

Reducing anxiety is vital as h

Freedom Day is in our rear-view mirrors and the furlough scheme's September deadline is looming.

That means homeworkers returning to the office and furloughed employees returning to work for the first time in several months. This gradual process will require plenty of readjustment and presents a set of health and wellbeing challenges that employers must be wise to.

According to the CIPD's 2021 Health and Wellbeing at Work Report, 44 per cent of employees were anxious about returning to the workplace with 23 per cent citing fear of contagion as the main concern.

The report reads: "Some employees will be fearful about contracting the

virus, others will be anxious about family and friends. Many will have suffered bereavements during this time, often without the chance to say goodbye or attend funerals.

"There will also be fears about job security, returning to the workplace (including using public transport for commuting) and financial concerns. Some employees are working longer or more irregular hours and many are combining work with other family responsibilities, leading to a poor work-life balance."

This leaves business leaders with a tricky puzzle to solve. They must be attentive to the needs of a workforce, all facing unique and unprecedented risk factors, now spread across home, office and hybrid locations.



CHRIS MORRISEY
LILY COMMS

"Ensuring employees are engaged, supported and growing is the utmost importance to achieving high productivity. Since the health crisis, organisations have developed great wellbeing offerings; the key now is consistency. Leaders should continue to invest in wellbeing programmes and infrastructure that supports inclusion. Hybrid working is now the future; businesses have recognised that stepping back into the office environment full time for most employees isn't required. A hybrid workforce brings new challenges but so does having five generations in the workplace. Why? Because each generation's wants and needs are different. However, a common theme amongst all ages is communication. Transforming office space into video conference hubs, allows better workplace collaboration and in turn better relationships. Engaged people radiate and create a positive culture and this in turn supports creating an unforgettable employee workplace experience."



PETER ORR
MENTAL HEALTH
ASSOCIATES

"Many of our colleagues in the telecoms industry will be anxious about returning to the office, face to face meetings and having targets to hit. Their anxiety is real and can be all-consuming. Most people will be feeling uncertain about what office working is now like – do we need to wear masks in the office, or take Lateral Flow tests? Will we be sitting at the same desks, and will there be additional cleaning in place? Will I be in the office on the same days as my team? You must send out clear, detailed information to try and reassure your staff of what to expect. Sales staff will be particularly anxious – the pressure of targets in a new working environment adds another layer of pressure. By giving staff the opportunity to talk about their concerns you can retain your staff and ensure their performance returns to pre-COVID levels."



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

"Improving the health and wellbeing of our employees is front and centre at Jola, as it is our people and their passion that drives our growth. We put our efforts into training and motivating our team to help them grow with us. It starts with our culture. We are can-do people who strive not only to achieve but exceed our KPIs. We put our customers first and do what we say we are going to do. We recruit against these values. We reward our team for demonstrating these values and we lead by example. We encourage our team to take part in vitality health challenges such as, 'get a free smart watch by exceeding 10,000 steps a day'. We offer discounted gym memberships and share discounts for healthy meal kits. We also provide free access to meditation apps and tools to support positive mental health."



LISA HEWITT
VIRTUAL1

"Organisations have largely focused on providing reactive support to employees, particularly in recent times. However, to maintain and improve upon the momentum we have gained in workplace wellbeing, organisations must flip their focus to preventative measures, such as workload management and identifying burnout. Research shows that creating a listening culture has the biggest impact on engagement and overall business performance. Facilitating holistic one on ones that enable employees to feedback on all elements of workplace wellness and their perceived challenges helps both the employee and the manager understand where attention may need to be redirected before it is too late. Additionally, revisiting leadership behaviours is a must; not only to build on their skills and confidence in having discussions around health and wellbeing, but also to give them confidence in their ability to focus on the new principles of leadership such as empathy, flexibility and more human-centred leadership."



ANTHONY BUXTON
PROMPT VOICE

"Back in February, before the second lock-down, we conducted a survey of all staff to ask how many days a week they wanted to return to the office. 30% said none, 35% said one, 33% said two, and 2% said five days... I was one of those! Consequently, we are completely reconfiguring our offices to be a more welcoming place to come back to, with sofas and coffee machines and we have created better collaboration spaces such as pods and huddle zones. Staff like the flexibility homeworking offers, but it's too early to evaluate the long-term effects on teamwork, mental health, and corporate culture. We feel staff will need to experience the new environment for many months before we decide on the optimum balance. Teams video calls have been brilliant for maintaining working relationships and encouraging staff to video call rather than text chat, has really helped maintain positive morale."



