Viewpoint: 12 Tips for Return-to-Work Communications

Be flexible and willing to adjust your communication approach

By Denise Foster © Milliman

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While the move to working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic happened quickly, the return to work will be slower and more complicated.

Employers that haven't made movement back to workspaces and office buildings should think carefully about the implications of the new six-feet-apart world. How will you handle an employee who refuses to wear a mask when required? When will you open the kitchens and make coffee and water available? How many people will you allow in a restroom at a time? Do people have to walk clockwise around the space? Where do you put hand sanitizer stations? Setting aside all of the logistics, how do and will employees feel?

🔒 **SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT**

Coronavirus and COVID-19 (https://shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

Connect with Employees

Like any other workplace change, making sure employees are aware and understand this new world will be equally as important as the actual changes themselves. Training, education and effective communication are key to returning employees to the workplace.

Below are a number of tips to keep in mind as you communicate return-to-workplace situations:

- **Develop** a clear and detailed safe work plan, reviewing any policies that need to be updated.

- **Write** in plain, easy-to-understand language.

- **Use** images and diagrams where appropriate.

- **Outline** what building management is doing, how the company is supporting this effort and clear expectations for employees.

- **Partner with** legal counsel. They can help you steer clear of perceptions of discrimination and other potential employee relations or legal issues.

- **Get input** from your senior leaders. They should be knowledgeable and included well before you communicate to employees.

- **Train** your managers and supervisors on the safe workplan and what is expected of them. They are the front line of employee communications.

- **Use** different media to supplement a written plan. Hold a webinar and record it. Create a video, leverage your online employee portal, or do a podcast.

- **Make good** use of signs throughout the office to help with key behaviors, including directions to walk down aisles in one direction or to designate one stairwell for walking up and another for walking down.

- **Be clear** where employees should go with questions.

- **Start** communicating before workers are allowed (or expected) to return to the workplace, and keep communicating to address new issues and concerns as they arise.

- **Explain** that the situation is fluid and manage expectations by noting that when new information becomes available the plan will be updated. Communicate those key changes with leadership and employees.

[SHRM members-only toolkit: Managing Organizational Communication (https://shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/managingorganizationalcommunication.aspx)]

Careful Not to Overdo It

Especially now, employees want to understand what you are doing to keep them safe and to believe that you care. But you don't want to overdo it, either. Whether it's due to a lack of trust or excess worry, some organizations are holding more meetings than usual to "check-in," which employees can find invasive and intrusive.

If "eyes on your employees" was your primary form of performance evaluation, you might be feeling unsettled in this new work-from-home arrangement. In most situations, you've likely hired responsible, talented people who want to, and will, do good jobs under any circumstance. Trust they will, and reward them when they do.

Tip: Let them dictate the check-in frequency. Be willing to tailor your approach to the communication needs of the individuals or groups. Then, over time, survey your employees and ask them how it's working, especially the frequency and content of communications.

Wherever you are along this journey, don't forget employees' needs have shifted and will likely continue to change. Be flexible and willing to adjust your communication approach constantly. Look for that Goldilocks communication approach—not too much, not too little, but just right.

Denise Foster is principal, employee communications, at Milliman, an international actuarial and management consulting firm based in Seattle. A version of this article was posted on Milliman's Healthcare Town Hall blog (https://www.healthcaretownhall.com/#sthash.HlDKzeYY.dpbs). © 2020 Milliman Inc. All rights reserved. Reposted with permission.

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Video, E-Mail or In Person: Match Communication Method to Your Message (https://shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/Video-E-Mail-or-In-Person-Match-Communication-Method-to-Your-Message.aspx), *SHRM Online*, June 2020

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