



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

## Returning to Work

### *Managing Employee Emotions is Vital*

**W**orkforce reductions of the magnitude seen in recent months can be very challenging for business leaders and employees alike. While uncertainties surrounding the economy and coronavirus pandemic remain, a reasonable number of remote employees *have* returned to traditional work environments. This prompts many executives to assume that the pain incurred from this difficult time has disappeared.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Returning to work requires a period of adjustment. Whether the absence is due to being laid off as the result of COVID-19, direct exposure to the virus that led to hospitalization or other significant time spent at home, or any other reason, returning to work after being away for weeks or even months can be an anxious and difficult period of adjustment.

Consider what it feels like to return to work after a long holiday or vacation. The simple act of driving to work or entering your work area, something you've done hundreds or even thousands of times, can feel slightly foreign and produce minor anxiety.

Now, consider having been out of work for six months or more – and bear in mind that you left work not because of a vacation or seasonal layoff, but because you were either let go indefinitely due to the coronavirus, or told to work remotely until things “got back to normal”. What would it feel like to get back to work *then*? It's pretty much uncharted territory!

#### **Managing Emotional Responses**

When laid-off employees return, there is a sense of relief among both business leaders and those being called back to work. Recalling workers and even hiring new ones are signs that indicate a significant improvement in the business climate. Moreover, the presence of additional

employees may allow organizations to resume work that had been put on hold.

Employees going back to work will likely feel relieved from a financial standpoint and also excited that they can be productive and get their careers back on track.

Unfortunately, emotions don't stop there. Return-to-work situations are often marked by complex emotional and interpersonal responses that, unless managed carefully, can have a negative impact on employees and the workplace.

Supervisors should be aware of the emotional reactions they may see from employees returning to the office after working remotely or from a lengthy layoff or other absence. It's important for managers to be aware that, like any change, returning to work is a process that plays out over time. Employees may even exhibit some reactions that seem contradictory.

#### **Understanding Employee Behaviors**

Employees returning to work may demonstrate one or more of the following job-related behaviors:

- Exhilaration, enthusiasm, and high levels of motivation;
- An exaggerated desire to please or impress others;
- Anxiety and fear (especially in light of the pandemic);
- Lack of confidence;
- Social anxiety, isolation or withdrawal (again, especially in light of COVID-19);
- A reluctance to engage with others or take on special work, particularly if the work is highly visible;
- Problems with memory, concentration or focus;
- Increased sensitivity to criticism, discussions about performance, or talk of economic problems;



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- Difficulty getting along with others;
- Anger, sarcasm or cynicism;
- Higher levels of absenteeism or medical complaints;
- Performance problems stemming from a variety of factors, including erosion of skills; and
- A distracted, fatigued or tired appearance.

*Exercise: Use this space to note if any of these behaviors are occurring in your employees – and if so, which ones?*

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Why would supervisors see such reactions? After all, these employees have been brought back to the office. What could possibly be the problem?

It may be helpful if supervisors try to understand their employees' experiences so they can better recognize potential problems and respond appropriately. Bear in mind that employees who were laid off during the economic downturn went through one of the most stressful and challenging experiences of their lives. Employers and supervisors won't know how they coped during this period. In most cases, employees will have coped well and will comfort themselves appropriately. However, there is potential for employees to experience:

- Anger;
- Resentment; and
- A host of physical and/or emotional problems.

These feelings may – or may not – have been resolved by the time they return to work. *HR can step in and suggest mental health counseling from the EAP.*

### **Pandemic Adds to Anxiety & Other Distress**

As if the usual return-to-work concerns weren't enough, the pandemic has added new elements of

fear and uncertainty that employers and employees alike need to address.

- What new policies and procedures will they have to observe?
- What if some employees don't wear a mask? If that is the case, can the employee work in a more secluded area?
- Will social distancing change their relationship with co-workers or customers?
- Will employees now used to different work schedules be able to adjust their hours accordingly?

Employees need to feel empowered and safe addressing their emotional well-being with their boss or co-workers.

*Exercise: Use this space to note whether employees are concerned with any of the preceding areas about getting back to work in a post-COVID workplace – and if so, which ones?*

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### **Burnout & More**

Some employees may experience bouts of fatigue and burnout upon their return to work. As a result, a period of adjustment to the physical and mental demands of daily work may be necessary. It's also important to convey that there's no shame in requesting accommodations like altered schedules or job responsibilities, which many employers overlook.

Employees with mental impairments are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act and can't be legally laid off or terminated as long as they perform their essential job functions. Time off under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), with or without pay, is another possibility.

Whatever the specific situation, HR needs to provide managers with as much direction and

skills as possible, back them up, and encourage them to brainstorm accommodations with employees to avoid legal and performance issues later on. *The EAP is in a perfect position to assist.*

## Changes in Leadership

Changes in leadership and organizational structures may compound the stress and anxiety associated in returning to a more “normal” work schedule. Employees returning to their former jobs may be greeted by:

- New work duties;
- New functional areas (especially in light of COVID); and/or
- New leadership.

These changes can complicate efforts to address emotional concerns.

