



Rachel Willcox

# Post-furlough: What next?

With many firms having to furlough staff, we look at the next steps...

**W**e're not going back to work until we've finished our box-sets, Britain tells government.

This is actually a spoof headline, but it belies an element of truth as millions of employers and their furloughed staff adjust to the idea of returning to work, not fully knowing how long the support will be available.

As the easing of lockdown restrictions signals hope for employers – and some employees – that the journey towards some semblance of normality has begun, organisations are also, understandably, keen for the economy to start moving. However, against the backdrop of economic uncertainty and ambiguous return-to-work rules, transition will be far from simple for many, employer and employee alike.

## Back in business?

The UK government has outlined a tentative timetable for the potential reopening of some shops from 1 June.

In the meantime, people who can work from home should continue to do so "for the foreseeable future" and those who can't work from home should travel to their work if it is open, where possible avoiding public transport.

Pregnant employees and those considered vulnerable should stay at home and avoid face-to-face contact, but if they are unable to work from home they should remain furloughed, according to Citizens Advice. The government has also published sector-specific guidance outlining what employers should do to minimise the chances of staff catching COVID-19 (coronavirus) while back at

work. However, the lack of clarity surrounding the new measures to gradually ease lockdown remains a source of concern for many. Indeed, a recent poll conducted by Ipsos MORI found that 35% of people would feel anxious going back to their place of work at this point in time.

Recognising the psychological impact of returning to a so-called new normal – which, for many, is now an alien environment – is as important as addressing the logistical issues, warns Dr Shainaz Firfiray, associate professor of Human Resource Management at Warwick Business School.

"In some workplaces, adhering to social distancing guidelines might be impossible and as such employees will be worried about the health risks they might face when businesses reopen.

"There will also be a lot of anxiety on how workers can safely commute to work as avoiding public transport may not be a workable option for many workers.

"Any sustainable return to work

would also be dependent on the reopening of schools and childcare and the ambiguity on these issues will cause obvious concerns for people who are being asked to return to work," Firfiray adds.

## Talking the talk

The importance of clear communication and transparency throughout this pandemic cannot be overstated. Staff must be notified not only of the fact they are being furloughed, but also when furloughing will end, and when they can expect to be back on full pay, or know of an alternative route of action.

For those returning to work, it certainly won't be a case of returning to the old ways of working for most companies, according to Brendan Street, professional head of emotional wellbeing at Nuffield Health.

He advises managers to set up virtual meetings, if possible, with every employee - or with set teams, before they return to work.

"You should encourage them to share any concerns they have and address any worries about their physical and mental wellbeing," Street says.

Sharing actionable steps on how the business is planning to safeguard employee health and how they can protect themselves when back in their old work environment will help rationalise this issue.

Company health protocols must be clear and accessible. This means keeping staff informed on the steps you are taking as a business and giving advice on how to stay hygienic and safe around others.

Some staff will be anxious about the resumption of their duties or being close to colleagues and/or the general public, while some may have suffered personal bereavements during the lockdown period.

"There is no statutory right to bereavement leave, but responsible businesses should be sympathetic to requests for additional time off if required," Street adds.

## The new normal?

Some businesses, such as Barclays and Twitter to name but two, have already decided that - regardless of



what happens with the pandemic - their ways of working, and the requirement for staff to come to rather than do work, has fundamentally changed.

Twitter's CEO Jack Dorsey sent an email to employees earlier in May saying they could work from home as long as they wanted to, even once their physical offices are back open for business.

While Barclays CEO Jes Staley has been quoted as saying he believes big offices will most certainly be a thing of the past. It's estimated that around 70,000 of the bank's employees are working from home during the pandemic - and successfully so.

"There will be a long-term adjustment to our location strategy," Staley said during a press conference, according to the BBC. "The notion of putting 7,000 people in the building may be a thing of the past."

One size certainly doesn't fit all and business leaders will need to carefully consider the nuances of their particular organisation and sector as well as the financial impact coronavirus has had before making rash decisions that will affect their firm's - and that of employees' - futures.

Simon Robinson, managing director of law firm Robinson Ralph, says employers should have communication and support systems in place to help employees.

These systems should have some flex to cater for individual circumstances in a bid to try and ensure that any reintegration into the workplace happens as smoothly as possible.

"It seems inevitable given the circumstances that employers will receive an increase in flexible working requests in both the immediate and long-term future," Robinson says.

"Management will therefore need to be careful how they deal with those requests and should remember that some employees may also have carer responsibilities which may have been intensified as a result of COVID-19."

## Game changer

Bear in mind that formal flexible working requests, if agreed, will result in a permanent change to the employee's contract.

"On the other hand, if employees refuse to attend work despite reassurances about the measures taken to ensure their safety, a fair disciplinary process may be appropriate," Robinson adds.

Ultimately, the decision to bring staff either off furlough or to consider redundancies must be based on sound economic reasons and robust workload forecasts, warns Kevin Green, a former CEO of The Recruitment & Employment Confederation and former HR director at Royal Mail, now a non-executive director and author of *Competitive People Strategy*.

"What you don't want to do is drip feed redundancies. Do it once, be very clear and communicate it well," Green warns.

"The people who are left behind will look at how you treated people. It's not just what you do, it's how you do it. Try to cushion the blow."