

# How to Return to the Workplace: A Practical Guide

By Neill Hunt

For the past several weeks a vast cohort of employees has been working from home. Companies are grappling with how best to bring them back to their workplaces, against a backdrop of profound uncertainty. Many employees are eager to return, while others are enjoying their remote working experience, and still others are deeply fearful of leaving home. Over the last several weeks Egon Zehnder has spoken with executives to hear just how they are safely returning employees to their workplaces. The good news is that some Chinese companies seem to have been able to do this, while avoiding any COVID-19 cases in their sites so far. This has required them to be strict and disciplined. The onus is now on their Western peers to replicate this success.

## **Building new behaviours**

Companies are expected to put safety first, and traditionally this has required overcoming habits that employees form in their private lives. COVID-19 presents a different challenge: employers need to build on the habits their employees have formed in quarantine. In some cases, this will mean improving their safety behaviour, while in others it will mean reducing fear and moderating reactions. It will involve employees (such as office workers) who are not normally exposed to sound health and safety practice.

Companies are starting this journey before reopening their workplaces, with remote training packages on topics such as proper hand-washing and the safe use of public transport. When employees arrive back at their workplaces, posters, handbooks and even comic books can reinforce the right policies. As always it is critical that leaders role-model good behaviours and maintain high expectations of their teams.

### **Testing and Tracking Data is Vital**

Testing and tracking are vital tools in combating COVID-19, but their availability and public acceptance varies around the world. At one extreme, for instance, an Asian company regularly checks its employees' temperatures and combines this with self-declarations (taken on a phone app, and including family members), location data and periodic virus (PCR) tests. By contrast, Western companies are often limited to testing for symptoms, primarily using touch-free infrared forehead thermometers, and asking employees for self-declarations. As employees can transmit COVID-19 prior to being symptomatic, both of these methods have significant drawbacks, but may be helpful in reducing transmission risk. Even so, their results are sensitive and must be kept confidential, despite the need for accurate reporting.

### **Entry and Exit**

Controlling entry and exit to sites is critical. Companies are rethinking how employees access buildings, in some cases limiting them to one entrance, while in others having one entrance and one exit to control crowds. This enables companies to maintain a consistent and regimented entry procedure, with employees tested for fever, asked to complete a self-declaration, and provided with appropriate protection equipment such as a mask and a sticker as proof of completion. In so doing, firms must ensure distancing, privacy and the safety of medical or security staff. One company gives employees explicit arrival windows to ensure the entrance is not overwhelmed, while many others are granting flexibility around working hours.

To improve social distancing, companies are reducing maximum building occupancies (sometimes called "de-densification"). To deliver this they are being strategic about who is invited back to the workplace, with some having their work-from-home provision extended. In other cases companies are splitting their

workforces into smaller teams, with each team getting an allocation of time in the office. This may also involve heavily curtailing visits by contractors and other guests. One company has site heads approve every person travelling to the office each day.

Travelling to and from the workplace is also an important consideration. In China, some companies have sponsored parking spaces and the use of car services such as Didi to keep employees out of large crowds. They also provide employees with guidelines on how to safely use such services.

### **Physical changes to the work site**

Companies are very focused on increasing physical distancing. This could include removing desks or placing some off limits to ensure workspaces are appropriately spaced. Meeting rooms are a concern, and some companies are closing small meeting rooms and reducing occupancy in larger ones by removing chairs. In some cases companies are sealing off every other cubicle in bathrooms, shutting or limiting access to elevators, and using visual cues like lines on the floor to ensure distancing in high-traffic areas such as print rooms and entrance halls. Some companies are creating one-way systems within the office to limit the chances of bumping into someone.

Eating and break arrangements are particularly tricky. Many companies limit employees going out for food, with some catering meals on a staggered schedule and others asking employees to bring in their own. Seats in dining areas are either spaced out or eliminated altogether, with employees encouraged to eat at their desks. Breaks and lunchtimes are being scheduled in some cases.

Some companies are considering improving movement tracking in the site by installing RFID or Bluetooth beacons. Personal proximity warning devices are also being considered.

High-touch surfaces are also of concern. Companies are seeking to make them noticeable, with red markings or paint, for instance. Where possible buttons can be replaced by touchless or automated technology, and doors kept open where not required for security or fire regulations.

If possible, equipment is allocated to a single person (a stapler, for example) while in other cases clear procedures are being created: to use a printer, for instance, could require wearing gloves. Some shared equipment like a coffee machine could be off limits altogether. Mobile phones are a particularly tricky item, and some companies are purchasing phone sanitisers.

### **Sanitisation builds confidence**

Visible, regular and thorough sanitisation is important both for health and safety and also to give employees confidence in the site and in their leaders. The same applies to PPE. Although guidance on the use of masks has varied, some Chinese companies have issued one mask to each employee each day, with instructions to wear it unless in a private office. Naturally large volumes of hand sanitiser and cleaning products are required. Individual “clean working” kits, packed in a satchel, are also being considered.

### **Rekindling the desire to congregate**

With so many health and safety considerations, it is easy to forget that the workplace must still be a place in which employees *want* to do work. Many working from home are eager to return to their workplaces to reconnect with their company and their colleagues, while others are fearful of the risk this will entail. In both cases leaders will need to work hard to prevent their workplaces from becoming cold and clinical.

Taken together, it is not surprising that Asian companies are reporting that their managers and HR departments continue to be extraordinarily busy. Never has strong and empathetic leadership been more important.

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## **Covid-19 Micro-Website**

We have launched a micro-website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

## **About Egon Zehnder**

Egon Zehnder is the world's preeminent leadership consulting firm, sharing one goal: to help people and organizations transform. We know what great leaders can do and are passionate about delivering the best solutions for our clients.

Our more than 500 Consultants in 68 offices and 40 countries form one powerful, collaborative team. Our services include: leadership development, individual, team and organizational effectiveness, CEO search and succession, executive search and assessment, Board advisory, and cultural transformation.

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