

3 Ways to Support Employees Returning to the Workplace

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Whether it comes next month or several months from now, it's going to happen. The stay-at-home regulations will be lifted, the threat of the coronavirus will recede, and public health officials will deem it safe for Americans to go back to work.

It's important to understand that going back to the office won't feel like business as usual for many of your employees. But planning now for the day you finally reopen your doors—however soon or far off that may be—can mitigate confusion and stress among your employees and make for a smooth transition.

The obvious first step is to consider the [health and safety practicalities](#) of reopening your workplace. Paying careful attention to these precautions shows employees that your company is serious about their safety. In addition to any needed personal protective equipment (PPE) that's needed, ensuring your workplace has plenty of hand sanitizer, thermometers, and social distancing measures will go a long way toward helping your employees feel good about coming to work.

There is, however, a much broader, more holistic picture to consider as well. Your employees' well-being encompasses much more than simply being able to wash their hands. As our regular readers know, true wellness involves the entire person, with each aspect of wellness (physical, emotional, social, financial, occupational, and purpose) affecting the others.

So, while this pandemic may have affected employees' physical health, it may have even more of a lasting impact on their mental health. Your employees may be fearful, in

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mourning, experiencing major changes in their life, and under an extreme amount of stress.

To support employees through this period, there are three key areas you can focus on: empathy, open and transparent communication, and financial support.

1. Empathy

The routine of work and a supportive community of colleagues can be comforting in difficult times. But keep in mind many of your employees may be apprehensive—or downright resistant—about venturing out of their homes even if your local government has given the all-clear. And it won't just be the workplace your employees will be worried about, especially if many of them commute using public transportation. Depending on where your company is located, some of your employees may themselves have suffered from COVID-19 or have loved ones affected by the virus. Many of your employees will be concerned not only about their own safety, but that of their families. Stress (which is unfortunately [all too common in the workplace](#) in the best of times) is sure to run high.

You can help your employees feel comfortable returning to work by:

Showing You Understand: Make sure employees know your company doesn't expect them to put their health or well-being on the line to come back to work and do what you can to accommodate their needs and concerns.

Not Rushing It: Just because your state's governor says businesses may reopen, it doesn't mean you have to recall your employees immediately. Determine the time and manner of opening that is right for your company and your employees.

Embracing Remote Work: Gartner reveals that [88% of organizations](#) have encouraged or required employees to work from home due to the coronavirus, and many are discovering that remote working works surprisingly well. If that's the case for your company, consider continuing to allow your employees to work from home (at least until they feel ready to return).

Being Flexible: No one will want to work around others who are coughing or sneezing—no matter how few [sick days they have left](#). As the economy resumes, we may see more and more companies shifting to unlimited paid time off and flexible scheduling.

2. Communication

Clear and transparent communication is always a good idea in any workplace. But with a crisis situation that evolves so quickly, with so much conflicting and confusing information surrounding it, communication is more important now than ever before. You should keep employees up to date on:

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- Changes to your company's policies related to the coronavirus, workplace safety, time off, and remote work.
- The resources you are making available to your employees to help them get through the crisis, such as mental health counseling.
- Your company's plans, procedures, and schedule for reopening safely.
- How your company is weathering the economic situation.

Open the lines of communication and keep employees informed by:

Coordinating with Managers: Conflicting information and poor communication are a source of stress and confusion for employees, especially when that information concerns their health and well-being. Make sure the entire leadership and management team is fully aware of the plan and how to communicate it to their respective teams.

Scheduling Regular Check-Ins: If you don't already have a weekly or daily check-in with your employees concerning the coronavirus (by email or group meeting), schedule one now. Keeping employees regularly updated will show you care while quelling any rumors.

Listening to Employees: Powerlessness is [a major cause](#) of workplace stress but being heard can make a big difference. Make sure your employees have public and private methods to express their concerns and needs without fear of judgment or repercussion. Additionally, do your best to accommodate all reasonable requests on this topic, and if they can't be accommodated, make sure employees know why.

3. Financial Support

The coronavirus pandemic is not just a global health crisis, but an economic meltdown. Stock markets are extremely volatile, entire industries are being shut down, and unemployment numbers are reaching heights they haven't seen in generations. Just because your employees still have their jobs, it doesn't mean they won't still have financial worries. They may have family members who have been laid off, for example. Or they may be concerned about their 401(k) or other investments.

Help employees manage their financial concerns by:

Turning to an EAP: [Employee assistance programs](#) help employees manage everything from legal concerns to work-life stressors by connecting them via phone to certified counselors. An EAP counselor can help employees take stock of their finances and make a family budget, discover resources that help them manage their debt, and understand government programs for minimizing the financial fallout of the pandemic.

Reviewing Compensation: This pandemic is a good opportunity to ensure your company is [protecting and investing](#) in its people. Implementing measures like profit-

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sharing programs and extended benefits can be the life-raft employees need to stay afloat.

Enlisting the Experts: Employees within a decade of retirement may be shell-shocked at the state of their investment portfolio. You can help by bringing in an expert for group or one-on-one sessions that offer guidance on how to best rebound and recover from market volatility.

The World Is Changing

No one can say with any certainty how the coronavirus pandemic will reshape our society, our economy, the way we live, and the way we work. And few things can provoke as much anxiety as uncertainty.

Whatever you're going through now, your employees are going through it, too. As the lockdown continues, and eventually, lifts, the most crucial step you can take as an employer is to reassure your employees that you're all in this together. Your company has their well-being at heart, and your employees can count on you to have their back as we all get used to the new normal.

Produced by:

WELLRIGHT, LLC
600 WEST VAN BUREN
SUITE 800
CHICAGO, IL 60607