

# **Supporting Returners Mental Wellbeing**

## **What Issues Are Organisations Facing Now?**

We are now starting to move out of lockdown which is good news but given that we are still living with risk, there are some factors that organisations will have to give serious consideration to. Some employees will be looking forward to being co-located with others whilst others will be dreading it. Even those who are looking forward to working in the same room/office will have fears and concerns about their health and that of their families. Some employees who have to remain working from home, will be content to do this whilst others will be feeling lonely and isolated. In other words, employee mental wellbeing may be suffering.

Covid 19 places an even greater burden on managers as they will have to support employees with the higher levels of anxiety and reduced mental health caused by fear and uncertainty. In addition to this, Managers will be struggling to deal with their own fears and concerns.

All these factors will be impacting on employee mental wellbeing and organisations should start addressing these issues now whilst adopting a more strategic approach for dealing with them over the longer term.

In the short term, there are a number of things that organisations can do to support employee mental wellbeing and maintain productivity. These can be grouped under the following headings: support to employees working in the same location, support to employees working from home, support to managers.

## **1, Support to Staff Working in the Same Location**

### **Communication is Key**

Good communication prior to staff coming into the workplace is going to be vital to ensure that staff understand how their physical safety is going to be protected e.g. social distancing measures, cleansing of shared facilities etc. This should provide a good opportunity to start asking staff about their mental wellbeing e.g. how are they feeling? How do they feel about returning to a physical work location?

### **Many Employees Will Feel Anxious About Returning to a Physical Workplace**

Staff returning after being on furlough are likely to feel apprehensive and managers will need to facilitate an atmosphere where employees feel physically safe coming into work and feel that their mental wellbeing will be protected. There will be many potential fears to overcome and manager will need to be visible and open in their dealings with employees, in order to build trust again.

### **There May be Resentment Towards Returning Employees**

There is the possibility of negativity and conflict from employees who would have preferred to have remained at home. Managers will have to remain patient and supportive to give these staff the opportunity to vent their frustrations so that they can work harmoniously with their newly returned colleagues.

### **Some Employees May Prefer to Work From Home**

Returning employees may miss the time spent with family, particularly time spent with children and may be lower in mood initially. Managers will need to be empathetic and actively encourage them to talk about their feelings and their fears, whilst promoting a clear message that it is good to talk about mental wellbeing.

### **There May be Stigma Around Covid 19**

When employees return to a physical workplace, there may be stigma around admitting that they have had the virus or that someone in their household has had it. There may also be a degree of mistrust amongst team members regarding whether anyone is hiding the symptoms of covid 19. During these difficult economic times, some workers will want to continue working and may ignore symptoms as they cannot afford to take time off work. This means that stigma could result in a negative impact on both physical and psychological wellbeing.

### **There May be New Cases of Covid 19 Amongst Team members**

Managers will also need to be prepared to maintain a state of calm if a team member (physically in work) becomes ill with covid 19. They will need to be even more visible to other team members and willing to talk about and explore their fears.

### **Flexibility is The Way Forward**

Flexibility is going to be key in helping employees return to work for a number of reasons: Firstly, if you have employees who are unable to drive, they may feel anxious using public transport and may wish to travel when the services are quieter, so flexible start and finish times will be helpful in

getting people back into the workplace. This is also important because some team members will have children who are not yet back to school and may have to juggle childcare with a partner or other family members. Flexible working could also be used to help those team members who would prefer to work from home, in that, you might be able to agree a balance across your team, where they have some days working from home and some days in a physical workplace. Greater flexibility should help promote higher levels of mental wellbeing.

### **Dealing With Grief**

If you have team members who have passed away as a result of covid 19, your team members may start to grieve when they see empty chairs, formerly occupied by colleagues. Equally, some team members may experience 'Survivor Syndrome', where individuals feel guilty that they are still alive, and others have lost their lives.

### **Helping Employees Feel Part of a Community**

Given social distancing rules and potential flexible ways of working, opportunities for team members to connect socially and feel part of a team, may be more limited. Managers may have to think of creative ways to help their teams connect, regardless of where they are working from. For some organisations and some teams, this is going to be crucial in helping employees feel part of a team again.

## **2, Support to Staff Continuing to Work From Home**

### **Developing Skills for Home Workers**

Some employees first experience of working from home will have been when lockdown was announced, and we all went into a flat spine. There was little time to prepare or organise and organisations did what they could to help employee work from home. We are now coming out of lockdown and for those workers who will be continuing to work from home either on a full time or rostered basis, there is the opportunity to help them develop the skills that they will need to be an effective home worker.

Some employees working from home, will benefit from support to develop sustainable good

work/home life habits, such as, designating one area of the house as a work area to help recreate a feeling of starting and leaving work. They may need support in achieving a work/life balance, when they lack the usual signals that the workday has finished.

### Support to Managers

Managers will need support to cope with the extra logistical and emotional burden that the current situation is going to impose on them. Along with HR, they will be the individuals investing time in trying to get employees back to work and engaging them in helping the organisation retain/improve productivity. At the same time, many managers will be experiencing the same anxieties as the team members they are trying to support. It is going to be more important than ever that support mechanisms are put in place for managers to ensure that they remain mentally well and operating at their best. This will include monitoring their workloads to ensure that they are not being overwhelmed, with the additional requirements of covid 19. There is also a need for managers to be trained to manage wellbeing more effectively. Some managers have been trained to identify early warnings of stress and mental health conditions, hold supportive conversations and support staff. Equally we know from the statistics that many managers have still not been trained to manage psychological wellbeing. The current situation with covid 19, however, means that it is not going to be enough for managers to focus on the wellbeing of employees who are struggling, they are also going to have to manage wellbeing proactively to keep employees safe and psychologically well. **At Cognoscenti, we have been training managers (virtually) to manage wellbeing proactively to safeguard employees from tipping over the edge into reduced mental wellbeing. If you think your managers would benefit from learning how to maintain the mental wellbeing of their team members, get in touch at : [sharon@cognoscenti.uk.com](mailto:sharon@cognoscenti.uk.com) (07771 870547)**