

I'll See You On Monday 🙌

Building A Plan To Bring Your Employees Back To Work. Safely.

When in doubt, make a plan.

There are plenty of organisations who as we speak have emailed or called their employees and told them to come back to work.

With no plan, no reassurance of how their physical and psychological well-being will be looked after, *"just turn up to work on Monday and we'll sort it out then"* they've been told.

Can you imagine how those employees must feel? And can you imagine the damage this is doing to the reputation of those companies?

If your son or daughter, family member, or friend called you and said they've been told to come back to work, what would you say? What questions would you advise they ask their employer?

Your every move is being scrutinised

Your key stakeholders are constantly assessing the steps you are taking around coronavirus. Is what you're doing in keeping with your purpose? How far are you helping your employees? And what are you doing to support your wider community? These are the questions running through their minds.

No matter the size of your organisation, whether you're a listed, privately owned or public sector business, failure to convince your stakeholders you are doing everything possible to look after your teams, means you risk being called out.

Have you seen Piers Morgan on Good Morning Britain? Or even his Twitter feed calling out any company he believes doesn't live up to his expectations? These days, it could easily be your company on the receiving end of bad publicity.

A step-by-step process

This guide will walk you through the step-by-step process in creating a back to work plan, which means you can privately reassure and publicly defend any allegations you are not making the well-being of your employees your number one priority.

Following this guide enables you to:

- **Instil confidence** in your leadership ability and also in your brand.

- Feel **more in control**, which should ease some pressure that comes with waiting for events to unfold before you can act. Every time you build a plan, you are putting yourself and your company back in the driver's seat.
- Show you have taken a **robust and thoughtful** approach to bringing your employees back to work. It's not just about *bums on seats*.
- Provide the **right support** to make sure your employees are as productive as possible, given the circumstances, from Day 1. This means a decrease in lag time in being able to better service your customers and clients, which increases the odds of your company surviving the economic downturn we will undoubtedly face.
- **Save money.** You could spend twice as much on management consultants to help you do this, but instead we will teach you in such a way that you can leverage your own internal resources to create and execute the plan.
- Get off to a **running start**. Knowing where to begin is often the hardest part in building a plan like this. With this guide, you don't have to waste time trying to work out where to start. All you need to do is follow the steps until you're confident you have all bases covered.
- **Defend** any accusations you are not prioritising the welfare of your employees.

Despite information you may receive contrary to this, there are no templates you can drag and drop to make this process any easier. There is no one company who can provide you with an iron-clad plan that's done for you.

The word unprecedented has been overused, but it's true. Even with the financial crisis, we never had to deal with threats to human life as well as ensuring business survival.

Some leaders are acting more decisively than others.

There are those who decide to wing it or make it up as they go along, using government guidance as their barometer. And there will be others, who prepare regardless and update their plan as and when new information is made available.

There are four key stages you need to go through to build a robust back to work plan which is also adaptable. Having a flexible plan is key.

1. Plan
2. Communicate
3. Monitor and assess
4. Adapt and pivot

We'll take you through each stage, making it clear what you can do, how and why.

1. PLAN

The extent to which you follow these steps is of course dependent on having the right knowledge and expertise around your leadership table.

You need people around you who you can not only leverage their skill and expertise but also, who are engaged and have the headspace to support you.

After reading this guide in its entirety, you will know whether you need additional support and you can decide what to do from there.

	Action
1.	<p>Set up a small task force that has the knowledge and authority to act. This should be a team of individuals who are not involved in the day-to-day operations as you need them to solely concentrate on the plan.</p> <p>If you have a small leadership team and don't have the budget to bring in outside dedicated support, provided you have senior HR and IT expertise, this is enough to get you started.</p> <p>The key responsibilities of the task force will be to build a back to work plan which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Protects the well-being and safety of your employees ▪ Encapsulates the thoughts and feedback from key stakeholders ▪ Gives you the best likely chance of having productive employees who feel supported and listened to ▪ Circulate relevant information to key stakeholders at the appropriate times using the appropriate channels ▪ Is agile and can be quickly changed when new information is made available <p>And give the team or project a name. It makes it easier to separate from day-to-day operations and let's be honest, everyone loves a bit of light-hearted debate about a project name!</p> <p>Above and beyond functional expertise, here are the behavioural traits you should seek to have within your team.</p> <p>This is a critical component when building productive teams and it's often left out due to focusing on tasks and identifying subject matter experts.</p> <p>Remember though, one person won't have all the traits and it's good to have a separate person act as the project lead/decision maker and another person to facilitate debate and discussions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to respond positively under pressure

