



## Communicating the return to the office

## ➔ Introduction

Within the next few weeks and months, corporate offices will start opening their doors again. This reoccupation will be gradual – there's not going to be the sudden influx of people in the same way that there was the sudden exodus in mid-March.



But just as people had concerns when they left the office, they will be equally anxious about re-entering the workplace with questions around safety, wellbeing, the behaviour of other colleagues and the future of their role and the wider business. Addressing these concerns and communicating the new normal in a clear, transparent and open way will be important.

Here are some top tips from the team at Magenta Associates, the workplace communication experts.

**Staged reoccupation:** It's likely that people will come back in stages so that the building is not fully occupied at any one time. That could be achieved in a number of ways: department by department; alternating the days people can work in the office so some teams are in the building on Mondays and Wednesdays, while others come in on Tuesdays and Thursdays; different shift patterns or other options. Clearly explain when people can access the workplace and when they should keep working remotely and share the timescale for gradually easing people back into the building – even if it's not set in concrete. People will understand that the situation is fluid. Explain the reasons for the staged reoccupation.

**New behavioural guidelines:** Not only will the office be less occupied but people will need to work differently. That may include working a desk apart, limits on numbers of people on certain floors, reduced meeting room capacity, etc. Explain the new processes and procedures to people in advance to help them understand why, for example, there may be fewer chairs in a meeting room, task chairs have been removed on floors, break-out furniture may have been removed and non-essential items in meeting rooms such as notepads and pens may be missing. The procedures for using lifts, stairwells, washrooms and hot-desks while also maintaining social distancing will also have to be shared. Some organisations may consider introducing single flow direction to avoid people crossing in corridors and open spaces or reintroducing a fixed desk policy. Many organisations will have introduced new technology as a result of the pandemic. From new video conferencing options to new collaboration tools, people may have got used to a new way of working while they've been at home. Explain how this new technology will be used in the office.



Communicate this information in advance of the return to the workplace and then display the information prominently around the building (see Tools and Channels on page 5) to make sure that people are constantly reminded of the new way of working.

**Safety measures:** Understandably, people will be nervous about coming back to work and mixing with other people after being told to socially distance for so long. Obviously no-one with any health concerns should be asked to return to the workplace before they're ready. But for healthy people, set out the measures you have taken to ensure their safety. This could include:

- \* Enhanced cleaning regimes such as more regular deep cleans, continuous day-time cleaning, increased cleaning of high-risk touchpoints or a change in cleaning specifications. Some companies are trialling the use of fogging, a whole room disinfection method
- \* Providing personal hygiene packs to each staff member to help them keep their hands, IT and comms equipment and area sanitised. Some companies may offer PPE to employees depending on Government advice and the availability of such material

**ENHANCED CLEANING REGIMES SUCH AS MORE REGULAR DEEP CLEANS, CONTINUOUS DAY-TIME CLEANING, INCREASED CLEANING OF HIGH-RISK TOUCHPOINTS**



- \* Placing tissues on each desk together with cleaning materials so people can wipe down the desk and chair handles after use. Installing hand sanitiser in regular points throughout the office will be effective
- \* Increased messaging around handwashing
- \* New systems in staff restaurants, at vending machines and in communal kitchens such as lunch shifts or ordering in advance
- \* Automatic temperature checks as people enter buildings
- \* Introducing touchless systems such as automatic doors
- \* Changes to the airflow system to increase the frequency at which the air is changed
- \* Extra cycling racks to reduce the need to use public transport or extra parking spaces
- \* New security procedures to reduce contact
- \* Signage around the building to encourage social distancing in common areas
- \* New procedures in sending and receiving post

Again, inform people in advance of these changes but also display this information around your site so that people are reminded about the procedures.

People's concerns, which should be answered in a communication plan, will include:

- \* How will we all return to work?
- \* What are the new behavioural guidelines? How can we socially distance?
- \* What will be different from before? What do I need to do differently?
- \* Is everyone in the office healthy? What if someone turns up who is ill?
- \* How will we be reassured that it is safe to be in the office?
- \* How will I know that the office and my desk is clean?
- \* How will it work in lifts and washrooms?
- \* Is there a new process in the staff restaurant?
- \* Will we have to wear masks?
- \* Can I still work from home sometimes?

**New policies and procedures around business travel:** It's unlikely that people will travel in the first few months after lockdown ends to the degree they did before the pandemic. Many organisations will introduce new policies, perhaps limiting travel or attendance at certain events, for a period. Make sure you communicate that clearly to your teams so there are no surprises. This information should be shared before people go back to work, but also regularly updated through the normal internal comms systems as Government and company advice changes.

