

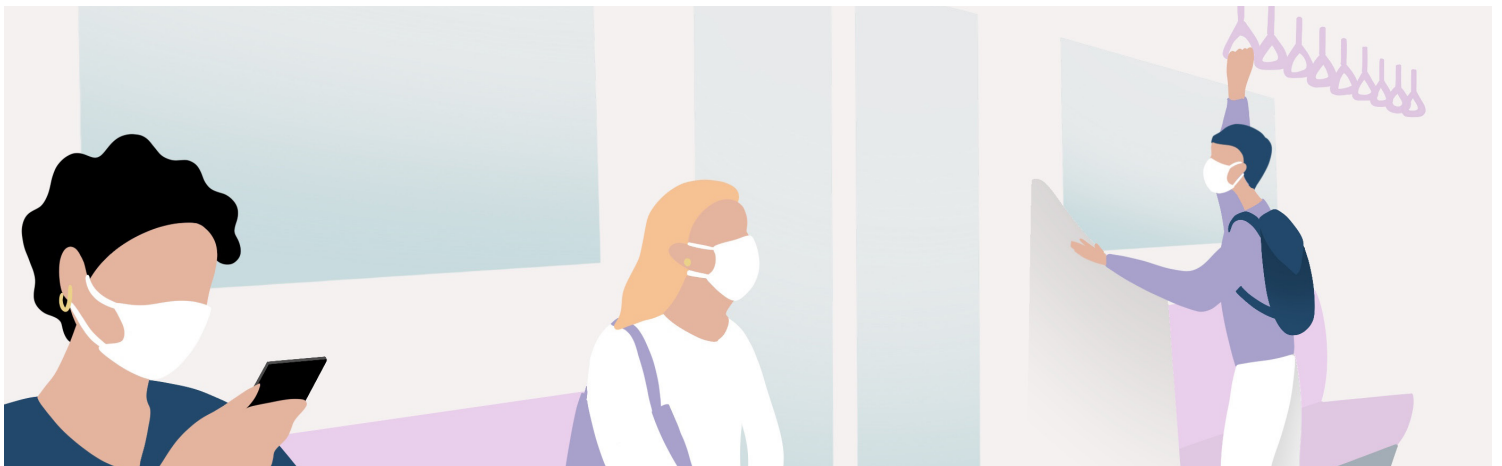


Returning to the Workplace

Supporting Employees Through the Transition



Uncertainty around a return to the workplace remains high for many. Even with widespread vaccinations and bits and pieces of “normalcy” coming back to daily life, many feel unsettled about disrupting new routines to return to a workplace with new and different dynamics. Employers are faced with unique challenges that accompany building a “new normal.” This includes leading and supporting the workforce through the transition back to work. This guide provides tips for supporting employees through that transition.



Understand Concerns

To better understand employee concerns in returning to the workplace, consider conducting a pulse survey or holding a virtual town hall. The town hall offers people the opportunity to process grief given that so many lost connections with colleagues, time with family and friends, loved ones to the virus, favorite local businesses, and more. It also offers the chance to learn more about how this historic time impacted people, what positive lessons came from this experience, and the changing needs of employees moving forward.

Here are concerns reported by returning employees:

- **Physical interactions with people:** For some, returning to the office means interacting with more people than they have seen in over a year.
- **Health risks:** While many are vaccinated, COVID-19 remains an ongoing concern for some.
- **Commute:** The use of public transportation and the anticipation of heavy traffic are likely concerns for those returning to the workplace.
- **Caregiving:** Many are currently serving as caregivers to children, people with health and mental health conditions, and the elderly. For caregivers, leaving home to go to work impacts the health of others and the care they provide.
- **Disruption to new routines:** New routines have been established during the pandemic, a return to the workplace means changing newly created schedules.
- **Local businesses closed:** The pandemic led to many local businesses closing, including restaurants, coffee shops, and more. This may limit employee options for lunch and needed breaks during the day.



Communicate Often and Be Transparent

- **Make resources easily accessible:** Consider keeping information and resources related to a return to the workplace in a centralized online location, like the Intranet.
- **Be transparent:** Keep employees updated on policies, procedures, flexible schedules and remote working options, and more. If they are changing, make sure employees know when they go into effect.
- **Share personal experiences:** Encourage staff, especially leadership, to share stories, feelings, and personal experiences related to transition so that people know they are not alone in what they are experiencing.
- **Routine check-ins:** Make sure people managers are routinely checking in with employees. Consider providing mental health training to managers on how to notice changes, check in with employees they may be concerned about, and connect people to services and supports.



Stay Flexible

Routines and priorities have shifted for many during their time at home. While in transition, people may need to navigate logistics for childcare arrangements, schedules, commutes, and more. Staying flexible during the transition back to the workplace reduces stress and helps retain top talent.

