Ensuring Your Employees Return to the Workplace Successfully

Where we are

Reflect back on wild ride the past 18 months have been and be proud of your resiliency and endurance. This hasn't been an easy journey, and we still have further to go.

- 70% of companies say their back-to-workplace plan includes both in-person workers and remote workers
- 83% of employers say the shift to remote work has been successful for their organization
- Only 34% of workers feel comfortable returning to the office and
- Organizations state that employee health and wellness along with employee productivity are their principal goals as employees return back to their workplace

Remember how well you have already managed everything

The pandemic has adversely affected the world physically, emotionally, socially, and financially. Consider what you have endured and learned during this time, such as: improved time management skills, greater work-life balance, and the ability to manage people and projects remotely. These skills will help you create a welcoming and supportive environment for your employees as they transition back to the office.

Supporting employees as they return to the workplace.

As your organization takes steps toward returning to the office, it is natural that employees may be experiencing a range of emotions. Some are nervous to come back and be around people. Some are afraid they may be losing the great work-life balance that they just settled into. And some are excited to get back to a "new normal" and finally be around other people!

> *"Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."*
> *– John F. Kennedy*

As a manager, your employees will look to you for guidance, answers, reassurance, support, and most importantly information. Here are some tips to best support your employees and yourself and create a positive return to work experience.

1. **Listen.** Actively listening to employees builds trust, creates a positive environment, and shows employees they are appreciated. Listening is crucial. Check in with each employee on a scheduled, reoccurring basis. Ask for their feedback. Discuss their transition back to the office before it happens, during the transition, and then regularly thereafter. Each individual employee will have their own concerns and questions. Setting a reoccurring communication schedule with employees gives them the opportunity to ask questions in a comfortable, private setting.

   Studies show that 86% of employees believe their employer doesn't listen to them. 47% of workers say that their employer does not value their input, and 63% of employees believe their input is ignored at work. You can change this.

2. **Be considerate and empathetic.** Your employees are probably going through a range of emotions from extreme anxiety to depression. Carefully choose how to speak to each individual based on their emotional wellbeing.

3. **Be their information source.** Stay up-to-date on all of your organization's pandemic policies and be able to answer most questions your employees may have. Make sure you know who to go to if you don't have the answer and then follow-up with the employee with the relevant information. Set clear expectations and emphasize that policies may fluctuate to meet CDC guidelines and to keep employees and business partners/clients safe.

4. **Be their advocate and a problem solver.** Some employees may have a situation that is making it difficult for them to come back to work full-time or even part-time. Understanding their struggles permits you to suggest tools and resources to help your employees. For example, an employee's childcare center may have shut-down. You can encourage the employee to seek consultation through PAS for help in locating vetted childcare and eldercare resources in their area.

   As you consider work plans for your team such as hybrid or flex time schedules, be sure to have ongoing conversations with your employees about balancing the needs of business operations with work-schedule preferences of workers. Establishing a dedicated time frame for team members to be "present" to collaborate in-person or remotely together several times each week is important for employee well-being and optimal business performance. Some employees may scoff at remote employees, believing they "goof off" all day and don't focus on their assignments. In reality, many high achievers work better in a low interruption, home environment. Commit to finding a balance. Maybe each week team members identify their weekly task goals in an online team board (such as Trello or Monday) or chat board (such as Slack or Jostle). This way everyone understands each other's goals and workload.

5. **Model appropriate behavior.** This includes how you act during meetings, in the hallways, when problems arise, and if projects are sidelined. Your employees are observing you. Are you following social distancing company policies? Are you wearing a mask in mask required areas? Are you negatively talking about anyone or any company policy? You need to be transparent in all of your efforts and model the behavior you want your employees to follow.

6. **Take care of yourself.** Keep your work-life in balance, take care of your physical and mental health, and allow your team to catch a glimpse of your personal side (ex. you are a hard worker who is adamant about hitting and exceeding team goals, but you also ensure you have time to coach your son's soccer team)**.** You set the tone for your team and the example they follow.

If an employee is struggling emotionally or with their work performance, remind them about the professional life management services PAS offers at no cost to employees and their families. PAS is available by calling (800) 356-0845 to connect directly with a counselor 24/7 or by messaging with a PAS counselor via www.paseap.com.

Sources:
CNBC, 2021
PwC US Remote Work Survey, 2021
The Workforce Institute at UKG, 2021