Preparing your team for the return to office life

Have you ventured into central London lately? It's a far cry from the vibrant, bustling hub it was before lockdown. There are fewer tourists, fewer shoppers and, notably, fewer city workers as many workplaces remain closed and people continue to work from home. But for how long? In light of PM Boris Johnson's latest announcement, perhaps not very long at all.

From 1st August, the government's work-from-home guidance will be relaxed, and I think that's a good thing. Working from home is all very well, but there's no substitute for face-to-face collaboration and the casual meetings that occur when you're together in one place. Many people are afraid to go back – and that's understandable – but my company Tiger Recruitment (Tiger) started the transition last week and people are glad to be reconnected with colleagues and familiar routines.

Of course, there are some fundamental things that businesses need to do to create a safe environment for their people, and there are clear Government guidelines around this. This ranges from having hand sanitiser readily available to using floor markings and signage to remind people of the need for social distancing.

For other businesses thinking of making the move, here are some of the things that helped reassure my team and give them the confidence to return.

Beware of making assumptions

The only way to know how people are feeling about returning to the office is to ask them. A survey can help you understand the impact returning to the workplace will have on your team and what they're most worried about so that you can tailor your return-to-work plans accordingly.

The results may surprise you! In the Tiger survey, people we thought might find it hard to go back due to, say, childcare or caring commitments, actually had support systems in place and were more able to return than we expected.

We also discovered, perhaps unsurprisingly, that commuting was a major source of concern. So, we signed up to the cycle-to-work scheme and are also offering people more flexible hours so that they can travel in off-peak times.

Don't skimp on the detail

Sharing as much information as possible about how you're making the office safe for employees' return can go a long way to allaying their fears. A risk assessment is a great way to do this. It should cover the potential hazards that COVID-19 presents for your business and the steps you're taking to mitigate those risks – from how often the office will be cleaned to how you'll be encouraging hygiene best practice.

We shared ours with employees a few weeks before our return, which allowed time for them to come back with any questions or concerns, and for us to make any changes. It's also a good idea to send employees a risk assessment from your landlord or building management company. This will give them confidence that all of the communal areas will also be ready for their return.

Collaborate – from a safe distance

The challenge for businesses is how to adhere to social distancing rules while still maintaining a degree of collaboration and 'normality'. Putting up protective desk screens is one option, but we decided that an alternating shift-type pattern would work better for the business and be less intrusive. People are in the office for a set number of days and work from home for the rest of the week, so there are fewer people in the office and we can space out more.

As a recruitment business, we're used to working in a buzzy environment so it was really important for us to recreate some of the vibe people are used to. Our solution has been to split the shifts and the alternating days in such a way that we get the right balance of personalities and people not only to get the

work done but also to maintain team dynamics and keep up morale.

Factor in furloughed workers

Workers who have been on furlough may come back to the office at different times. Their challenge is two-fold as they're not only returning to the office but also to working life after what may have been several months. At Tiger, employees returning from furlough will be having scheduled, return-to-work meetings with their line managers, not only to catch up and talk about the work they'll be picking up again but also to talk about any changes in processes, systems or developments in the business that have happened while they've been away.

Do what's right for your business

Going back to the office now won't be right for every business, or for every individual. But for me, it has been vital to getting people collaborating again face-to-face and bouncing ideas off one another – at least for some of the week. Homeworking has been great, but some people have really struggled. For every person on my team who has thrived, there is another who has battled with loneliness or the lack of structure. So, from a mental health and wellbeing point of view, I feel that now is the time for my team to return. It's good to be back.

David Morel is the founder and CEO of Tiger Recruitment*, a boutique recruitment firm headquartered in London. David set up the company in 2001 and since then has grown the business organically to become a top international provider of business support, private and family office, hospitality, technology and HR talent. The business has offices in Dubai and New York and is currently hiring new sector specialists to head up new divisions in new markets. Follow him on* Twitter*. Connect with him on* LinkedIn*.*

Read also

Can companies change working culture to accommodate remote working?

Article by DAVID MOREL