

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2021 Edition

Ask the Expert

Managing the Successful Return to Office

Getting everyone on board after the lockdowns



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Q My employer has just advised that we are all expected to return to the office following the lockdowns. How do we navigate this change?

A We know that the pandemic has created stress and uncertainty for us all over the last year and a half. Our worlds have been turned upside down not only work wise, but personally as well. Those who are introverted may have appreciated many aspects of working from home while those who are extroverted struggled with lack of interaction during this period of isolation. Studies have shown that not only extroverts, but those displaying introversion experienced more severe loneliness, anxiety and depression due to COVID19-related circumstantial changes. Morneau Shepell reflects this in their monthly Mental Health Index that shows the strained mental health in the Canadian population recorded monthly since the pandemic began. With vaccines now available, the mandate to return to the workplace is not that far off. Employers and employees need to recognize that the toll on employees' mental health will impact their return to the workplace and their ability to manage working relationships successfully.

When your employer has indicated it's time to return to the workplace, what will you do? It's a good time for a conversation and maybe a negotiation with your employer by asking some questions ourselves. When is the right time to go back? Is the employer telling me to return or do I have a choice? What am I going back into? How will it work? Can I go back full-time or will they let me have a flexible working arrangement? The working relationship with our employer is also one of our most important ones, so a natural place to begin our efforts.

We will again find ourselves in the position of having to redesign the way we work as the pre-pandemic ways won't be suitable for some time to come yet, if at all. We will continue to have to adapt to constant change and uncertainty; feeling our way as we have during the past fifteen months. What will our new social norms be? We can't fathom that shaking hands or hugging will be on the near horizon, so maybe that awkward elbow bump will become a new standard of greeting. How will we collaborate differently? Virtual collaboration was becoming easier and now we will likely have to adapt to a mixed undertaking of virtual and in-person. Some individuals in the room and some on video, or some meetings with everyone gathered in person and some virtual touch points. We've done so well without travel so maybe that will continue to ensure organizations can manage costs. Returning to our own travel or commuting may also create some strain so remember to build back in the time — we've become used to a short commute when working from home.

In many cases during lockdown, we were able to get to know our colleagues better through our video glimpses into their homes. You can tell a lot about a person by viewing the art on their walls, their pets and of course meeting their house mates, whether that is small children interrupting or spouses in the background. Perhaps our previous in-office working relationships were targeted to those we felt safe to interact with or those we knew we had things in common with. Returning to the office will give us the opportunity to strengthen these newer, broader working relationships that began through our video connections. This may be more difficult for those introverts mentioned earlier and welcomed with open arms by the

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extroverts. Regardless of which category you may fall into, a focus on building and restoring our working relationships will be vital so ensure you set aside time in your day to reconnect in person. Stress and anxiety will be higher for all of us, but we can use those pandemic video connections as a foundation to build strong working relationships. These relationships will be what keeps us grounded and able to thrive during our return to the office.

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