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can think beyond what they've always done, so can come up with novel ideas to address any challenges ▪ A completer-finisher who can take direction and execute the plan with the appropriate level of detail and compliance with your policies and procedures. ▪ Ability to deliver through engaging with people. They find it easy to build relationships and can 'sell the sizzle' rather than 'describe the steak' ▪ Unhampered by failure and comfortable operating in ambiguity. There are no clear answers and ways to approach this. Therefore, if you have too many people who need a lot of detail to feel confident in what they are doing or advising, this will slow you down. ▪ Able to balance a variety of tasks and are unfazed if and when the goalposts change. ▪ Comfortable making decisions and committing to them, even if they do not have the complete picture, without fear of being unpopular. <p>If you have conducted any personality profiling, psychometric testing, then it is likely you are already sitting on this information. Your HR leader will be able to help you with this.</p> <p>It's not a complicated exercise and indeed, we use a tool that can assess this within 10 minutes.</p>
2.	<p>Identify key stakeholders who you may want to consult with but who are not responsible for the execution of the plan. This could be a few of your employees, ensuring they are representative of different departments and pay grades, non-executive board members, trustees, end-service users, key partners or suppliers.</p>
3.	<p>Create a list of questions that as a team you need to answer or consider. Within this guide is a list of 14 questions just to get you started. See Appendix 1. You can use these as a starting point and add to these as you go along.</p> <p>⚠ <i>Typically leadership teams are not fond of having to answer a slew of questions, thinking they already have an idea of what to do. However, having a written list of questions helps slow the pace, minimise knee-jerk reactions and gives everyone time to think and assess what's right for the organisation.</i></p>
4.	<p>Appropriate to your audience, circulate the list of questions for feedback. You want to elicit their thoughts and opinions, but also any concerns they have. This is critical in building a plan which has the buy-in from your employees and those in your wider ecosystem.</p> <p>You can run virtual feedback sessions, make old-fashioned phone calls, use Survey Monkey, or Typeform for example to collate responses. Or if you have your own internal comms channels, you can utilise those as well.</p> <p>⚠ <i>Don't make the mistake of having the task force build a plan and make all the decisions without an attempt to involve and engage those who are directly and indirectly affected. As</i></p>

	<p><i>much as possible this needs to be a bottom-up plan if you want to increase engagement and build trust.</i></p>
<p>5.</p>	<p>Has anything changed? There are some businesses who have changed their strategic objectives, their operating model and others who have pivoted and experimented with new products or services. Are you restructuring, likely to make people redundant? Or will there be changes to job roles or reporting lines?</p> <p>If this is you, it is important to re-calibrate if this has had an impact on the job roles within your organisation, but also how tasks are split between team members and whether the people you have are right for the future.</p> <p>At this point you only want to identify what's changed and ear mark that so you can determine how you are going to communicate and make the change when your employees come back to work. This will need a separate plan run by your HR lead and CEO.</p> <p>⚠ <i>Knowing there may be some structural changes to your business or tweaks to job roles, be careful in not overdoing the reassurance. There are many leaders who over-promise and under-deliver in giving well intentioned updates and speeches which soon prove to be incorrect later on. Don't make promises you know you can't keep, and that includes making sweeping statements that no jobs will be affected. You lose trust and credibility as a leader and as a business if this happens.</i></p> <p><i>Knowing what you intend to do differently as a business is key so you can factor that into the back to work plan and subsequent communications.</i></p> <p><i>Please don't skip this step.</i></p>
<p>6.</p>	<p>Build the plan. Your task force should use the questions and collated responses to discuss what your plan needs to look like. At the very least it should cover answers to the example questions included in Appendix 1.</p> <p>There will be an overarching plan, but also sub-sections. This may feel messy at times but provided you are clear in your intent, communicate often what you are trying to do, people will forgive that it's not perfect.</p> <p>⚠ <i>At this stage you may find there are differences in opinion. Not everyone is going to agree. Acknowledge everyone's feedback and opinions, it's important they feel listened to, then draw a line and make a call. Try to be steadfast in the decisions you've made. There's nothing worse than leaders who keep changing their mind. This can quickly destabilise a team and slow things down.</i></p> <p><i>What's most important is everyone agreeing to commit and support the plan, even if there are aspects they don't agree with or fully endorse. Do <u>not</u> move on until you are sure there is alignment with the decision. You cannot afford to have members of your task-force dissenting in private.</i></p>
<p>7.</p>	

Who is doing what, how and by when? Agree on who is responsible for which tasks, whether you need additional support (and who is responsible for procuring that), how you will update each other and how often you will check in and update.