**Different offices:** If people need to visit different offices, explain the different processes and procedures at those sites if they vary across your portfolio.

**Remote working:** Remote working has been growing in popularity all the time; the pandemic has simply accelerated its rise. The practice has proved to be largely effective during the crisis so many organisations will continue with a degree of home working for the long-term. Communicate any changes in the company's policy around homeworking to people so they can continue to incorporate it into their working pattern.



**Furloughed employees:** Some of the people coming back to the office will have been furloughed while others will have been working from home. They may have different experiences and feel at odds about the return to the workplace. Those who've worked at home through the period, sometimes under trying circumstances, may feel that their furloughed counterparts have had an easy ride and be envious of what they perceive as a long holiday. Others may feel guilty that they kept working while others were seen as temporarily dispensable. Furloughed employees may feel envious of those who worked through the period as they had something to focus on and take their mind off the lockdown. They may also feel angry that they were seen as expendable. This is an emotional time for everyone, so communicate carefully and recognise these differences.

**Redundancies:** It may be that not everyone returns to the office. The changed economic situation may mean there are some redundancies and changes within organisations. Communicate these as quickly as possible, ensuring that they're not left to the office grapevine, causing further uncertainty.

**Visitors:** Many organisations will be anxious to get back to business as usual, and that will include welcoming external people into their building at some point. Share visitor-specific information with the business so they can inform visitors of the measures in place to ensure their wellbeing, and those of the organisation's employees in advance of their visit. This could include not coming to the building if they have virus symptoms, changes in front-of-house and security procedures, limits to meeting room capacity, changes to hospitality and enhanced cleaning procedures. Display this information as they enter the building so that they are kept fully aware of the measures being put in place.

**Use a variety of tools and channels and keep communication**

**fresh:** At the beginning everyone will read the material provided and be interested and engaged out of a keenness to return to the workplace. But it will soon become wallpaper even though social distancing is likely to be around for many months. Keep the material fresh and change it regularly to ensure it gets noticed. There are some ingenious and entertaining ways



**THE CHANGED ECONOMIC SITUATION MAY MEAN THERE ARE SOME REDUNDANCIES AND CHANGES WITHIN ORGANISATIONS**

to communicate social distancing. At the same time, use a variety of different tools and methods including:

- \* A microsite which acts as the main repository of information about the back-to-workplace change. Include a meaty FAQs section to cover everything and anything you can think of. Add the questions people ask to the FAQs as it is likely that someone else will want to know the answers. Direct all other forms of communication to the microsite
- \* Regular e-newsletters are great ways to share latest updates, particularly in advance of the change
- \* Company screensavers can be a great way to share the latest updates, especially if there's a significant change in policy
- \* Whereas much of the communication will be digital, the power of physical tools such as posters should not be underestimated. Posters placed in lifts, on the back of loo doors and in tea points – places where people are usually twiddling their thumbs – can be great ways of getting a message across. But make sure these are laminated and regularly cleaned so they're not a breeding place for the virus
- \* Many employees will want to hear about the return-to-work plans from a senior person. In the past, this sort of communication would have been done through open forums or town hall meetings, but that's not an option now. Instead talking-head videos with the CEO or other board members explaining the decisions made and the new policy and procedures are good ways to share key messages without the leadership team having to travel around several sites and contravene social distancing measures. They can also be shared on the microsite and on social channels to reach people. Other options include videos of the HR or property/facilities person interviewing the CEO about the changes
- \* Many companies use social media to communicate internally either through tools such as Facebook or through private forums like Yammer. These platforms should always be included in any communication plan. Where there are staff forums for discussion, make sure these are carefully monitored and immediate feedback to any questions or concerns are given
- \* Just as organisations use move champions during a relocation, consider the use of return-to-work champions, or hygiene stewards, within departments for the post-virus period. They can be useful ways to communicate on a one-to-few basis within teams, police any policies and be a familiar point of contact for any concerns.

## STAKEHOLDERS

There are a number of different groups with whom you'll need to communicate the return to work plans and procedures. These include:

- \* Business heads – it's important that the senior team lead by example and meticulously follow the rules. Make sure they're aware of the new way of working and have bought into it before communicating it to the rest of the team
- \* Employees
- \* Contractors
- \* Suppliers
- \* The landlord
- \* Visitors, including couriers

## 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](http://www.magentaassociates.co) or email [info@magentaassociates.co](mailto:info@magentaassociates.co)

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