

The Journey Back to the Workplace Unintended Consequences



Unintended Consequences

Organisations nationwide are working tirelessly to implement the mandatory measures necessary under the return to work safely protocols. Despite the commonality of these actions there exists some differences to the impact on organisations as they plan and prepare for a return to the workplace, and the unintended consequences of the healthcare pandemic are starting to become more and more apparent. In particular, employers in the community and voluntary sector are now faced with a changing workforce, changing expectations and a different way of working as they enter the new normal.

A continuing Remote or Hybrid Remote Workforce

Organisational decisions in returning to the workplace have for some, already been decided. So, while some organisations intend to remain in a remote working space, others are introducing a hybrid form of remote working. This has the consequence of both delivering on the measures under the protocols but also preparing for a new form of work practice, one which may stagger shifts/working hours and continued aspects of remote working, which may lead to the necessity of Managers managing employees in a different way. This is an unintended consequence of the new normal, requiring people managers to adapt accordingly.

In order to do this effectively, communication must continue to be frequent and transparent. organisations must engage their workforces by both providing autonomy as well as encouraging collaborative practices. There must be an equitable approach to dealing with employees so that you are mitigating risks of employment equality issues arising. Finally, flexibility must be modelled so

that both management and employees can navigate this new territory and work together for organisational success.

Employee expectations around flexible work

From the outset of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, employers and employees alike moved quickly to flexible working arrangements. This flexibility continues today even where some organisations have returned to the workplace.

Following 4 months of restrictions however, there is a growing expectation that flexibility in terms of work practices can and should continue. In most cases this is absolutely true and should assist in the transition back to the workplace as organisations enter the new norm.

Where a deviation may be needed is in the management of expectations around flexible work. More and more situations are arising where employee expectations no longer balance the needs of the organisation whether this is around working hours, work practices or availability to return to the workplace. The issue now becomes how expectations are managed. Flexibility, while needed, may now be expected from employees in a different way. This means that employers must ensure that they are clear in communicating the organisational needs, have appropriate policies in place to deal with changing leave arrangements and are prepared to foster a safe and healthy workplace.

Changes to the Workforce

Probably the most obvious and unfortunate unintentional consequence of the healthcare pandemic has been the substantial impact of changes to the workforce. Whether workforce planning occurred in the initial stages or not, most organisations have been, or will be, impacted with pay cuts, layoffs, short time or redundancy situations.

In order to deal with this effectively organisations need to implement a workforce plan, assess newly emerged priorities, analyse the financial circumstances of the organisation and assess the current needs of the organisation, to fully understand the suitability of skills, experience and requirements within the new norm. Proper planning and transparent communications are key to managing the unintended consequences that come from changes to roles and impacts on the workforce.

Health and Wellbeing

The final unintended consequence stemming from the impact of covid-19 is the manner in which mental health and well-being importance has been pushed to the fore. In a positive way employers were forced to clearly analyse the impact on their workforce and put the mental health and well-being of their employees front and centre. This renewed or re-energised mandate of mental health and wellbeing has meant that organisations have had to put in place resources to support employees. In the new normal this must continue and will be of huge benefit to employers and employees alike.

However, with all the changes that have occurred in organisations over the past four months other areas of concern have been highlighted. These include feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety being

experienced by a high number of employees. It is therefore essential that employers ensure the correct supports are put in place. Update appropriate policies, engage the services of an employee assistance programme, ensure occupational health physicians are at hand, ensure regular 1:1's take place, have a constant and consistent messaging to employees with a strong communications plan and finally focus on engagement with the correct resources and supports in place for employees.

Key Take Aways

- **Communication is integral to effectively managing all unintended consequences and maintaining an engaged workforce.**
- **Model flexibility but be clear on organisational expectations.**
- **Balance the needs of the organisation and treat employees fairly.**
- **Ensure the correct supports are in place to maintain and foster health and wellbeing as a priority.**

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**For further information or advice, please contact the designated HR & Employment Helpdesk at thewheelhrhelpdesk@adarehrm.ie or via telephone on (01) 5394661
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