Communicating the return to the office

Magenta

→ 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 abrupt exodus in March last year.

But just as many people had concerns when they left the office, some 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 next normal in a clear, transparent and open way will be important.

This guide provides some top tips from the team at Magenta Associates, the workplace communication experts.

Decide on your 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 any new ways of working and behaving and have bought into it before communicating it to the rest of the team. Any behavioural change has to be lead from the top down.
* **Employees** – the lifeblood of your business. It's important that everyone's on board.
* **Contractors and suppliers** – don't forget to communicate with your contractors and supply chain.
* **The landlord** will probably need to know how you're going to use the space moving forward especially if you bring in any additional cleaning and hygiene measures so be sure to keep lines of communications open.
* **Visitors**, including couriers, need to follow the same rules as everyone else in the building so you need a comms plan for them too.

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.

It may be that not everyone returns to the office. The changed economic situation may mean there are some redundancies and changes within organisations. Many of these will already have happened but others may be coming down the line as the economic situation changes. Communicate these as quickly as possible, ensuring that they're not left to the office grapevine, causing further uncertainty.
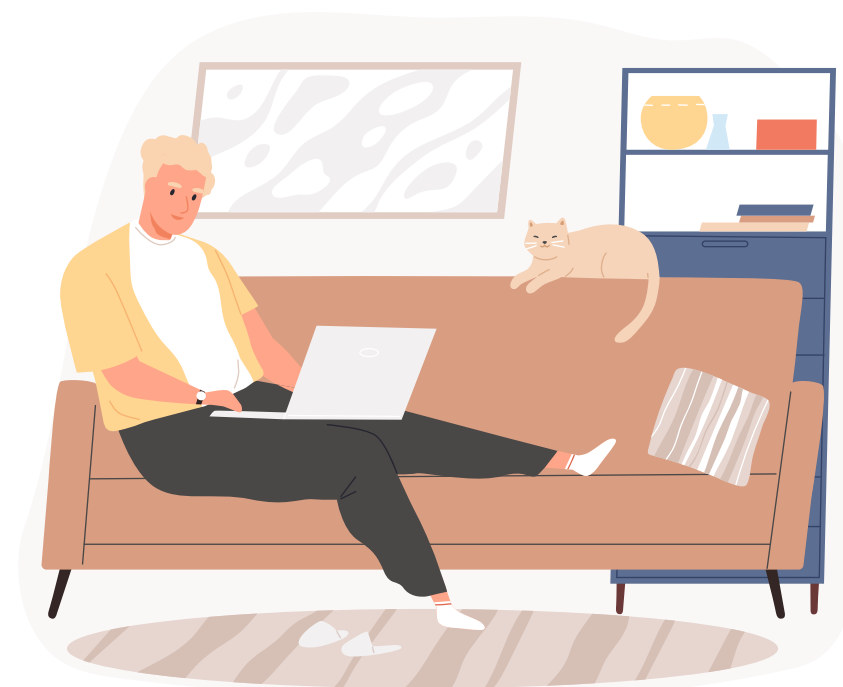
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Researching the return to work: what you need to know

Before you start any communication, it's essential to know as much as possible about the return to work. Not all the information may be available at the beginning – and it may change as you go along – so make a note of what's missing. This will fall into eight distinct areas:

What's going to happen? Clearly the aim of the project is to get everyone back to the workplace in some form or another. Talk to the project lead to understand how that's going to work. How many people will be affected, for example.

Why are we doing this? Understanding the aims of the project will help you to draft the appropriate messaging – even if you don't mention all the reasons. Some people will be quite happy about working from home and may resent having to return to the office. Others will be itching to get back. Explain why the organisation is planning on bringing people back – reasons could include Government advice changing; the workplace being safe and ready for reoccupation; the benefits of bringing people together to collaborate and socialise etc.

When's it going to happen? The post-pandemic return to work will involve key dates and you'll need to know these in order to put together a communication strategy. There's likely to be a gradual return to work so there will be key dates involving perhaps a pilot project of 10% of people, then 20&, 30% etc up until full occupancy. Work backwards from these points to create your plan.

Where is it happening? If you have more than one site, then are all sites coming back at the same time or is there a different approach from site to site. In one building, it could be that each floor is treated differently.

Who will be affected? As discussed the return to work is likely to be gradual starting with pilot programmes and moving to full occupancy. Knowing exactly who will be affected ensures you communicate with the right people. Also find out if there are teams which need to be treated differently, such as trading floors, legal/finance departments or teams with specialist equipment such as designers, or people with disabilities. But don't forget, even those who aren't affected, or perhaps will be affected much later down the line, will need to know what's going on.

How will the return to work happen? This is the really meaty question to know the answer to. 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.

What's going to change? 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.

Stay legal: Don't start communicating anything until you are certain that you have adhered to all the necessary legal requirements. The return to work may involve changes in employment contracts in some cases and unions may need to be consulted before any formal announcement to staff is made. Make sure this has all been investigated and resolved fully before embarking on a comms programme.

