



Communicating with furloughed employees



➔ Introduction

Furlough. Most of us had never used the word before Chancellor Rishi Sunak's launch in March of the Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Now it's the word on everyone's lips as thousands of employers across the country take advantage of the opportunity to place some of their people on temporary leave with the Government funding a proportion of their salary.

Although it's clear from the [guidance](#) that furloughed employees can't do any work for their organisations, they don't have to sit twiddling their thumbs under lockdown. Many will feel bewildered and anxious about the situation and leaving them to their own devices will only make them feel abandoned.

Most of these employees will return to their old jobs once the Coronavirus pandemic has passed, lockdowns are lifted and the economy starts recovering. So it's essential that employers maintain a good relationship with their teams during this uncertain period.

Here are our top tips for communicating with furloughed employees. [↓](#)

FURLOUGH

1 Explain what furlough leave is and isn't. Just as employers are getting to grips with what the term means and how it works, employees, too, are confused. Furlough is a new word for everyone. Explain what the term means (think of it as a paused employee – being on hold), how much they will be paid and that they'll be paid through the normal channels. Explain how their holiday, benefits or pension payments may be affected. Explain what happens if they get sick, or a member of their family gets sick while they're furloughed. Lastly, don't make promises you can't keep about life beyond the furlough period.

Secondly make it very clear what they are allowed to do, and not allowed to do as furloughed employees. Consider a Do's and Don'ts guide so there's no ambiguity.

Make sure that everyone knows who's furloughed and who remains working and that non-furloughed employees know what the rules are with regards to their furloughed counterparts so they don't inadvertently break them by contacting them to speak about work matters.

2 Don't use people's work emails. That's essentially asking them to log on to work equipment which is against the furlough rules. Explain that you are keen to communicate with them about non-work matters during their furloughed period and ask for their personal email address to do so. But recognise that they're under no obligation to give it to you and you must give them the option of opting out at any time.

3 Keep them updated about what's happening in the organisation. A weekly in-touch newsletter, aimed specifically at furloughed employees is a great way to keep in touch with 'paused' employees. Many employees will have been furloughed very quickly at a time when the organisation was in panic mode. By explaining what's happening (both good and bad) during this constantly-evolving situation, the employee will be reassured that they know the full picture. Although the update shouldn't include information on particular clients which could be considered work, it can paint an overall picture of the business. Enable people to have access to the company intranet, if you have one, so they can feel connected to the organisation.



A WEEKLY IN-TOUCH NEWSLETTER, AIMED SPECIFICALLY AT FURLOUGHED EMPLOYEES IS A GREAT WAY TO KEEP IN TOUCH WITH 'PAUSED' EMPLOYEES

4 It's good to talk. Suggest managers call up their furloughed direct reports informally just to catch up on how they're feeling. A call from HR or a director might feel uncomfortable or overly formal. Encourage furlough 'buddies' so people can keep in touch and talk about their experiences. If furloughed people are spread across a company, consider introducing furloughed employees to one another, so they can provide a support network as they're all going through the same thing.

5 Maintain a social bond between teams. Some part of a team may be furloughed while others are still working which can create tension. Bringing teams together for regular social activities is a good way to maintain morale and make everyone feel part of the same team. It will also help the team work well together once people come back into the organisation.

Ask your furloughed team whether anyone would want to volunteer to be a 'culture champion' during this unusual time – organising and managing extracurricular clubs (film clubs, book clubs, baking clubs), virtual meet ups to exchange skills (languages, yoga, poker, etc) and support groups (for parents, those living alone, etc)...

Many teams will already have Whatsapp groups, or similar. Make sure that no work content is discussed but use it to share lockdown film recommendations, Spotify playlists, the latest Coronavirus memes or other thoughts and tips. Weekly social video calls where people get together online with their own glass of wine or online quiz nights are other fun things to bond a team during this difficult time.

6 They can't work for you, but they don't have to do nothing. Suggest things that your team members could do during this time that will help their career in the longer-term and keep them occupied. This could include:

- * Training – explain if there's a budget
- * Volunteering within the community or NHS – there are lots of opportunities at the moment for people to feel like they're making a difference
- * Reading business/sector-specific books – perhaps suggest some titles and offer to provide a budget
- * Listening to a relevant podcast – perhaps the team could make some suggestions
- * Working elsewhere – the latest guidance states employees can work elsewhere even during the hours that they would have otherwise worked for you.

BRINGING TEAMS TOGETHER FOR REGULAR SOCIAL ACTIVITIES IS A GOOD WAY TO MAINTAIN MORALE



7 Advice and support during lockdown. Just as you're supporting your working teams during this unusual period, consider doing the same with your furloughed employees. Advice around sticking to a routine and home-schooling will be just as welcome for furloughed team members as those working remotely.

8 Encourage self care. While self-isolating is a good way to support people's physical health, it can be a challenging time for their mental health, especially when they've been furloughed and they don't have work to focus on. Providing a self-care guide to furloughed employees is a nice way to demonstrate that you care. It could include exercise ideas that people can do at home, advice on good nutrition and avoiding snacks and tips for a good night's sleep.

9 Understand that everyone is different. People will have differing reactions to being furloughed. Parents with young children might be relieved that they no longer have to juggle working remotely with home-schooling their children. Those living alone might feel anxious that their social contact will be reduced. Introverts may need less contact than extroverts, who may find lockdown more difficult. Everyone will be concerned about their employment, their finances and the future. Make sure you understand that people react differently under these circumstances and tailor your communication accordingly.

10 Create a safe psychological environment. This is a challenging period for everyone – those working and those furloughed. The future is uncertain for us all. The lack of face-to-face interaction can cause mistrust and misunderstanding. Encourage everyone to input into group discussions about their feelings and experiences, respect people's differences and opinions and watch out for signs that people are withholding and not contributing.

11 Be human. Only last month, the furloughed people were sitting opposite you and working normally. Don't treat them differently now.

12 Keep people updated. This is a fast-moving situation. Your organisation's position may change just as Government advice is changing. Keep people informed of any change to company policy but acknowledge that you don't have all the answers, nobody does.

Note: before you initiate any communication with your furloughed employees, consult your HR and legal teams to seek their advice. This is a new term and everyone is still getting to grips with what can, and can't, be done while employees are furloughed.

➔ Do you need comms support?

For almost 10 years, Magenta has been the communication expert in the built environment, designing and delivering bespoke internal communication strategies. During this unprecedented period, we are here to advise and support organisations of all sizes through the remote working and internal comms minefield.

Many organisations have in-house built environment and comms teams who can manage most aspects of workplace communications and just need some extra support at either a strategic or operational level. Others require more comprehensive support. Whether you need a bespoke communications strategy or support in creating engaging material to deliver a strategy you've already produced, we can help.

With teams in London and Toronto, together with partners around the world, we can seamlessly support your organisation. Get in touch at www.magentaassociates.co or email info@magentaassociates.co

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