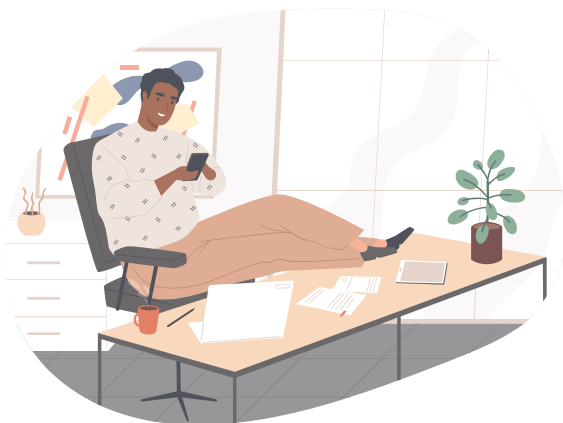




As we draw closer and closer towards returning to the office, it is hard not to be irresistibly reminded of approaching the first day of a new school year. It is not long now until many of us will be back together, eyeing each others' new shoes and haircuts, greeting old friends and swapping stories of everything we have been up to since we last saw one another. But of course, the time away has been radically different and more challenging than the summer holidays of our youth and employers, and managers therefore need to consider how to prepare for the great return.

Flexibility

Working from home has been a welcome change for some and an annoyance for others. As we (hopefully) come to some sort of return to normality, one of the key decisions for employers is whether to continue permitting staff to work away from the office. Figures released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in July 2020 showed that 46.6 per cent of



Summary

- Flexible working arrangements are on the way in and this might take a hybrid approach, where a certain amount of office attendance is required.
- Many employers will clearly need to make alterations to their workspaces, while others plan for an increased emphasis on the mental health of employees.
- The Covid crisis has led to a streamlining of many processes that will survive beyond the lifespan of the pandemic.

A new normal

Duncan Ferris explores how employers need to prepare as we draw nearer to Covid-19 restrictions being lifted and staff returning to the office, after what has been an undeniably difficult year

people in employment did some work at home in the first full month of the UK's lockdown, with 86 per cent doing so as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Now that we can foresee a moment on the horizon where this might no longer be a factor, employers are establishing their approach.

Lincoln Pensions CEO, Darren Redmayne, comments: "While we see the office environment as still important for collaboration and learning, it is clear that working from home and flexible working arrangements work extremely well. Lockdown has, for many, revised social expectations around where work should be done and accelerated some existing trends."

PensionBee CEO, Romi Savova, appears to agree that offering flexibility is a good thing, stating: "In September 2020, we gave all members of staff the option of being office-based or home-based, which will dictate their default work location for the foreseeable future."

She notes that "achieving the appropriate balance between office and home working for our team is a necessity", acknowledging that different members of staff will have "different needs and circumstances".

For some companies it makes sense to introduce some element of



structure to this flexibility. Foster Denovo head of human resources, Louise Blair, explains that the financial advisory firm's hybrid approach will see employees working both at home and in the office, with the company ideally expecting staff to have "around three days in and two from home".

Blair adds: "We have found through talking to our members of staff, that the majority enjoy the flexibility working from home provides, promoting a healthy work life balance.

"Although, it should not be underestimated that working in the office for some of our time provides that much needed face-to-face engagement, cross-team collaboration, learning and development opportunities and building and strengthening relationships that has been missing since last March."

Dalriada Trustees director, Brian Spence, agrees, stating: "Many of our professional trustees joined us at entry

level and they are keen to develop their knowledge and skills, often by learning from their more experienced colleagues. Collaboration, learning and teaching is better done face to face and we will be meeting our clients in person whenever they want us to.”

Support

Regardless of how often employees are going to be in the office, employers must consider what kind of support and alterations they should provide in order to help their staff with any changes.

Redmayne says: “We are completely refitting our office space for hybrid working with the construction work taking place as we speak. This new environment will provide extra support to colleagues working partly from home and partly in the office.”

Savova explains that PensionBee has “set up hot-desks to accommodate those remote workers that want to visit the office for socially distanced face-to-face interactions” along with adhering to government guidelines.

These guidelines currently consist of 14 documents that cover a range of different types of work, with measures listed in the guide for offices including a Covid-19 risk assessment, more frequent cleaning, adequate ventilation and taking part in NHS Test and Trace.

But the matter of support does not just require physical changes to office space, with Savova noting the need to aid staff with their mental health.

She explains: “We’re checking in with each other regularly to ensure everyone has everything they need. If anything, the pandemic has brought us closer together as a team, and we have five internal mental health first aiders whose job is to help look after and care for the wellbeing of colleagues, wherever they are located.”

Blair is also keen to point out this side of the return to normality, commenting: “We are being flexible as to when employees have to begin to return to the office and we appreciate that everyone feels differently about the return.”

Additionally, she explains that “all line managers have received mental health training”, while an employee assistance line is available at all hours, the company runs wellbeing workshops and employees have access to an app-based service, which includes mental health support.

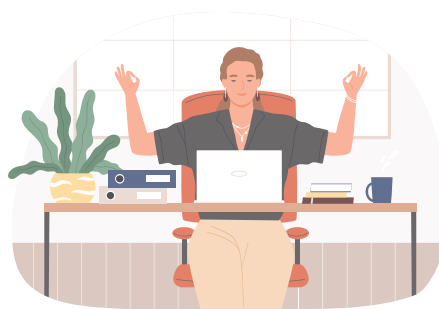
Mental health is never a matter to be ignored, but employers should strive to be particularly aware of their staff’s wellbeing in the current conditions. In December, Royal College of Psychiatrists president, Dr Adrian James, said the combination of the virus, its social consequences and the economic fallout of the pandemic had been responsible for “probably the biggest hit to mental health since the second world war”.

Streamlining

As well as the possibility of flexibility and changes in how employers support staff, workplaces have been greatly impacted by the streamlining of certain processes. While these changes were often a necessity in the dark days of the pandemic, many will continue to be a fixture of people’s jobs as we return to normal.

Redmayne comments: “The pandemic has helped take us fully to paperless working, which is also great from environmental, social and governance perspective. Prior to lockdown we still had parts of our business printing and binding documents as a traditional part of client service.”

Blair states: “Client meetings have been held virtually and this is something that some of our advisers and clients wish



to continue doing post restrictions. We have fast tracked our use of electronic signatures and the use of online forms and applications for clients and we do not see ourselves going backwards from this. In fact, we’d love to ditch paper altogether.”

She adds that communication has “actually improved despite everyone working from home”, noting that video meetings software has helped to “improve collaboration”.

Meanwhile, Savova states that while PensionBee was “more prepared than most” for working from home, she adds that a critical team remained in the office to “take care of the tasks that just can’t be done from home, like processing post and scanning customer policy documents”.

Pointing out a bit of a snag in going fully paperless, she states: “Unfortunately this is a manual process that we’ve been unable to streamline as most of the traditional pension providers will only accept transfer paperwork that a customer has signed by hand and won’t accept a digital signature. This is despite the fact that transfer times can be greatly improved for consumers, especially where a digital pension transfer platform like Origo is used.”

Even so, it seems that when the office doors are once again unlocked for us all, it could represent a moment where employers embrace important changes to working life, which make things easier for all their staff.

Written by Duncan Ferris