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STATEMENT

Easing lockdown: How employers and employees can prepare for the new normal at work

Covid-19 Working Differently Group at the British Psychological Society
(www.bps.org.uk).

As plans for easing lockdown are announced in each of the four nations, employers and employees are preparing for new ways of working. To support transition to this 'new normal', the BPS Covid-19 Working Differently Group is developing psychologically informed resources which include advice, a staged model, and podcasts.

Exiting lockdown is expected to be gradual, with industries restarting at different times. Since restrictions were introduced, employees have been working from home, furloughed, redeployed, or made redundant, while keyworkers have attended their usual workplace sometimes in markedly changed circumstances. The impact of lockdown on life and work is varied with people experiencing its effects in different ways. Making time to engage with employees, address expectations and concerns, and provide practical support, are three key strategies to help employers and employees work through this transition and meet future challenges.

ENGAGE WITH EMPLOYEES

Recognising the different impacts on employees is important when developing strategies for transitioning to a new normal, and opportunities to talk about what has changed is a crucial starting point for employers. Although not everyone will want or need to discuss their concerns, some employees will wish to speak about job-related worries including safety, infection control and transport to work, as well as their personal circumstances, caring responsibilities and anxieties. Some will feel pressure to return. Others will be reluctant to go back at all. Listening to and engaging with employees also means that they can help shape the 'new normal'.

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ADDRESS EXPECTATIONS

Modifications in job roles, responsibilities, work location and patterns, and moving between teams can affect relationships at work. Flexibility in working hours, workload, tasks etc., are factors in this. Consequences can be negative or positive. On the one hand, major change can cause overload, role ambiguity, reduced autonomy, perceptions of unfairness, decreased productivity and increased risk of disengagement and burnout. On the other hand, some people have experienced more autonomy and report greater productivity during lockdown. In the process, the psychological contract – the unwritten set of expectations in the employment relationship – may have changed and need to be re-negotiated.

PROVIDE PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Homeworking is set to continue in the ‘new normal’ so many employees need support in developing new skills for doing this in a healthy and sustainable way. Organisations need new skills for exercising their duty of care, providing effective management of remote employees and virtual teams, and delivering new business models. These features are only part of a strategy for transitioning to the new normal at work. Key elements to consider include:

building psychological resilience at an individual and organisational level

having supportive conversations between employers and employees, including risk assessments

understanding the anxieties, worries, concerns of employees as restrictions ease and signposting appropriate sources of support.

Details of the BPS Covid-19 Working Differently Group resources will be made available from the BPS Website soon.



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