Your plan won't be perfect and it will change as you receive more information. It's the equivalent of flying and building a plane at the same time.

⚠ *Make sure everyone is clear about the parameters of decision they can make unilaterally or those which need to be brought back to the group. As much as possible allow members to have the autonomy to do what needs to be done.*

Too often organisations are slow to respond because of multiple layers of decision making and waiting for 100% consensus before remedial action is taken.

2. COMMUNICATE

This stage is probably the most important part in building your return to work plan.

Your teams are going to be feeling extremely anxious and so not only what you say but how you say it will matter. Particularly if they have been furloughed or are working remotely.

Here you need you as the CEO to be the 'face' of your business when it comes to providing updates about the plan. All communications should be written by you and sound like you, even if you've had outside help to draft it.

You've been through this already in crafting your responses to covid-19, so there's no need to go over old ground, but here are some things to bear in mind.

- a) Plan who needs to know what and when.** You won't have enough time to provide real time updates but you do want to be thoughtful about what to send, when and how.

Spend the time mapping up the types of updates you need to give, the frequency you need to send them (as much as you can pre-plan) and the methods you will use.

Also ask yourself these questions:

- What does our audience/key stakeholders need to know?
 - How can we keep our messages simple so there is less room for misinterpretation and people can remember what we've said
 - How often are we planning to update on next steps?
- b) Decide on the appropriate channels depending on your audience.** For your employees, it could be via Slack, holding 10-minute video conferences (that are recorded for those who can't make it), pre-recording a video message on your phone or even setting up an internal podcast and uploading it to your intranet.

There are lots of original ways you can do this and it might also be worth asking your teams how they would appreciate being updated. For example, give them a choice of 5 different methods/channels and use the top-two methods that get the most votes. For other stakeholders, it might be a video message they can access when convenient or an email update. Or you might even decide to send a press release to enable you to get ahead of any potential media interest.

- c) **Keep a clear a structure to your updates.** This is helpful to make sure your messages have substance and there's a purpose for every message.

- **PROBLEM:** What's the problem, challenge or opportunity you're facing?
- **ACTION:** What are you doing right now?
- **PURPOSE:** Why are you doing it/what information are you basing your actions on?
- **RESULT:** What result are you hoping to see and when will you provide another update?

- d) **Tone matters.** Show empathy, be transparent, but don't forget to show realistic optimism. People want to know the challenges but also the positives and potential opportunities. They are looking to you for reassurance but they also don't want to be patronised.

Have an objective third party on hand to sense check any messages or review written communications before you press send. This might seem like overkill, but try redacting an email that's already been sent. It's possible, but doesn't your heart skip a beat when you realise something you wrote might be misinterpreted?

⚠ *Don't assume because you've told employees to contact you any time that a) they will and b) if they don't, no news is good news. If they don't have a good relationship with their line manager or you feel line manager capability is not as strong as you would like, build in the fail-safes now. It might be frustrating and expensive in some cases, but you cannot afford to leave anything to chance.*

Brand loyalty and enhanced employee commitment can be won and lost based on how companies communicate with those that matter both internally and externally.

3. MONITOR AND ASSESS

Having channels or systems in place to monitor how your employees are feeling, in real time, can make it a lot easier for you to identify potential problems and quickly mitigate any risks.

Many people assume that once a plan is in place and it's executed, the job is done. With covid-19, this is not the case. Here are some additional things under monitoring and assessment to think about.

- a) **Have a channel to receive and respond to concerns.** As you are executing your plans, in parallel make sure you have an open channel to receive and respond to employee and customer queries. If you had something in place to deal with the initial outbreak of covid-19, use the same structures and systems.

Engage in social listening. Your employees might not follow the normal chain of command if they aren't happy, feel like you're putting them at risk or not taking due care of their physical and

mental well-being. Monitoring public forums like Glassdoor, Twitter mentions, or even LinkedIn, although time-consuming, can be invaluable to determine how people are feeling. It also works well for checking customer sentiment too.

b) Set up regular meetings to check how the plan is progressing. You want to discover and discuss:

- What feedback you've received?
- How employees are feeling?
- What is the mood in the office? It's amazing what you can pick up from just walking the floor.
- How are your productivity levels? This isn't about hitting people over the head, but if you sense people aren't doing enough or conversely working too hard, investigate the root cause. Don't jump to conclusions about why this might be happening.
- What latest information have you received from the government, your suppliers, partners or customers?
- Take a temperature check of how you are all feeling. It's important you support each other and if you notice a team member looking particularly fatigued or they are acting out of character, don't ignore it.
- Make sure you have the right support systems in place to check in on the task team. It's also a good way to check how comfortable they are with the decisions you're making and means you can head off any issues before they arise.

