel like they want to be. But also offer the choice of whether your team would like to be onsite or work remotely. If you've done a good job, you should see a good balance.

Involve employees in discussions about their workspace

Talk with them about what might change and what they need. Employees who are informed and participate in decisions about their own space have greater psychological comfort in the workspace. "The second area, which has been most important for us, has been communicating regularly with our

staff and letting everyone know that their health and safety is a priority for us," says Jeremy Chen, Co-Founder and Managing Director at Good Things. This engagement helps them adapt to changes that employees can't control, such as requirements to promote physical distancing. Employers can solicit input regarding individual workspace needs, such as task lighting, sound-masking devices, and flexibility to rearrange the furniture.

Leaders are role models and help set examples

Employees look to leaders during a crisis. Acknowledge that returning to the office isn't a return to the way people previously worked. Organizational-wide policies and practices may need to adapt and change with the uncertainty of the pandemic's effects. Prepare to be flexible, consistent in communications, and a role model for showing support and encouraging individual control and decision-making. "The big spark for MoneyMe was and is, always, innovation," he explains. "With collaborative and innovative workspaces, we've re-energized every single facet of our working environment that emboldens this concept.

The next few months hold much uncertainty for everyone. Businesses will be working out how to safely transition their workforce back to the office, while employees will be making personal and professional changes of their own. Importantly, business leaders need to ensure that whatever strategy is put in place has health and wellbeing of employees at the forefront.

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