## Financial Woes?

Employees returning to work may also be having financial problems stemming from their time away from work. As a result, they may be anxious or distracted, and they may need to conduct personal business during work hours. They may be resentful toward their employer for laying them off in the first place, and may see this as the cause of their financial problems.

Supervisors should be alert for signs of possible financial concerns and should also consider that employees’ motivations for working may have changed during their time away from work. For instance, whereas employees may have been highly engaged in the company’s success and their own career advancement, they may now be motivated merely by the need to earn money.

## Suggestions for Supervisors

How can supervisors, managers, and other business leaders effectively manage employees who are returning to working following a prolonged layoff? The following are several suggestions that employee assistance professionals can share with business leaders to assist them during this uncertain time.

❖ **Open lines of communication with existing employees before the returning employees arrive.** Discuss the impact on workplace teams and their work. Educate them about the difficulties that can accompany a return from a layoff and encourage them to be supportive and engaged with returning employees. Make certain that all workers understand the state of the business, the rationale for employee recalls, goals for the future, and expectations for employees’ work, conduct, and safety (especially in light of COVID).

❖ **Spend time with each employee returning from a layoff.** Don’t intrude into their personal lives, but show a genuine interest in their return. Acknowledge the difficulties and anxiety they may be experiencing, and try to gauge their emotional responses about returning to work. *Referrals to the employee assistance program should be routine.*

❖ **Set clear performance expectations and goals for returning employees but allow ample time for the “settling in” process.** Understand that anxiety and loss of skills may impede performance in the short term. However, do not insulate returning employees from challenging work or give them only menial tasks. Hardiness is not built by avoiding possible stress.

## Summary

Clearly, employees returning to work after an extended period will experience diverse and complex emotions and behaviors. Regardless of the nature of an employee’s response, it’s important for supervisors to be prepared to assist workers during this adjustment period.

Employee assistance professionals should be consulted at every phase of the recall process in order to support both managers *and* employees. ■

*Editor’s note: This Brown Bagger is adapted to reflect the new, post-pandemic culture from an article originally written by John Pompe, a licensed psychologist and assistant medical director at Caterpillar Inc. in Peoria, IL.*

## Managing in a Post-Pandemic Office

As companies transition back to working in an office – likely with masks, increased social distancing, and many other new policies in place, how might company culture be impacted? The following are some suggestions for HR and the EAP in working with managers, supervisors, and other business leaders.

**Problem:** The client company is transitioning back to the office and needs to find a way to communicate so employees aren't worried about risks to their health.

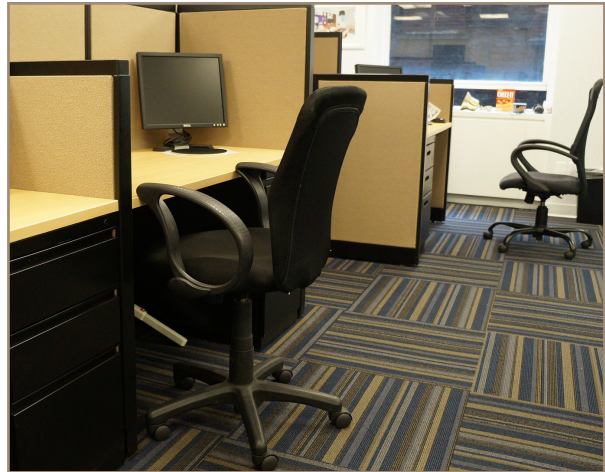
*Solution:*

- Work with the client leader and stress his/her role in setting the right tone.
- Messaging should be around what steps he/she is taking to ensure the safety and health of employees as the company's top priority.
- If workers do not feel comfortable returning to work, the business leader needs to respect that and let them continue remotely.
- Either way, how the client handles the transition will do wonders for company culture – or sabotage it!

**Problem:** Increased social distancing and persistence of remote workers could impede lines of communication among teams.

*Solution:*

- Work with the client leader to be as strategic about who goes back and when as possible, while also keeping in mind employees' *mental health needs*. For instance, a worker with an anxiety disorder should not be made to come back too soon.
- Staff likely just went through a complete disruption in how they work, so the client leader should encourage the same persistent spirit and dedication exhibited a few months ago.



**Problem:** Without people feeling safe enough to participate in company sponsored social events, lunch breaks or after-work happy hours, they're not connecting with their peers as much as before the pandemic, and it's showing in their work.

*Solution:*

- Work with HR to build company-wide or team-specific opportunities to connect into the workday, and make sure they are activities that everyone, even those still working remotely can participate in. In addition, business leader should:
- Schedule 15 minutes each week for the whole office to connect via Zoom and share wins or updates, work related or in their personal lives.
- Encourage everyone to pick up the phone/Zoom to contact peers instead of writing a lengthy email or message.
- Grab a co-worker to get outside for a walk during lunch.

*Sources: Employee Assistance Report; Ed Mitzen (www.edmitzen.com), Forbes book author of "More Than a Number: The Power of Empathy and Philanthropy in Driving Ad Agency Performance" and the founder of Fingerpaint, an independent advertising agency grossing \$60 million in revenue.*