4. PIVOT AND ADAPT

This section is simple.

Dependent on the answers uncovered during the previous stages, you may discover new information which means you need to adjust the plan or communicate a change of course. If this is the case, don't forget to keep a structure to your updates:

- **PROBLEM:** What's the problem, challenge or opportunity you're facing
- **ACTION:** What are you doing right now
- **PURPOSE:** Why are you doing it/what information are you basing your actions on
- **RESULT:** What result are you hoping to see?

As we mentioned before, this period may be chaotic and unstructured, but with the right team in place, with the right overview and understanding of what you're trying to achieve, you will get through this.

If you need further support, we are running a series of complimentary 45-minute webinars to walk business leaders, non-exec board members and HR Directors through building a robust back to work plan.

If you would like to register your interest, just let us know via shereen@hr-rewired.com and we can book you in on our next available slot.

This guide was written by Shereen Daniels, Managing Director, HR rewired.

About Shereen Daniels

From working with ex-military, ex-police, crime scene investigators, Metropolitan Police Special Branch Detectives, to books, mobile phones, fashion, food and coffee, Shereen has worked for some well-known brands such as ArmorGroup (G4S), Orion Publishing Group, Carphone Warehouse, Gala Coral, Hobbs, Greene King and Caffè Nero spanning a HR leadership career of over 17 years.

Shereen has a BA (Hons) in Business with Psychology, an MSc in International HR and certified certificate in Finance for Non-Financial Directors. After a brief stint in politics undertaking an MP Leadership Programme with the House of Commons, she is also a member of the Open Data Institute and a community member of the All-Party-Parliamentary-Group for Artificial Intelligence. She is also on the Board of Trustees for Endeavour-mat (a group of selective and non-selective schools) and a board member of the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership Board.

Often called upon to be a keynote speaker and panellist, Shereen is a vocal advocate for purposeful leadership, inclusion and technology. Her mission is twofold; democratise access to technology so we leave no one behind and encourage leaders to engineer better performance and more engaged teams, using data rather than gut and anecdotal evidence to make people decisions.

As Managing Director of strategic HR consultancy HR rewired www.hr-rewired.com, she helps leverage the skill and spark the will of your employees, so you can achieve more with fewer resources.

Appendix 1: #14 Questions To Help Bring Your Employees Back To Work. Safely.

1) How are we going to protect our 'at risk' employees who may need different levels of support due to underlying health conditions?

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2) What do we need to do to redesign our office spaces to maintain social distancing protocols and/or to minimise the transmission of the virus?

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3) Will you require employees to be tested before they return to work? Or will it be a 'all those who are fit and hardy say aye' approach?

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4) What procedures do you need to put in place from an insurance perspective in case an employee comes back to work, and gets the virus from another colleague, client or visitor to your premises?

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5) Will you stagger the return of employees and if so, how are you going to do this?

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6) Will you stagger start times, lunch breaks, finish times so the risk of having many employees congregating in the same office area is reduced?

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7) What about physical meetings? Will those return as normal, or will you limit attendees so you can observe social distancing?

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8) Will there be guidance on how many people can be in the toilets at any one time? In your corridors? In your break out spaces?

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9) Can employees go and visit clients in their office spaces? Or can clients come to you?

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10) What will you do if employees aren't comfortable coming in to work? Will you enforce it, or will it be mandatory? What if many of your employees want to continue working from home?

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11) What other support will you provide employees to help them transition back to work?

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12) Will there be any changes in how you measure their performance or set objectives?

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13) What will your response be if some employees can't come back to work due to childcare or caring responsibilities?

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14) And in building your plan, how much or little will you involve your employees? And how will you communicate the end result?

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Examine your answers through an additional lens

To help you get to the answers which you can not only live with but also stands your brand in good stead and is aligned with your personal values, try asking these questions every time you feel you've landed on a decision.

- Is this in keeping with our brand values?
- Would we stand by this decision if it was out in the public domain?
- Would we feel comfortable bringing our son, daughters, mothers, fathers, close family and friends into our office? On the proviso that if it's safe for them, then it is for your employees.
- Can we look at ourselves in the mirror every day and feel pride in who we see reflected back?