

# How to Manage the Mental Health of Returning Employees



By Paul Bergeron May 14, 2020



Many employees will soon be experiencing the mixed emotions of joy and fear as they transition back to the office from working at home. Joy will come from a partial return to normalcy and the opportunity to see colleagues again in person, while fear likely will arise from the stress and anxiety of commuting and working in an environment where COVID-19 may linger. In fact, experts say that initially, employee productivity isn't likely to be high as workers deal with a range of concerns, including childcare responsibilities and the safety of elderly family members.

"The most important thing HR directors need to do is to manage expectations," said Maria Clyde, SHRM-SCP, director of human resources at BHI insurance agency in Newark, Del. "There's been a whole lot of emotional letdown for workers over the past eight weeks. First, we all thought we'd be closed for two weeks—'this is just going to be a blip'—then it was a month, now it's two months [and longer]. You must acknowledge to employees that this transition will be difficult. At the same time, you need to recognize we just don't know."

Not everyone is going to be skipping back to work—although some will, Clyde says.

"When you have high hopes about a recovery, and then there's a letdown, mentally you

take a beating," she said, adding that even employees who were allowed to work from home were thrown into an entirely new job scenario, and most have settled into new, usually productive routines.

Amber Clayton, SHRM-SCP, director of the Society for Human Resource Management's HR Knowledge Center, said she expects employees to bring their stress, anxiety and depression with them when they come back to work.

"Employees might be dealing with a spouse who has been furloughed or laid off, so there will be financial pressures," she said. "On the other hand, a few others will be super happy to rejoin their colleagues in person. Every situation will be different."

In a PwC survey conducted the week of May 4, 51 percent of workers who have switched to remote work or haven't been able to work said their fear of getting sick would prevent them from going back to the office, even if their employer asked them to return.

In a separate PwC survey of chief financial officers released May 11, 43 percent said they may make remote work permanent for those "whose roles allow it." Fifty-eight percent said it would take at least three months before their companies could return to "business as usual."

## **'It Depends on the Situation'**

As employers decide whether to recall employees from furloughs or work-at-home situations, the size of their business often plays a key role.

"An HR director's favorite phrase, 'It depends on the situation,' has never been truer," Clyde said. "A company's culture, size and industry present unique situational challenges. We're not all in the same boat, but we're in the same storm."

However, the calendar and mandated timetables apply equally to all. For example, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) grants 12 weeks of paid leave to employees to care for their children in response to school or day care closures due to COVID-19.

"For most, those 12 weeks will be up in mid-June," Clyde said. "And we're already seeing that all of the summer camps are being canceled. That leaves a lot of parents in a tough spot."

As a result, companies may need to be flexible based on their employees' needs. Consider letting certain staff members continue to work from home but with firm rules in place about their availability and work deadlines, Clayton said.

"For the past eight weeks, a lot of employees have been able to sleep in. Their bodies are on different sleep cycles," she said. "If they had a 1.5-hour commute each way before, they've gotten used to not having to deal with it. They may be out of shape mentally—and even physically."

## **Tough Unemployment-Insurance Decisions**

HR departments also face difficult unemployment-commission policy decisions if their employees are afraid to return to work.

"If an employee is offered their job back after shelter-in-place rules are lifted, and they decline, then technically the employer is supposed to notify their state employment commission that the person turned the job down," said Suzanne Lucas, an HR consultant, a writer and the author of the Evil HR Lady blog.

"That means employees will then be cut off from receiving unemployment benefits. Did the employee not come in due to fear or is there a medical reason?" she asked. "HR directors are not doctors. So, do you terminate the employee? It becomes an ethical question. No one wants to cut someone off from earning money, but if they aren't willing to work, what is the recourse?"

## **Making an Emotional Connection**

Supervisors also need to realize that some staff members could be less productive due to the stressful situation, and they may have to rethink how they will measure performance, Clyde said. This is when an emotional connection between returning employees and their senior staff is critical.

"You have to proactively communicate with staff," Clyde said. "You have to pay a lot more attention to them than you did before. Encourage them to share how they are feeling about what's going on in their lives: fear about safety, job loss, health, their spouse ... Tell them, 'We are not mind readers. You need to let me know.' "

Clayton agreed that strong people-manager skills are critical. "Supervisors may need to be flexible, empathetic, open and understanding. They need to reach out and be proactive in their communications with their staff. Be ready for sudden events—such as family emergencies, which will pop up for their direct reports—even in a moment's notice."

HR also should take steps to make sure that whispers and false rumors don't take over the office dialogue. "HR departments have to balance the needs of their company and the needs of their employees," Clyde said. "HR and the senior staff need to be as transparent as they can be [while following privacy rules]. Animosity will be created

based on whose work situation has changed and why. Others will fill the void with negativity because that's the world we live in. However, once employees learn and understand some of the personal side of their co-workers' situations, they will understand. But if they aren't informed, the rumors will start flying."

If the office rumor mill gets going, then it's possible the staff didn't trust management even before the pandemic. The C-suite needs to provide quick and honest answers to questions to prevent rumors from spreading in the first place, said Clayton, who added that especially in circumstances such as the current coronavirus crisis, the rumor mill could rev up to full speed unless companies and supervisors are transparent about decisions made and the decision-making process.

"Not doing this will only turn up the volume," Clayton said. "And if you hear [rumors and speculation], you have to step in and say, 'Stop.' "

Also, be aware of staff who become more political at the office, such as those who believe the pandemic is not as serious as it is reported to be or that it is a hoax, or those who think the government isn't doing enough. Employees should be told that those discussions are inappropriate for the workplace, say experts.

Finally, find out what options are available for workers through the employee assistance programs your organization offers, Clayton said. Contacting your health insurance companies to see if they provide for counseling sessions is another approach, as is offering literature and guidance from SHRM.org.

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