

Employee Wellbeing during COVID-19

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Introduction

Looking after your employee's welfare has never been so important as during COVID-19. While many employees are working remotely, or have been placed on temporary layoff, the employer's duty of care still remains in place. Looking after employee wellbeing at arm's length poses a unique set of challenges. This guide is intended to help employers navigate these challenges.

There are a number of areas of wellbeing an employer can support during this difficult time:

Physical

- During this period where work routines are likely to change it is important employers remind employees how important it is to engage in regular exercise. Even if someone is housebound, there are still options available.
- For example, providing access to digital fitness solutions or using technology to maintain social interaction through corporate challenges, are effective ways of promoting physical wellbeing, connecting colleagues and injecting some fun into the working environment.

Emotional

- A wide range of factors can contribute to or cause mental health issues and COVID-19 could be exacerbating some of these factors, as well as causing employees anxiety in terms of how it might impact them personally or other family members and how they might meet family care commitments.
- Extended periods of remote working, potentially self-isolating, could further fuel feelings of anxiety and loneliness due to less connection with colleagues or making it difficult for employees to switch off and balance work and home life.
- Employers should ensure that if employees need help during this period, they know exactly what benefits and services are available to them and how to access such support.

Inclusivity

- During this period of increased remote working, employers should make a concerted effort to ensure employees don't feel isolated and that they maintain a strong sense of purpose. Tactics employers could consider using to address this issue include utilising video technology for virtual meetings, encouraging virtual 'watercooler moments' and encouraging verbal communication and feedback rather than over-using emails or other electronic messaging methods.

Work Practices

- Flexible working can play a key part in helping employees achieve the correct work life balance and in many respects an extended period of home working can be viewed in a positive light. Employers should take the opportunity to engage employees a number of topics such as encouraging physical exercise, taking regular breaks, eating healthily and the importance of hydration, switching off, not being connected 24/7 and setting up the remote working environment properly.

Financial

- During this period where many employees are embracing different working practices, employers may like to consider taking the opportunity to execute on some of the key components of their financial wellbeing strategy, including:
 - Encouraging employees to take advantage of a better work life balance opportunity presented by home working to dedicate time to really understand their financial situation, whether this means getting control of their household

Employees who have been placed on temporary layoff

Many businesses have had no option but to consider layoff arrangements in light of the current crisis. Employers in this situation should double-check that they have up-to-date contact details for all employees and have their express consent to be contacted on their personal mobile phones, were a period of lay-off to occur. It is important that Employers keep in regular contact with their employees in relation to the availability of work and the continuation of the lay-off. Employers should emphasise to their employees that the priority is job retention and to avoid redundancies, it at all possible.

Employers should be aware that a period of layoff is a particularly stressful time for any employee, and regular updates regarding the workplace, and proposed return to work dates will provide welcome relief for many employees. There should be a clear communication plan put in place that outlines the frequency of communication and the method, so that employees know what they can expect from their employer.

Employers should also outline what supports are available to their employees during the layoff period, such as an Employee Assistance Programme, or other supports provided – See Tools and useful links, page 5 of this document.

Essential workers

Some employees have continued to work to maintain essential services throughout this pandemic. While it may appear as if it is “business as usual” it is important to remember that these employees may also be finding the current environment is causing extra stress or worry.

Some tips to help these employees feel safe and supported at work include:

- Minimise in-person meetings, using phones or videoconferencing to reduce the number of people gathered in one space.
- Practice social distancing in the workplace, keeping to the “two meters” rule especially in break rooms, meeting areas, and common areas.
- Provide cleaning supplies for employees to wash their workspaces before going home and provide ready access to hand sanitizers and disposable wipes to use throughout the day.
- Post signs in common areas, hallways, break rooms, and restrooms on the importance of washing hands, keeping things clean, and practicing respiratory hygiene.
- Stagger work schedules to reduce the number of people in the workplace at a given time.
- Discourage employees from using each other’s desks, tools, keyboards, phones, and office supplies.
- Limit contact with people outside the company in the workplace. Place hand sanitizers at all entry points for any visitors to use before traveling within the workplace.
- Establish a quarantine area in the workplace, such as a meeting room or some other room with doors, to isolate employees that develop symptoms until the employees can be removed.
- Stock up on supplies such as sanitizer, tissues, and rubber gloves.

- Develop and communicate precautions to keep your employees and the public safe, and plans that consider employee exposure and its impact on the business.
- Promote benefits that may relieve the emotional burdens of those who must work in proximity to other people, such as coaching services, EAP programs, resilience programs, and mindfulness programs.
- Arrange regular check-ins, taking appropriate social distancing precautions, to discuss employee concerns, ongoing work, and the employee's general wellbeing.
- Regularly communicate COVID-19 updates to employees using information from trusted sources such as the CDC and OSHA that provide facts and guidelines while minimizing rumours. These can be done in parallel with ongoing wellbeing initiatives or as part of digital wellbeing communications.
- Also regularly communicate to customers and the public about your precautions to keep your employees and the public safe.