Don't forget:

- **Transition takes time:** Returning to the workplace will be a process.
- **Hybrid work schedules should be considered:** This includes alternative work schedules, new remote work policies, and flex hours.
- **Factor in commute times:** While early and late meetings may have been the norm during the pandemic, be respectful of people's commuting time when scheduling meetings and deadlines.

Recognize the Signs of Pandemic Fatigue

The year of coping with isolation and the fallout from a global pandemic has impacted the thoughts and behaviors of many. Some may be experiencing "pandemic fatigue."

Here are some signs!:

- Lack of motivation
- Excessively tired, despite adequate sleep
- Feeling ineffective
- Irritability
- Anxiety or stress related to discerning who is "safe" or "not safe"
- Difficulty concentrating

Whether a person is experiencing "pandemic fatigue" or not, as people work through this transition, it offers the opportunity to support the process of managing uncertainty and unpredictability.

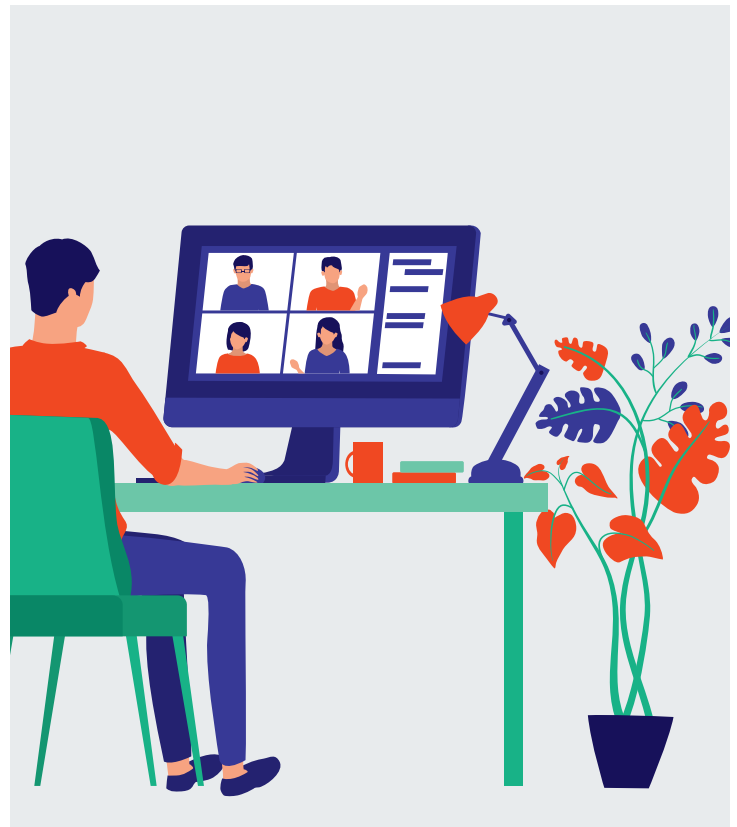


Manage Uncertainty and Unpredictability

Find ways to support employees who may be feeling the uncertainty and unpredictability that comes with transitioning back to the workplace. Organizations are well positioned to be a resource for employees by sharing helpful recommendations to manage uncertainty.

Here are tips to consider sharing with employees:

- Prepare yourself to feel a bit lost, it's ok to feel unsettled.
- Remember that re-engaging with people is good, find ways to manage feeling unsafe around those you have not physically seen during the pandemic.
- Stay healthy by getting enough sleep, eating well, and engaging in regular physical activity.
- Stay socially connected with loved ones and friends.
- Return to activities you once enjoyed like art, music, cooking, and more.
- Establish routines to add predictability to your day.
- Consider testing your commute before officially returning to the office to get comfortable with the mode of transportation and route.



Create Employee Resources on Strategies for Managing Change

Here are tips to consider:

- Recognize that change is normal and acknowledge it for what it is.
- Understand that change often requires some level of flexibility.
- Try to stay positive, find the good in the change.
- Stay in touch with feelings and emotions about the change.
- Create routines and control what you can.

Promote Resiliency

Building and promoting resilience helps employees manage stress and address challenges on the job. Improving resilience in the workplace is associated with greater job satisfaction, engagement, happiness at work, commitment to the organization, and better overall health.

How can you support and promote resilience in the workplace?

- Encourage and offer opportunities for mindfulness, meditation, and other spiritual practices. You might invite a mindfulness leader to present on the value of the practice and then lead a 15-minute mindfulness break during the workday.
- Work with leaders and managers on modeling healthy behavior and responses to work challenges. Refocus reactions to challenges to prioritize learning from past mistakes and to emphasize the positive moving forward.
- Create a safe work environment that allows people to set reasonable work hour limits, prioritize sleep and physical health, and encourage people to access mental health support when it's needed.
- Acknowledge and support people's strengths and be proactive about validating and celebrating employee "wins" to bolster self-confidence and create a more positive work environment.



