

## Managing employee health & wellbeing as Ireland returns to the workplace May 14, 2021

As the country begins to start returning to office and workspaces, employers are facing with a number of challenges. In many cases, employees will have dual workplaces for some time to come as either their employers implemented a phased approach to the return or that they introduce a hybrid model.

Employers also have to balance the return to the workplace with the ongoing threat of Covid-19 while it is still very much in society.

### ***Employer responsibilities***

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, employers are responsible for ensuring their employees have a safe place to work, regardless of whether they are working remotely or in an office. This includes providing the correct and safe equipment for their employees to complete their tasks, sufficient training to use this equipment and to do their jobs correctly and safely and to carry out appropriate assessments of any potential risks.

Employers will be challenged to ensure compliance with the Act while also managing people coming back to the workplace. We would remind employers that a full re-assessment of workstations may well be required if any equipment has been changed or ungraded over the course of the past 14 months. And, if employees are returning equipment to the office but still doing some work remotely, the employer is responsible for both workstations.

It is important that employers don't neglect or overlook their responsibilities, particularly with the distraction of reopening; this could lead to issues with personal injury claims further down the tracks. For remote DSE and Ergonomics training members of the Wheel should review the promotion relating to online assessments that is in place currently.

### ***Keeping the workplace Covid-free***

While we are still 'living with Covid', employers also need to ensure they have the appropriate public health measures in place in the workplace; hand sanitiser, safe distancing, adequate ventilation and regular cleaning are some of challenges employers need to bear in mind. The Government has produced very helpful information and guidance contained within the "Work Safely Protocol". Issued late last year employers within the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sectors need to review the requirements contained within the protocols and ensure consistent application of all measures is applied to continue to mitigate any risks. It is also important the employees understand their role in keeping the workplace safe and healthy so a re-induction of the measures and training requirements should be considered.

### ***Health & Wellbeing initiatives***

One particular area of focus for employers over the period of lockdown was looking after the wellbeing of employees. Implementing strategies and initiatives to combat a sense of disconnection or loneliness and trying to maintain employee engagement was not an easy task. And, in many cases, employees were also trying to manage childcare or other caring responsibilities.

In a recent survey conducted by Adare Human Resource Management the HR Barometer research report, outlined that 45% of organisations pointed to employee health & wellbeing as a key priority in 2021, which was a considerable increase from previous years. However, many of the initiatives that were in place prior to Covid-19 certainly were not designed for a remote workforce but employers have continued to adapt their health and wellbeing strategies to main engagement and build a sense of culture.

As we begin to emerge from Covid-19, employee engagement will play a crucial role in the success of organisations. An engaged workforce is not only more productive but contributes more in terms of innovation and creative thinking.

Employers have an opportunity to take a step back and reassess the objectives of any health and wellbeing initiatives and ensure they are fit for purpose post-Covid. If not, now is the time to make changes. Introducing more flexible working arrangements or childcare supports that fit in with the return to the workplace are far more valuable in the eyes of employees and will certainly go further to support retention strategies.

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