



The Office is open – Business as Unusual!

Like many of our clients, at ema consultancy we packed up our desks at the end of March and have been home-working ever since in order to continue supporting our clients.

We're now discussing the pros and cons of working at home and when might be the right time to return to the office, and indeed, who will return.

It was heartening to see the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development's (CIPD) guidance, a simple 'three-pronged' approach, for employers looking to bring people back to work.

- Is it safe?
- Is it essential?
- Is it mutually agreed?

In terms of the first point on safety the lead authority is the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Their website www.hse.gov.uk is full of helpful advice on the subject. I'm currently part way through the written Coronavirus risk assessment form for our office. Here's the template to help you with yours. There are some useful prompts to capture the basics: <https://www.hseni.gov.uk/publications/example-covid-19-risk-assessment-template>

The second point concerns what essential work can't be effectively delivered at home. Businesses are grappling with the dilemma of what functions can continue being delivered at home and the impact that is having in terms of their employees' mental health and, several functions that have been largely put on hold through this global pandemic need to be restarted in a safe way at some point so as not to expose employees and customers to any unnecessary risk.

Again, the www.hse.gov.uk has lots of useful guidance on the importance of social distancing being maintained and the absolute importance of developing risk assessments with your colleagues. The use of dynamic risk assessments is really important, however, colleagues will need to be trained and empowered to conduct such risk assessments to enable a safe environment that is constantly changing. For example, if you are a repairs technician going into someone's home the environment is not a familiar one – nor one you can control.

The Ministry for Housing & Local Government have issued guidelines to be observed on working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19) & Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Landlords and Tenants.

Communication and consultation is key during this time to ensure everyone understands their responsibility and ability to make their own decisions in order to stay safe. From the customer asking for this repair, to the colleague raising the repair to the technician in attendance, everyone has a role to play. The key task is ensuring they understand what that is.

The third point is a reminder of the need to consult colleagues about individual circumstances so avoiding problems further down the line. Personal circumstances will vary tremendously and might include health issues of the employee, whether they're shielding a vulnerable family member, their journey to work, childcare, home schooling and productivity. If you've seen our articles about the effect of personality on working from home, you'll appreciate that home-working suits some personality types better than others and can significantly impact some people's motivation and productivity, so that is also something to consider.

In terms of practicalities for those who absolutely need to return people to an office or other shared premises, our team has devised a simple checklist to consider when doing your risk assessment:

1. Workplace Design

Think about workplace design and – most importantly - how people really used the building before. Old habits tend to die hard and will be the toughest to break. So, if everyone takes the back stairs to go for a cigarette break, ensure that's where reminders are placed. If everyone congregates on the floor three kitchen, again plan for what's likely to happen, not just what you want to happen. Ergonomically thinking, not just yellow tape and signs with multiple exclamation marks are what will have the greatest impact. Fit the task and equipment around the user. Not the other way around.

2. PPE

Order PPE now and plan how it will be shared. Make a policy on who will have it, for what and the responsibility for ordering and flagging when it's running low; where it is stored, donned and doffed; and, how it is disposed of. Just as there's always someone who leaves the empty milk bottle in the shared fridge or the empty toilet roll in the communal loos...don't let PPE become the next victim of human behaviour!

Ensure the policy addresses the consequences of not wearing PPE. Once people feel they are returning to normal, they will slip back into old patterns. The fear factor then becomes too weak and employees will need clear motivation and understanding of the personal consequences beyond their own health to follow what will appear arduous extra layers to a job they've done for years.

3. Legislation

Although some aspects of business have been put on hold, you need to be up to date and implement changes in employment law. For example, on 6th April a number of legal changes linked to employment came into effect:

- The new increase to the National Minimum Wage

- The period used to calculate a week's pay for holiday pay purposes increases from the previous 12 weeks of work to the previous 52 weeks
- New guides on [ICE \(Information and Consultation of Employees\) Regulations](#).
- Agency Workers' Rights have changed; they now have the same right as employees to written terms (a 'written statement of employment particulars') from their employer.

Find a useful round up at: <https://www.thsp.co.uk/the-good-work-plan/> and <https://www.ACAS.org.uk>

4. HR Policy

Many HR policies such as sickness absence, return to work conversations will now be largely out of sync and therefore will require updating using engagement tools to consider ideas from unions, colleagues, management and occupational health on how such policies can be adapted and taken forward.

5. Be prepared for the R rate to shift

You will need to have a flexible plan. It's possible the return to the office may need to be fully or part reversed depending on a second wave of the virus. Ensure any new policies and procedures cover this possibility and create a simple checklist for office closedown. There's a real opportunity to capture from employees what they'd have done differently in March with more notice and the biggest obstacles when working from home. Some problems, such as childcare or worries about ill family or friends may not be in your gift to solve completely, but a lack of clear printing routes, wi-fi boosters, video conference training and home office furniture vouchers may well be.

Never has it been more important that HR Teams take their role as enablers, to partner with leaders and managers to ensure dynamic and agile plans are invoked with the prime concern of keeping people safe and where possible maintaining key services and of course maximum engagement from colleagues.