

## Case study:

### Top 10 Tips: Returning to work – Supporting Mental Health

#### Summary

As lockdown restrictions have relaxed and employees are returning to their normal places of work, it is evident that new challenges have developed around supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the construction industry.

Across different organisations, office-based colleagues have experienced difficulties returning to work in an office; from ongoing concerns about safety around COVID-19, to fears of losing the flexibility that came with homeworking. Some employees have stated they have struggled with the return to work, or are reluctant to return to the pre-COVID way of working.

In comparison, our site-based colleagues on construction sites have mostly continued to work throughout the pandemic lockdowns, supported by government rules/advice to protect their safety at work. As restrictions eased however, they too have reported new challenges including coping with busier commutes, reduction in social distancing rules, as well as not enjoying the same flexibility as office-based colleagues.

Supporting and managing expectations as well as the mental health & wellbeing of both office and site-based workers at work has been a challenge for construction. The ability of our industry to effectively adapt and respond will not only continue to support the mental health & wellbeing of our workers at work, but also positively impact on attraction and retention rates, diversity, and our ability to tackle the talent shortage across all areas.

Most organisations have now returned to work with the requirement of working from home if you can be removed by the Government. This guidance highlights 10 top tips for organisations on how to continue to support the health & wellbeing of their employees in our industry.

#### 1) Hybrid Working for all

Offering employees' choice and control over working patterns (flexibility) where possible is strongly associated with improved wellbeing.

Flexible working practices go beyond catering for employees to work from home. Research studies in construction have begun looking at options to support site-based employees to have more flexibility and choice. Timewise, in conjunction with BAM Construct, BAM Nuttall, Skanska UK and Willmott Dixon, have trialled on flexible working initiatives on site.

Initial results have been positive, showing improvements in productivity and wellbeing for site workers. Survey data recorded that flexible working led to an increase from 48% to 84% of site employees saying that they had time to look after their wellbeing. Pilot trials reported no negative impacts on project timeframes or budgets and early trends indicated that there were labour cost savings due to increased productivity. Trials included:

- a. Collaborative approach where teams work together to set shifts by considering individual preferences alongside business requirements (supported by holding more than one site briefing a day)
- b. Supporting employees to leave once they have finished their work tasks for the day, but always following discussion with the line manager
- c. Supporting employees to take time back if they work overtime (e.g. one day a month)- flexi-day approach, again following discussion with their line manager
- d. Support for hybrid working, including working from home periodically for desk-based roles

#### 2) Phased Return to the workplace

Phased return to work programs have been safely returning employees back into the workplace across construction. Looking forward, proactively responding to all employee concerns and any reluctance in returning to work will maintain momentum and engagement and documented guidance.

### **3) Encourage people to feel positive about their workplace**

Give positive reasons for employees to come into work, e.g. catching up with colleagues, or getting a coffee from the canteen. Think about maximising collaborative, work-related reasons for coming into work for instance, workshops, conferences, and face-to-face meetings.

### **4) Communication from the organisation**

Consider sending out regular communications to the entire business about changes in working patterns, especially if there are changes in local restrictions or government policies (about issues related to COVID19 and beyond) to inform and reassure employees about the organisation plans. Provide and update FAQs for employees.

### **5) Communication on an individual level**

Ensure line managers hold regular meetings with the employees in their teams. Encourage employees to feed back on how the return to the workplace is going to ensure managers understand how they are feeling and how to support them.

Consider setting up buddy systems for those concerned about returning to work, or who have struggled after their return.

### **6) Open and honest feedback loops**

Obtain regular and ongoing business-wide feedback from employees over the next few months to understand how they feel about being back in the workplace and new ways of working.

Remember to engage with those who have been back in work for some time (e.g. those on site). Methods for collecting feedback include surveys, meetings and focus groups,.

### **7) Individualised support**

Employees are likely to require different types/levels of support while adjusting to new ways of working. Consider the support required for people of different backgrounds, cultures, or personal circumstances. For instance, those who returned from furlough may need more time to adjust and adapt to being back in work and new working patterns before they resume 100% productivity.

### **8) Long COVID-19**

Long COVID sufferers may require individualised support, including phased return to work management, and introduction of Reasonable Adjustments. Management may be difficult as symptoms can often come and go, but symptoms may include fatigue, memory loss, and concentration difficulties which can impact work efficiency and lead to stress-related issues.

Employers should plan how they will manage long term absences and increased support for employees. Where appropriate seek advice from Occupational Health and Human Resources Specialists.

ACAS' new employer guidance states that, although it is unknown if Long COVID will constitute a disability, they recommend that employers make reasonable adjustments for sufferers. Certain symptoms associated with Long COVID, namely those that have a substantial, long-term impact could potentially classify as a disability under the Equality Act 2010. To minimise the risk of a future disability discrimination claim, employers need to be aware of their legal obligations to make reasonable adjustments.

### **9) Health and Wellbeing Strategy**

Ensure there is adequate support for those struggling with the transition back to work and new ways of working, such as employee assistance programs, or mental health first aiders (MHFA) or occupational health support.

Provide mental health training across the business (e.g., MHFA training) to build up an organisational support network. Ensure it is communicated across the business, so employees know where their support networks are located.

Consider how to embed conversations about mental health support into daily working practices e.g. raising mental health topics during departmental or leadership meetings to raise awareness and make people more willing to discuss their struggles and provide feedback to make it easier to support them. Look to introduce a health and wellbeing strategy if not already in place, ensure it is absorbed into business objectives. Monitor the impact of supportive strategies to develop them further in the future. E.g. changes in Employee Assistance Program (EAP) usage (frequency, topics).

**10) Encourage employees to reflect on their own feelings and experiences**

Be honest with the workforce about what they can expect from their organisation and what they must take responsibility for. They should be able to expect their organisation to support their ability to take care of themselves through activities such as:

- a. Taking regular breaks (including screen breaks). Encourage staff to hold meetings whilst going for a walk.
- b. Promote the importance of employees getting enough rest and relaxation, and to spend time on leisure activities.
- c. Encourage and facilitate employees to learn calming or relaxation techniques. Some organisations are holding regular exercise or meditation classes for employees.
- d. Encourage and facilitate employees to stay active.

**Contact details**

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