

## **The Return of People to the Workplace Causes Uncertainty - Are You Ready for Change?**

### **Returning from Remote Working**

Despite team meetings and support from line management, there is no getting away from the fact that people who have been working remotely have been working in isolation for much of the time. This, in turn, can bring about unexpected change and not only to the relationship between the employer and staff or even between staff members who were used to working in a team environment prior to the COVID crisis.

The CEO at Goldman Sachs has stated that remote working is not ideal where a business relies on collaboration and innovation and, of course, he is right. Whilst you might learn the theory through attendance of formal training courses, a great deal of professional development is nurtured through the learning undertaken in the workplace – especially in the picking up of ‘tacit’ knowledge which requires both the identification of a lesson to be learned and also an understanding of the context in which it was identified and in which it can add value. This raises further questions when it comes to having people return from working remotely.

Have staff members experienced a change in customer expectations? Has this, or other events, brought about changes to work practices? If staff have taken it upon themselves to change their work practices whilst working in isolation, this could bring about two distinct problems. Firstly, if this has resulted in different work practices being adopted across the organisation it is likely to cause confusion for the End Customer and is unlikely to meet customer expectations when it comes to continuity of service. Secondly it could result in workplace conflict with staff trying to leverage differing work practices when they return. So, what does this mean for the employer?

There is a need for the employer to establish any lessons learned by members of staff, whilst they were working remotely, and to gain an understanding of how these may have resulted in changes to work practices. Once this data has been collected and evaluated, there is a need for business leaders to assess whether there is a need for changes to be made to work practices and, if so, how these changes might add value to the Customer and to the Organisation itself. What effect will such changes have on Value Chains (working back from the Customer) and to the inter-departmental interactions required to support them? However, it is not just about changes brought about by the workforce. What changes will business leaders have, or likely to, put in place in order to move the business forward and ensure future continuity?

Have there been changes to the structure of the Organisation and, perhaps, to the culture that business leaders would like to leverage? What effect will this have on lines of communication and collaboration within the Organisation? Has there been changes due to new technology being introduced into the workplace? When did staff last receive training in Health & Safety; Equality & Diversity etc? This will need to be relayed to the staff as they return. Can this be communicated, along with any changes brought about due to lessons

learned by staff whilst working remotely, through a programme of induction training – perhaps re-titled as ‘Reintroduction Training’?

### **Return from Furlough**

In addition to some of the changes that have been highlighted in respect of people returning from remote working, for those returning from furlough there is also a need to look at the problem of skills-fade. How long is it since these people actually utilised the skills required for them to do their job? Is there a need for re-training? If so, what will be length of the training programme? What effect will this have on productivity within the Organisation? Can this training be undertaken prior to businesses re-opening? What will be the cost?

### **Conclusion**

I have no doubt that other people will pick up on other areas that will need to be researched when people eventually return to the workplace (given that every organisation tends to be unique). However, business leaders need to ensure that the structure of the Organisation is such that it can support the leveraging of the ‘right’ strategies, capabilities and culture required to encourage the innovation and creativity needed to ensure business continuity. In addition, they will need to ensure that people returning to the workplace understand the Value Chain (working back from the Customer) and the inter-departmental interactions (such as collaboration and lines of communication) required to support it. Any changes to work practices need to be identified and unified before moving forward.

How well have you prepared for the return of your staff?