Here are resources from the Center for Workplace Mental Health on resiliency:

- [Resilience: A Strong Workforce Needs It](#)
- [The Value of Resiliency](#)

Support People Managers

Managers have played a key role in supporting employees experiencing stress and burnout during the pandemic. In taking on this added responsibility, many may be experiencing compassion fatigue, and would benefit from extra support themselves.

Normalize their new role in supporting employees throughout this time, whether they've been remote or onsite. Support managers as they prepare to support their teams through yet another transition in returning to the workplace.



Tips for managers in leading their team through the transition back-to-the-workplace:

- Stay flexible and be aware of team members' schedules, commutes, and work arrangements in setting meeting times, deadlines, and more.
- Create a team culture of caring where feelings and feedback are welcomed. Do this by encouraging open communication and dialogue.
- Stay positive, remember to celebrate the team's successes and small wins.
- Take breaks during the day to manage stress as you support your team's transition.
- Surround yourself with people who enrich you to counter any added stress.

- Engage in and encourage random acts of kindness, which are often fulfilling.
- Recognize and provide space for grief and consider potential triggers and anniversary reactions, which might include the date of the first lockdown, first person lost to the virus, date a person or a loved one went to the hospital with COVID-19, and related issues.
- Returning to work is not akin to an "on-off switch" – for some, distress may show up months later, so be on the lookout for people feeling distressed over the next year.
- Consider mental health training, like the Center for Workplace Mental Health's **Notice.Talk.Act.® at Work**, which supports leaders and managers to:
 - » **NOTICE** potential signs of mental health concerns;
 - » **TALK** with a person about these concerns; and
 - » **ACT** to connect a person with services and supports.

To learn more about the Center for Workplace Mental Health's mental health training, **Notice.Talk.Act.® at Work**, visit: WorkplaceMentalHealth.org/NTAatWork



Make Employee Mental Health a Visible Priority

Remind employees about available mental health and well-being resources, including the following:

- **Benefits and Resources:** Provide a comprehensive list of available mental health and well-being resources, along with contact information for each. Here are resources to consider including:
 - Human Resources Contact for Performance and Related Issues
 - Lead for Health & Mental Health Benefits
 - Digital Health and Mental Health Tools
 - Leave and Accommodation Options
 - » Family Medical Leave
 - » Short and Long Term Disability
 - » ADA and Related Accommodations
 - Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
 - Relevant Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)
- **Supplemental Benefits:** Consider offering apps that promote mental health and well-being through meditation, coaching, sleep, and more.
- **Community Organizations:** Share information about community organizations, like the **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** that offer support, education, and more for people living with mental health conditions and their families.
- **Stress Management:** Offer guidance on how to promote health and well-being throughout the day. Encourage activities like yoga, mindfulness, and meditation, or even a mid-day trip to the gym to help alleviate stress.
- **Launch a Mental Health and Well-being Initiative:** Think about launching a mental health and well-being initiative to accompany the return to the workplace. Consider adding a new benefit as a perk to accompany the launch. Check out **Right Direction** for high-impact, customizable resources on raising depression awareness and launching mental health workplace initiatives.

A Final Note

New habits have been created over the past year. For many, it was easier to break habits on the front end of the pandemic because of the clear sense of urgency, but breaking habits on the back end may be harder for some. People may see no urgency, especially given how much they have heard over the past year about how productive they have been and how well they have done with remote work.

Consider allowing people to ease back into the workplace. Two key takeaways are “transition” and “gradual” as people get used to returning to onsite working. This can be done by helping people remember what they enjoyed most about leaving home and coming into work. Involve employees as much as possible in creating the new normal. The process of working collaboratively promises to produce positive results.

References and Additional Return to the Workplace Resources

- **Returning to the workplace after COVID-19: What boards should be thinking about (PwC)**
- **What’s next for America’s workforce post-COVID-19 (PwC)**
- **Pursuing growth in 2021: The C-suite focuses on a rejuvenated workforce and building trust (PwC)**
- **Redesigning the Employee Experience: Preparing the Workforce For a Transformed World (MetLife)**
- **Mental Health: A Path to a Resilient Workforce and Business Recovery (MetLife Survey July 2020)**
- **Prepare for the new hybrid world with the Eden Workplace Return to Office Survey (Eden)**
- **COVID-19 Back-to-Work Checklist (SHRM)**
- **Workplaces and Businesses: Plan, Prepare, and Respond (CDC)**

¹Accessed at AMA, January 29, 2021.

<https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/what-doctors-wish-patients-knew-about-pandemic-fatigue>.