Remote workers

Those employees who are still working but are doing so remotely may be struggling due to any number of factors including juggling home and work life, anxiety related to Covid-19, financial stress, and isolation from their social and workplace support system.

As employers do not have the opportunity to see employees on a day to day basis it is vital that they learn to recognise hidden signs of stress in remote workers. Employers should be looking out for people who are not quite on their game. For example, perhaps they're inconsistent with things that they're usually consistent with. They might be very dependable employees – then, suddenly, they start to miss deadlines or drift off in meetings. Employees who normally have a positive, can-do attitude may begin to demonstrate negativity, and see problems rather than solutions.

If an employer starts to notice these signs, the most important thing to do is reach out and engage with the employee. This can be done by simply having a conversation about how they are doing.

Communication

This is the most important thing to consider when trying to keep your remote workforce informed, aligned and engaged. A proactive communication approach can also establish an open environment and minimize fear, uncertainty and doubt and discourage the spread of rumours or negative talk. Lead with facts and keep the focus on how employees can stay informed and protect themselves.

Employers should also ensure that their communication around work matters is clear and concise, and that deadlines, levels of urgency and tasks are communicated and understood. Email and text messages are often relied on in these situations, however it is important to remember that in the absence of face to face meetings, these communication methods can give rise to misunderstandings regarding the tone and content of the message.

Employers should aim to have weekly one to one check ins over the phone or a visual communication tool with each of their direct reports. These conversations should cover work, and how tasks and projects are progressing, as well as some time set aside to check in with the employee and discuss how they are feeling, and if they are struggling in any way.

While for many employers the introduction of remote working for their workforce may be unprecedented, suggestions from employees should be welcomed. Asking for feedback helps employees know that their thoughts are valued and when any issues are addressed as a result of feedback.

Focus on People, Culture and Values

In most situations, it's not just what you say, but what you do, that matters. A unified response demonstrates that your organisation is addressing the situation while keeping your values and employees' best interests top of mind. Continue to encourage healthy habits in and out of the workplace to help employees maintain their physical and mental health.

Depending on the event, company-wide challenges can foster inclusion and awareness and help employees focus on daily goals and tasks to support their health and happiness. Consider offering to match employees' donations toward initiatives. During the historic bushfires in 2019, individuals, groups and companies banded together to donate \$67 million dollars to the Australian Red Cross to provide disaster relief for firefighters, evacuees, wildlife and more. You can connect people across your organization and breakdown workplace barriers by providing them with opportunities to take action together.

Be flexible and empathetic

Where the nature of the business allows for flexibility, employers should consider allowing employees to vary their working hours to suit their new arrangements. For some employees being able to work before their children are awake or after they have been put to bed will be enormously beneficial. Employees' productivity levels when they are free from distraction will also benefit employers. Employers could also consider introducing set core hours that all employees must be available at but allow employees to work their additional hours at other times convenient for them.

Employers also need to ensure that employees are not working longer hours as a means to prove they are productive while working remotely. A survey from [IrishJobs.ie](https://www.irishjobs.ie) has shown that 44% of people currently working from home find they are working longer hours than they would in a normal working day. An employer's obligations to ensure compliance with the Organisation of working time act are still in place while employees work remotely.

Wellbeing tools and useful links

Employee Assistance Programme:

ISME in partnership with Laya Healthcare and Spectrum.Life provide an exclusive offer on an **Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)** for Members. The service offers unlimited access for your employees and their family members to a freephone EAP service 24/7, 365 days a year.

Employees can also access via website, app, or live chat.

- 24/7 Freephone Mental wellbeing support
- Up to 6 Sessions of face to face Counselling
- Video/telephone counselling option
- Support across finance, legal, mediation, parenting coaching, life coaching and more

More information on this great resource can be found [here](#).

Online counselling and support:

Turn2Me - Free online counselling and online support groups for people over 18

Visit turn2me.org

MyMind - Online counselling service

Visit mymind.org

Shine - Remote support and an outreach service to people who use Shine services by phone and email.

Visit shine.ie/covid-19

Stress Control:

Stress control classes to learn new stress management skills and mind your mental health from HSE Health and Wellbeing.

The programme is for 3 weeks on Mondays and Thursdays from Monday 13 April 2020.

Visit [HSE Health and Wellbeing](#) for more information.

General mental health supports:

Mental Health Ireland is the longest established mental health charity in Ireland. They have developed specific Covid-19 resources which can be found [here](#).

Financial Help:

MABS is the state operated free and confidential money management service. More information can be found on the [MABS website](#).