Welcoming back 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.

New policies 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

⊙ **COMMUNICATION PLAN**

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?

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.

New policies around 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. Many organisations are planning hybrid working for example, where people work in the office for some of the week and at home for the remainder.

Creating the messaging

Once you have all the information to hand, it's time to start drafting the key messages. Identify all the benefits that the return to work will bring to both individuals and the business and include them in the messaging. This could centre around collaboration, social contact and the ability to concentrate away from family distractions together with a sense of getting back to business as usual.

You will need different messages for different stakeholders. For example, employees will be interested in the personal benefits from the change and what they will need to do differently. Clients will be interested in your plan for visitors and your policies around business travel. Shareholders will be interested in any costs. Tailor each appropriately.

Potential challenges, such as safety concerns, a return to commuting etc, should be identified. By having key messages and answers ready for any difficult questions, you won't be caught on the back foot.

Make sure the messaging reflects the organisation's tone of voice and has been reviewed by the internal comms team (if it's not being written by them). It's essential that people are communicated with in the way they usually expect so they gain full confidence in the process. Communication within a financial services organisation might be very different from that
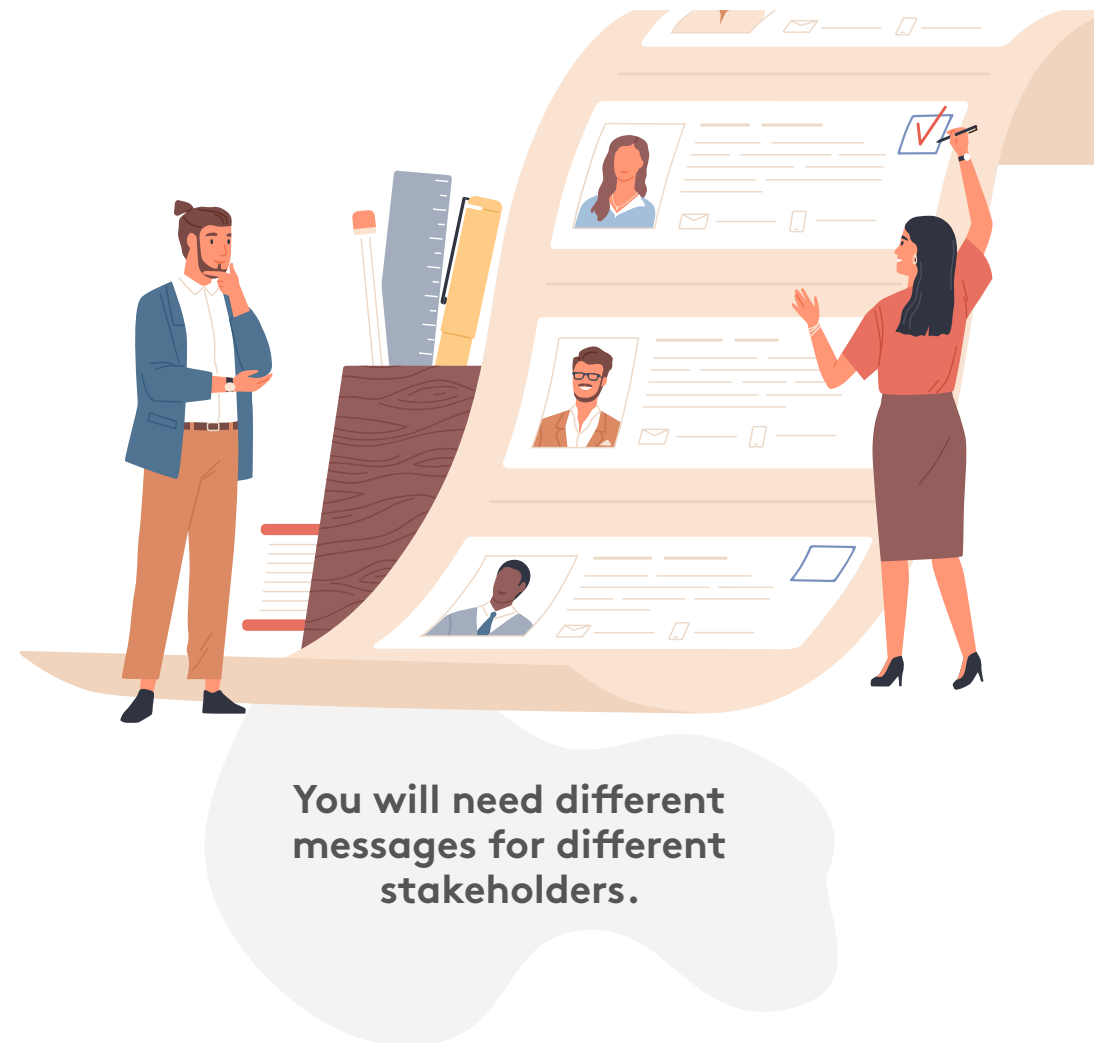
You will need different messages for different stakeholders.

within a media company.

