

## Employee Engagement Advice Note

# COVID-19

## Employee Engagement: Waves of “Re-Opening”

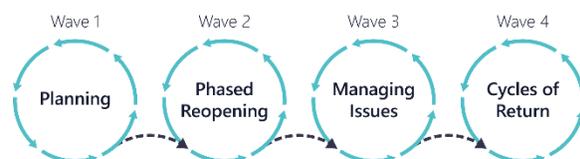
When we recover from an injury, we know it won't happen overnight. We recognize that we may never be as we once were. So, we work through the steps our care team gives us, reach small milestones along the way and remain focused on getting back to the things we want to do.

Business recovery in the case of COVID is no different. It will take time. We need to keep our eyes on the goal of getting back to doing the work we *want to do* versus the work *we used to do*. And we need to communicate to our employees that the milestones in front of us today are many.

While offices and sites around the world are considering how to re-open, we cannot assume that is one milestone, or treat it that way. We should think to the mid and long-term, and the waves of change that will happen throughout. Given what we do and do not know about COVID, we can assume that re-opening will happen in waves, with our employees' ability to focus and stay productive oscillating as well. We should also recognize and plan for our employees to have heightened emotions throughout the changes, potentially in relation to:

- Resentment between those employees experiencing different impacts and timing (i.e. those who have been on site versus those who have been remote, different pay structures, etc.)
- Anger that employers are “giving in” to government officials who are urging them to open
- Fear due to the continued spread of coronavirus
- Anger that employers *aren't* re-opening quickly enough
- Anxiety over stability of income
- Frustration at the cycles of cleaning and potential re-close of a site
- Resistance to possible infringements upon their privacy due to safety precautions (i.e.: temperature checks, social tracking)

As a general best practice, companies are creating workstreams to determine the operations, infrastructures and processes for how to re-open. These groups will have a multitude of cycles they will have to work through, and challenges to address related to employee emotions, communications needs, and possible outcomes.



## Wave 1: Planning

### Before Staff are Back On-site

During the planning period, when teams are considering how to re-open sites, it is not only critical to develop plans and workstreams quickly to address near-term decisions, but to send regular employee communications so employees hear about the process and decisions as often as they did when they were asked to shift to remote or modified working models.

From the start, COVID-19 has increased the need for employees to feel safe and secure, given the health implications for them and their loved ones. That doesn't stop as decisions are made on operations, infrastructures and processes moving forward.

A recent Brunswick Insight poll in mid-April found that 43 percent of employees already wanted information on their return to work plans, but only 20% said they have received any. With more in the news on loosened lockdowns and back-to-work guidelines, those numbers have already increased. While in many cases, planning has only just begun, employees are asking for insight on what that planning will look like and any guidance on how they will learn more.

Employees need to know that they are being considered, how government decisions they are hearing about daily in the news impact their working environment, and how their company is going to protect them.

Internal communication needs during this wave should be focused on announcing leadership philosophy on how workforce decisions will be made and ensuring employees understand what is being put into place to help them come back on-site.

It is important to:

- Set guiding principles aligned to the actions you've been taking on your response, and set up the cultural attributes you want to see reflected in your future organization
- Ensure leaders believe in the guiding principles and stand behind them in how they make decisions and how they communicate the strategy
- Include clear ideas about how you will communicate with transparency, integrity, intensity and to promote trust
- Explain why decisions were taken
- Recognize altered personal situations with childcare needs and new strains at home
- Align, where possible, with government or authority guidance
- Be clear about where employees can influence the future of the business
- Set clear expectations around safety, cleaning, maintaining on-site social distancing, staying home if ill, etc.
- Share stories internally from employees as they return to the workplace; be open to successes and challenges they overcame
- Bring employees into the decision-making process, where possible; consider employee advisory councils and feedback processes

This is the time to take a hard look at what we used to do and determine what we want to do going forward to be most successful. And, along the way, we need to invite employees to be part of the discussions and decisions as they, yet again, are handed new ways of working. The decisions we make now should be data-driven and rooted in the perceptions of the people who matter most.

## Wave 2: Phased Re-opening

### Phasing Employees Back On-site

This is the wave when communications must be as localized as the decisions being taken. With that said the overall company philosophy and messages should be centralized. How the company cares about its employees, and *is taking care of* employees throughout the changes, should be the same, regardless of location, function or tasks.

Internal communication needs should be focused on continuing to announce workforce decisions and enabling staff to come back on-site and should be clear about the timelines and milestones that are being rolled out company wide. This is also an opportunity to be clear about when decisions are being made in response to the inputs and requests of employees during the planning phase. In addition, employees will be watching how re-openings are handled at other sites, so telling that story proactively can help showcase where things are going well and what is being learned.

Communications efforts should consider how to:

- Welcome staff back on-site and help them feel safe
- Remind staff of cleaning and on-site social distancing protocols
- Share what staff can do (clean workstations before and after use, stay home if ill)
- Be clear about the steps and timelines around changes
- Continue to share stories of successful returns and be transparent about lessons learned
- Create formal two-way communication processes for collecting employee feedback on issues and challenges
- Be prepared to pull back if/when needed

## Wave 3: Managing Issues

### Addressing needs and changes

We know from companies that have reinstated on-site working policies that challenges arise. People get sick, sites need to be closed and cleaned, working schedules need to be readjusted to meet customer needs, and changes to official guidance impact processes.

We need our employees to continue listening to updated communications, to be ready to be flexible in the face of continued change, and to remain focused on their roles. Those three things – to listen, be flexible, and remain focused – can be challenging in the best of times, let alone now.

Internal communications need to be more transparent and considerate than ever in this phase, by:

- Emphasizing continued learnings, and unknowns, of the virus
- Communicating what is and is not changing for employees
- Reintroducing previous successful strategies for remote working
- Sharing what you are doing to care for employees and preparing for the future
- Expressing confidence in public health-based decisions or taking a viewpoint where making a different choice
- Leaning into formal and informal processes for collecting employee feedback on issues and challenges

It is through this experience that leaders and companies can demonstrate what was learned through the initial waves and is being applied now. This is specifically important to build employee confidence that their companies are set up for success in the future. Finally, this will help employees build further trust in the decisions made and get them more ready to support where needed.

## Wave 4: Cycles of Return

### Responding to changes on and off site

Closing and returning to sites multiple times demands resiliency of leaders, the company and employees. Each and every change event to the company and workplace impacts our employees' lives and asks them to reset their thinking, adjust their habits, plan for the impacts at home and learn new behaviors. We are asking people to change often and quickly. Our communications need to do the same.

- Develop new ways for employee engagement that take into account the various ways people are now working
- Continue successful virtual programs to ensure there are options
- Utilize the new platforms or channels that have been built when employees were home
- Bring forward more communications focused on business initiatives, eventually shifting the balance towards less COVID news
- Maintain and showcase lessons learned throughout the entire process
- Begin assessment of where culture is thriving and where it is lagging

As the near-term discussion focuses on how to bring employees together safely to ensure their health, prevent the spread of COVID-19 and enable a more sustainable way of working, we must continue discussions about how to care for our employees, take care of our business and contribute to society.

Bringing people back into the working environment should be done in whatever way and timeline makes sense for each of us, and should be seen as one, of many, steps to recovery.