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CAROLINE BAKER
CITYFIBRE

"The health and wellbeing of employees should be a top priority for any organisation. As a business it is so important to ensure we look after the mental and physical wellbeing of all our employees ahead of anything else, and our CEO, Greg Mesch, frequently reminds employees to look after themselves and their families first. At CityFibre, we train Mental Health First Aiders, run lunchtime activities/yoga, promote work/life balance and communicate frequently on this subject. We have also adopted a hybrid approach to working and are flexible on employees either working from home or the office. Business leaders should work closely with their HR and Learning teams to provide relevant skills training, whilst also constantly collecting feedback from employees. By listening and acting with your employees' best interests at heart, positive change and productivity will increase."



ADAM CATHCART
9 GROUP

"Business leaders can support positive mental health within their teams through well timed and considerate communications, management education and by creating clear signposts to professional support. We believe that mental and physical health should be treated with equal importance and aim to create a safe and understanding environment where people can speak openly. We never shy away from the subject. We enjoy a special and unique culture. Our partners often acknowledge this and say that they feel part of it, which is something we're hugely proud of. A positive culture can't be forced or bought, it must be authentic and should be felt right across every area of the business. It can be built through trust, communication and recognition. Our company culture hasn't been diluted by the pandemic, in fact it feels stronger than ever, as we're working more closely and with a common sense of purpose."



AIDAN PIPER
WELCOMM
COMMUNICATIONS

"Throughout the pandemic, something that's remained massively important to us is making sure that we keep connected with our people and our team is engaged in the business. When we talk to our staff, we understand that the meaning of 'wellbeing' and 'connection' is different to each individual – there's no one-size-fits-all approach. That's why we invite mental health experts to speak to our people, plan a staff wellness calendar of events and regularly communicate via a weekly company meeting to ensure updates reach everyone. We recognise that keeping in touch and remaining strong as a team helps us to grow and work together better. We've hosted a number of employee wellbeing events for our staff, customers and social followers to attend. Sharing the insights and knowledge that we learn along the way is something I believe we should all be doing. Don't be afraid to start the conversation!"



DUNCAN WARD
ENREACH

"At Enreach we've focused on improving health and wellbeing even more since the COVID-19 pandemic. We've brought in regular catchups for employees, presented mental health awareness campaigns and asked for complete collaboration from employees when it comes to whether they would be comfortable returning to the office full time. We believe that each employee should be a brand ambassador and that only comes from a positive and healthy workplace environment. By utilising our own technology, we've been able to listen to what our employees want and put a hybrid working policy in place. Communicating with a hybrid workforce has been easy and we've been able to send out regular business updates thanks to our video conferencing platform and instant messaging functions. We put an emphasis on work/life balance and actively encourage employees to use the presence functions on their phones to ensure they're not disturbed when on a break."



AYSHEA ROBERTSON
ZEN INTERNET

"It is essential to recognise the multitude of influences on employee health and wellbeing from both inside and outside the organisation. Boards and business leaders are increasingly aware that fostering healthy wellbeing, can not only help deliver increased productivity, but is also crucial to any talent attraction and retention strategy. Zen takes a holistic approach to health and wellbeing and its strategy addresses six key factors that may affect employee wellbeing: safety, personal health – physical and mental, life factors, working environment, resilience and giving back. Demonstrate a supportive and collaborative approach from the top down so your people understand they have the full support of their colleagues and management, whatever the health or wellbeing challenge is that they may be facing. This type of positive and supportive company culture, with supporting colleagues and managers, leads to engaged people and high performance."



ADAM BINKS
SYSGROUP

"Creating a positive employee culture is what makes SysGroup different. We adopt a holistic approach to health and wellbeing by focusing on employee physical, mental, financial, and social aspects. We've introduced initiatives such as providing access to wellness education support tools, family-friendly policies and enhanced health insurance, pension and life insurance benefits; ensuring our teams are educated to make informed decisions. Throughout the pandemic we listened to our teams and made changes to provide the workplaces they wanted. This saw significant investment in our offices, creating sociable and safe spaces, promoting collaboration and positivity. We're constantly looking at ways to engage and delight our teams, introducing quizzes, competitions, team socials, lunch and learns and book clubs."

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