

UK Employers Prepare for Return to Workplace

By Leah Shepherd

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As more U.K. workers are vaccinated for COVID-19, employers are making long-term plans for a return to the workplace. Prime Minister Boris Johnson indicates that the government intends to end its work-from-home guidance July 19.

The transition will require careful preparation to ensure workers' safety and thoughtful consideration of legal questions.

Employers should complete "risk assessments to make sure appropriate safety measures are in place not only in relation to the physical workplace, but the management of employee mental health and well-being, too," said Katie Russell, an attorney with Burges Salmon in Edinburgh, Scotland. "Businesses that have met their duty of care, conducted thorough risk assessments and implemented appropriate safety measures are likely to be in a stronger position to ask employees to return to [the] workplace. A phased return is likely to work best for most businesses."

Steps to Take

First, examine employees' contractual terms that relate to location and mobility. It may be necessary to make adjustments, if possible.

Then explain to employees the risk-mitigation measures that you have taken at worksites.

Before final plans are announced, it's a good idea for employers to survey workers to assess their feelings about telework and returning in person.

"Employers should try to assess their employees' main health and wellness concerns in relation to returning to the workplace," Russell said. "This may also present an opportunity to promote new wellness initiatives the business has implemented, and to gauge how these have been received. For larger businesses, it may be worth setting up an employee forum or working group to streamline communication channels."

She added, "Make sure that any insight gained from employees is put to good use. It is no good asking for views, only to then disregard them when it comes to the final plans."

A combination of remote and in-person work may be the right answer in many situations. "It is likely that many employers will opt for a hybrid-working model to get the best of both worlds for the business and employees," Russell said.

No matter what form the transition takes, clear communication about the company's plans is vital. It's helpful for employers to use positive, upbeat language and have some flexibility built into their plans to return to work.

Make sure employees who continue to telework are visible and not disadvantaged by working remotely, especially in their opportunities for career growth and advancement, Russell recommended. That way, you can avoid future claims of discrimination.

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Benefits to Both Arrangements

Employees like the convenience, as well as the time and money saved, when they telework.

"The human aspect of remote working has also bolstered many colleague and client relationships, with the webcam view into our own worlds often providing a level of insight into our personal lives that was not on show before," Russell said.

She added, "It is worth employers putting the time in now to get it right, and to really think how remote working will work for their business going forward. Businesses that get it right and are able to establish effective working practices, incorporating remote working and the benefits it has to offer, are likely to fly."

Peter Cheese, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development in London, noted, "There's been a huge shift to home working since the coronavirus pandemic, and this has proved to be positive for a lot of people, with many organizations now looking at how to provide more choice in where people work as we come out of the lockdowns."

At the same time, many people don't want to lose the benefits of working in person.

"The social aspects of the return to the workplace will likely be welcomed by many employees, with the opportunity for face-to-face, personal interaction with colleagues who they may not have seen for a considerable amount of time," Russell said. "Having teams back under one roof may also help to promote a sense [of] cohesion, which employers may find leads to greater opportunity for collaboration and innovation."

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