



On the brink of reopening – good advice for employees

The period since 11 March 2020 has been one of societal lockdowns followed by a gradual reopening after Easter last year and then another societal lockdown just before Christmas. Fortunately, things will start getting better as the vaccination programme proceeds. Now is the time to prepare ourselves for the reopening of our workplaces.

As an employee, you are presumably in a situation where you are waiting for information from your employer about the next steps in the process of reopening and what impact this might have on you. Many are feeling ambivalent about reopening the workplaces, as on one hand it is high time and good news, but on the other hand, there will also be new challenges and concerns.

PFA has some good advice here for how you can create the best conditions for a safe and successful return to your workplace.

Returning to the workplace may be difficult

A crucial factor in whether the reopening of your workplace is a success is your ability to show consideration and be able to deal not just with your own reactions, but also with the reactions of your colleagues.

For many employees, the idea of returning to the workplace may trouble them. Other employees will worry more about the risk of infection from being at the workplace and using common kitchen areas, crowded elevators or being in face-to-face meetings. For others, the idea of commuting to and from work again, having less 'me time', dealing with more interruptions, having to take into account being around more people or feeling like they're barely holding on will be a source of worry. If you have worries about returning to your workplace, here are some things that you can do that are helpful. And always remember, you are not alone in all this - virtually every one of your colleagues is in a similar situation. Everyone needs to understand that this is going to be a difficult time and that people may react to it in different ways.

Here you can read PFA's advice on how to prepare in the best way possible

Make your preparations together with your family

Returning to the workplace will impact everyone in your household. Perhaps you have pets that have become used to having you around every day - especially if you acquired a four-legged family member during the lockdown. You might also have children who have become used to you working from home. Having open and honest conversations can help you to deal with your fear of the unknown and help ease your transition back to the workplace.

Ask your employer what their returning to work policy is

Are you uncertain about what guidelines your workplace has issued? If so, it is a good idea to talk to your manager about how returning to the workplace will work on a practical level.

For example:

- Will all employees return at once, or will it be a gradual process?
- How many employees will be returning at once?
- Have any physical changes been made to the working environment?
- How will the guidelines for social distancing be enforced? Are there other health and safety measures in effect at the workplace?

Are you generally feeling worried about returning to the workplace after such a long period away?

You may have to work with new colleagues who joined the company in the past year for the first time, or you may return and find that former colleagues have been dismissed or have handed in their resignation. You may be used to working on your own now and feeling anxious about having to interact with a bigger group now.

We each have our own ways of dealing with changes. Try to find out what methods you tend to use so that you can find the resources that can help you adjust to the 'new' working environment, as it may seem new to you at first when you return to work.

Speak to your colleagues about returning to the workplace

It is crucial for you and your colleagues to talk about your experiences and the needs that have emerged due to the corona pandemic. Discuss the pros and cons of your individual experiences. Create a setting where it is alright to talk about concerns with each other (you probably share the same concerns with many others) - but keep it to a limited time frame, so that the worries do not impact the whole working day. Help your colleagues focus on that as well.

You might exchange thoughts on how you cope and share strategies for working without being disturbed when it is time to return to the workplace or discuss how to maintain proper distancing. Whether it is a scheduled meeting or a relaxed talk by the coffee machine, sharing your experiences with others can help ease your concerns and it will also give you the opportunity to learn from, and support your colleagues.



Adapting will take time

Just as with the first and second lockdowns and the following months, it will take some time to adapt and it will also now take some time to get used to being at the workplace again. Take it one day at a time and be prepared for some tasks to take a bit longer. Do not get angry or frustrated with yourself if things do not feel 'normal' right away.

Stay calm

It is important that you really focus on staying calm in the coming period. Do not let your worries overwhelm you. Share the worries you have with your manager and those closest to you, but also make sure that your focus is on how you can solve the issues you are facing despite the worries.

Decide that everything will turn out fine

Tell yourself: "It'll be fine". You have adapted to some very different working conditions and learned how to navigate a new normal in the past year, and you can do so again. You can do it - even if it might require a bit of effort.