If you're using an external agency to support you in this area, it's important that they get under the skin of your business and create messaging in your style and tone of voice.

Don't forget to include an elevator pitch – communicating the reasons for the return to work in a sentence or two – in your messaging document.

Create a timeline

Once you have a copy of the project plan – which will be constantly updated – create a timeline of activity from today until post return to work, but be prepared to change it to fit in with shifts in the overall project timetable. As we know, things do change quite quickly!

Start by explaining the rationale behind the change and then regularly update people as the days, week or months go by.

Communication should be often and open. It's almost impossible to communicate too much. But it's also important to listen as much as you talk so build in plenty of opportunities for feedback

Choosing your tools and channels

Deciding how to communicate with stakeholders is crucial. With multiple channels at your fingertips, using a variety of tools ensures that everyone takes on board what they need to know.

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 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 and embedding messaging around social distancing, for example. 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.

Communicating after the return to work

The communication shouldn't stop once everyone is back to work. It's likely that the workplace won't return to normal for many months, so people will need reminding about social distancing and any other changes. Keep any communication fresh to ensure engagement.

DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

Everyone takes on board information in different ways which means that you need to use a variety of communication tools and techniques when communicating the return to work:
There are seven learning styles. These are:

- Visual (spatial): this group prefers using pictures, images and spatial understanding. Consider posters, graphics and floorplans
- Aural (auditory): these people prefer using sound and music. Face-to-face meetings, podcasts and video are ideal for this group
- Verbal (linguistic): verbal learners like using words, both in speech and in writing. Face-to-face meetings, videos, podcasts, e-newsletters and microsites are all ideal
- Physical (kinesthetic): this group prefer using their bodies, hands and sense of touch, so mood boards and furniture samples work well if there are changes to furniture and layouts. If you're introducing new tech, can they touch/feel it?
- Logical (mathematical): These people use logic, reasoning and systems to take on board information, so any messaging on the business reasons behind the return to work and explaining the systematic process of the change will be effective
- Social (interpersonal): these people prefer to learn in groups or with other people, so taking on board news about the change in a town hall environment would work well
- Solitary (intrapersonal): this group prefers to work alone, so a micro site or any other form of information which they can digest independently will work well

Everyone has a mix of these learning styles, but many people find that they will have one dominant way that they prefer to take on board information. By using a variety of tools and channels to communicate with stakeholders, you will ensure that everyone takes on board the key messages.

After the return to work, a post-occupancy survey is a great way to understand how people feel about their surroundings and pinpoint any areas for improvement. Organisations such as employee experience assessor Leesman can provide this service, which when combined with a pre-occupancy survey, can be very valuable in demonstrating the impact of the return to work. Or you can do it yourself. By asking staff for feedback, they will continue to feel that their opinion matters and morale will be maintained.

Maintain the relationship with the return-to-work champions in the long term to understand how staff are settling in to the workplace and any changes to the way of working and what changes may need to be made. They are an invaluable source of information. Don't forget to thank them for their support during what can be a stressful period and consider ways of rewarding them, whether that's through a small financial bonus, extra holiday, discount vouchers or a bunch of flowers.

Pat yourself on the pack

Once a major project like the return to work is over, it's easy to move onto the next big thing. But take the time to thank everyone involved in the project, and don't forget yourself. You probably haven't had much of a chance to take holiday in the lead up to the change, so take a couple of days off and reflect on a job (hopefully) well done. Jot down anything you would do differently while it's fresh in your mind, so you're ready for the next workplace change project. After all, Covid has revolutionised the way we work, so you could find yourself undertaking another workplace change project quicker than you might expect.

⊙ Do you need comms support?

For over 10 years, Magenta has been the communication expert in the built environment, designing and delivering bespoke communication strategies for significant workplace change projects. Whether you're planning your post-Covid return to the office, moving several thousand people across the country or continent or refurbing a smaller regional

IN A NUTSHELL

Top tips on communicating the return to work

* What are people's typical concerns?
* Decide on your stakeholders
* Research the project and find out everything you need to know
* Create the key messages
* Decide on the timeline – but be flexible
* Use a variety of tools and channels to keep information fresh
* Treat furloughed employees sensitively
* Don't stop communicating when you're back in the workplace

office, we can help you to get your message across so that everyone knows what's going on, when it's happening, what they need to do, how they need to do it and why. This makes your project run more smoothly, ensures people are engaged with the process and guarantees business continuity.

Many organisations have in-house workplace and comms teams who can manage most aspects of workplace change 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 created for your workplace change project, or support in creating engaging material to deliver a strategy you've already produced, we can help. With teams in London, New York and Toronto, together with partners around the world, we can seamlessly support cross-border projects.

Get in touch at **www.magentaassociates.co** or email **info@magentaassociates.co** or call **+44 (0)20 3773 3622**

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