Update on Coronavirus

Practical Considerations of Returning to Work Safely

We now know that lockdown restrictions will be eased on a phased basis, beginning on 18 May and running over five phases as part of a comprehensive Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. With the addition of the Return to Work Safely Protocol, Employers are being supported in their preparations to return to work safely and in accordance with the easement of restrictions as laid out in the roadmap.

Every Organisation has obligations to ensure the health and safety of both their Employees and visitors to their premises and so the implementation of a carefully considered return to work plan will be critical. Employer actions and policies to protect individual lives and public health during the phased return to work should be necessary, proportionate and non-discriminatory. Key considerations will be Health and Safety Compliance and ensuring that Employment Equality Rights are maintained.

There is no doubt that Organisations planning to reopen in the coming weeks will be faced with a very different workplace and potentially an anxious concerned workforce. To ensure readiness for returning to work it is essential for Organisations to engage now with their key stakeholders in order to develop a practical plan for returning to the workplace. Engaging with those responsible not only for health and safety but those who manage the office facilities, line managers, team leaders and Employees themselves will be especially important in developing an inclusive and implementable plan.

Communication is key. Keeping Employees informed and up to date on your planning will help to keep everyone engaged and on board with the plan and give them some degree of security in very uncertain times. In particular, knowing they are valued contributors and that you are prioritising their safety and their ongoing employment is critical to supporting Employee mental health and well-being. Transparency is particularly important for building trust and engagement. And, being clear about the decisions taken and plans being implemented will keep everyone on the same page as you navigate the 'new normal'.

A Practical Planned Approach to Returning to Work

Every Organisation's return to the workplace will need to be adapted to a set of individual circumstances, keeping in mind that where possible common sense should prevail. Overcomplicated plans will only create confusion; every Employee needs to understand the plan and how it works.

The impact of the 'return to work' protocol and the continuing need for social distancing means that the capacities in many workplaces have been significantly reduced. Because of this Organisations will likely need to implement a phased return to work, considering which roles will be most essential in the first instance for getting

the business back up and running effectively, while still accommodating elements of remote working.

Building return to work plans in a structured way with clear criteria to bring Employees back to the workplace based on both business need and individual personal circumstances will ensure that the return is manageable. Building in reasonable accommodations at an individual level to an overall plan will also work to reduce the potential risk of employee relations issues down the line. Certain age groups, those with individual health issues (underlying conditions) or at-risk dependents, will need careful consideration in the plan

Ensuring plans are practical, founded in common sense and inclusive will be important to maintaining employee engagement and buy in to the plan. One approach is the use of an Employee Survey where Employees would self-assess, answering questions about their willingness and capacity (mental and physical) to return to the workplace. The Employee Survey would support the development of a practical plan for reopening which should be balanced with the requirements as set by the Protocols and assist in providing answers to the following key questions:

- What Employees should return to work and when?

- What are the maximum number of Employees allowed in the workspace at one time?

- Consideration to restructuring and splitting teams/ shifts?

- What communication is needed– when should it start?

- Should a re-induction process form part of a return to work plan?

- How will social distancing during shift changes/breaks be managed?

- Should the work 'week' allowing Employees to work shorter hours over 6 days rather than 5 be considered?

- Are there implications to individual terms and conditions that should be considered?

- Will the business continue to allow 'hot desking' and how will this be managed to ensure proper hygiene?

- How will essential meetings or teamwork/collaboration be facilitated? Should the use of video conferencing be long term?

- How will access to communal areas such as canteens or lunchrooms be managed? What alternatives could be provided to Employees to have a meal break?

- What about (international) business travel?

- What to do if an Employee refuses to return to work?

- What preparations should be made in the event that government restrictions are implemented again?

Addressing Mental Health Concerns

A well-planned transition plan will need to address the positive mental health of Employees. It is likely that most people will need a period of readjustment, of settling in to the new normal. Even where Employees have continued to work in a role, albeit remotely, over the period of lockdown they will need time to readjust to the workplace environment, to being around colleagues once again. There could be many underlying anxieties about travelling to work on public transport or about the resurgence of the virus. The old familiar workplace routines could feel very different or could have been replaced by new routines designed to address safety and hygiene issues in the new norm – all of this could have an impact on your Employees' mental health. In addition, many Employees will have experienced challenging home environments juggling caring responsibilities with their work. Some may have been ill themselves or might have lost a loved one. It could be worth considering the provision of additional breaks or shorter days on a phased basis to support Employees in dealing with stress and concerns related to returning to work post COVID-19. Any plans of this nature should be balanced with the considerations and obligations that fall under the government protocols. Building some flexibility into your return to work plan will help address the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on your Employees and mitigate the further risk of long-term absence.

What to Do if Employees Refuse to Return to Work

Finally, even with the most well communicated, transparent and robust planning process that considers the wide variety of business needs and Employee requirements, some Employees may be reluctant or may even refuse to return to work. This could be because of a general fear for their own health or the health of someone at home or because they are unable to obtain childcare or for other reasons related to COVID-19.

As outlined above, clearly communicating to Employees and being transparent about the steps being taken to protect them may be useful to alleviate anxiety and fear about returning to work. Offer support and model flexibility working with each Employee to reasonably accommodate their individual needs in returning to work. If remote working remains an option for your business, ensure that you update your policies and communicate to those who may be reluctant to return to the workplace in the first instance. Revisit the return to work at another time and keep the lines of communication open.

How we can help

At Adare Human Resource Management, we have an experienced team available to provide comprehensive support with developing a safe return to work plan, adapting workplaces for the 'new normal', communicating with Employees and providing remote assistance and support where necessary.

Disclaimer - The information in this section is provided to assist Employers on the implementation of government guidelines and must be read in that context and should not be interpreted as a legal definition of any of the information provided. The information is changing constantly, and any information relating to the government guidelines or protocols should be reviewed on the appropriate website.

**For further information or advice, please contact the experienced team in Adare Human Resource Management on (01) 5613594
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