Focus on your own experience and contribute to solutions

What did you do a year ago to adapt to the new normal? Are there methods that you can use again and which you found meaningful? Remember, your manager and the authorities have taken and will continue to take a

great deal of responsibility for the final practical solutions, but consider whether you can make a contribution as well. First and foremost, focus on how you can create a new good structure for your 'new' normal once you familiarise yourself with the framework.

Display and signal trust

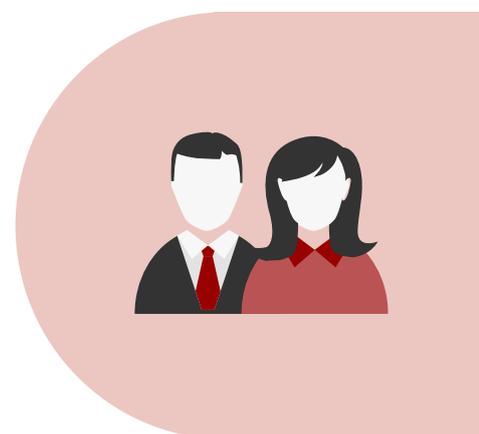
Trust in the people around you. Show that you trust that things will work out fine in the end. Make this clear to your colleagues as well. Have faith that both your employer and your colleagues are trying to create the best conditions possible for making your return to the workplace a success. Have faith in the recommendations issued by the authorities on how to make the most of being physically present at work, while also taking into account the health risks. Focus on how you can contribute to creating a good and safe framework for yourself and your colleagues going forward.

Accept that the risk of infection is inevitable - unless you are only returning to the workplace once everyone has been vaccinated

Remember that during the past many months, you have actually been operating in a world where the risk of infection is impossible to avoid entirely and everyone in the world is in the same situation. You have every opportunity to take appropriate preventive measures when returning to the workplace. The risk of infection does not mean that you cannot have a good everyday life and it does not mean that you should be constantly worried about getting infected or infecting others. Perhaps, make a plan for how to take breaks, eat your lunch and how, as a minimum, to wash your hands and use hand sanitiser during your workday. That will enable you to take control of what you need to do to reduce the risk of corona virus.

Maintain a close dialogue with your manager

It is important to maintain a close dialogue with your manager about your private life if you feel it is becoming a problem. An open, honest dialogue is the best way of ensuring a successful return to the workplace. There are so many things about your life that your manager may not be aware of. You cannot expect your manager to be aware of the challenges that you are facing on the home front as a family, so take responsibility and share this information with your manager so that you can come up with good solutions together.



Plan

Prepare a plan (potentially together with your manager) for how you can work, whether it be from home or at the workplace. Discuss the structure, time frames, start-up, tasks - and if relevant, make sure that you and your manager are on the same page when it comes to your workstation location so that you will not have to go looking for your spot once you arrive at the workplace.

Three essential pieces of advice on making a reliable plan:

- Agree on what the expectations are: What good habits can you take with you from the lockdown period (virtual meetings, walk & talks, flexibility, composition of work tasks, working hours/rhythm)?
- Consider which pre-corona habits or behaviour should be resumed? Is there something you miss about working together with your colleagues or something that previously energised you or increased your job satisfaction that you can do more, now that you are physically present again?
- Schedule weekly meetings with your manager where your well-being is assessed. For example, it may be relevant to discuss the pace of your return to the workplace, or there might be family issues, work priorities or something else that currently impacts your well-being and performance.

Finally, remember this:

- Communicate openly with your manager about your thoughts about a successful return to the workplace - for example, discuss the policy for returning to the workplace or changes that could be implemented. Try to avoid gossip or spreading rumours that could lead to people being worried for no reason.

- Manage your expectations. The experience that you think you want to have when returning to the workplace may end up looking very different in reality. You will not be able to imagine fully what your new routine will look like before you start working with it. You can expect the first few weeks to be an adjustment period, but know that things will get easier over time. Whether you need extra time to manage an emotional reaction or to adapt to changes to your surroundings, remember to give yourself the time and space you need to manage your expectations.
- Learn how to celebrate the small victories. For many of us, just returning to the workplace again will be a milestone. Celebrate the small victories that occur. For example, celebrating the first day or week back at the office or celebrating when a task is completed can put both you and your colleagues in a better mood.