

CPHR

British Columbia
& Yukon

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Returning To The Workplace Guide

CPHRBC.CA

June 3, 2020

As some COVID-19 restrictions start to lift, employers have already started planning for a return to the workplace. Their guiding principle should be how organizations take care of their people and safeguard their health and well-being. Many people will be concerned and anxious about being in workplaces or travelling to workplaces. Employees will want to know that their organization is retaining their support for physical and mental health and are changing their thinking about flexible and remote working. This should be at the heart of any decisions and plans that organizations make.

As restrictions ease and you work towards resuming your operations, we hope that this guide will help you plan your organization's re-entry strategies.

RETURN TO THE WORKPLACE

How you manage a return to the workplace will depend on the type of closure arrangements you have been operating with. The three most prevalent types are:

- Business that has closed and is not operating at all
- Business that is open and operating on a limited basis (some staff laid off, some working from home or in company premises) or where only 'essential' workers are currently at work
- Business that is operating fully but all staff working remotely.

Whichever of these is closest to your individual business, there are some common issues you will need to address:

- There will be a requirement for some social distancing for some time to come. Every employer holds an obligation to maintain a safe and healthy working environment. As restrictions ease and if possible, we suggest you allow staff who can work from home to be allowed to work from home. Where certain groups of employees or businesses are part of a sectoral return to the workplace, employers will need to consider detailed risk management approaches to safeguard their health and minimize the risk of infection. It's therefore essential that employers continue to base any plans for returning to the workplace on [up-to-date Government and public health guidance](#) in relation to COVID-19. [WorkSafe BC](#) has published extensive materials to provide employers with information and resources to assist them in ensuring the risk of exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19, is minimized at their workplace.
- Given that the priority for every business should be managing a safe return to the workplace for employees, it's crucial that you work in close collaboration with your health and safety and occupational health teams wherever possible. Communicate the practical measures you are taking to staff on a regular basis to help reassure them that their health, well-being, and safety is your top priority. Make sure employees are clear about what procedure they should follow if they begin to feel unwell, both in the workplace and at home.
- You will need to review your workplace and consider – can staff maintain a minimum of 6-feet or 2-meters physical distance between each other? How will you manage meetings, interviews, and other interactions? What about communal areas such as copy rooms, lunchrooms or kitchen areas? How can you implement resourcing strategies to support physical distancing such as 'cohorting' (i.e. keeping teams of workers working together and as small as possible), or staggering working hours so that not all staff are in at the same time? Have you updated relevant policies for outside visitors, deliveries, travel, and transportation, etc.?
- All of the key protection and hygiene measures will continue to apply to minimize the spread of infection, such as prohibiting staff to come to the workplace if ill and practicing good hygiene, such as frequent and proper handwashing. If your premises have been closed for a period of time, you should consider carrying out a deep-clean before you reopen. You should therefore review your cleaning arrangements, for example ensuring all phones/keyboards/door handles/light switches etc. are wiped daily with anti-viral cleaner. You can refer to the [Government guidance](#) for more information on cleaning sanitizing.

- Depending on your working environment, you may need to consider providing additional PPE, including gloves, masks or anti-viral hand gel. If you want people to wear gloves/masks, then you will also need to think about training/briefing staff on their correct usage – since both can be ineffective if used inappropriately. Information is available on the [Government website](#). Employers should continue to monitor the latest government guidance and be prepared to act upon any changes.
- Staff who travel or visit other company premises may also need additional equipment or briefing. Remote meeting facilities and video-conferencing should be encouraged wherever possible to minimize the need for staff to travel and/or use public transport. You can refer to our [COVID-19 webinar recordings](#) on our PD On Demand platform for tips on managing and engaging remotely, as well as suggestions on [looking after your remote teams](#).
- The risks to people’s health from this pandemic are psychological as well as physical. These include anxiety about the ongoing health crisis and fear of infection, as well social isolation due to the lockdown. Many will have experienced challenging domestic situations, such as juggling childcare or caring for a vulnerable relative, as well as financial worries if a partner has lost their income. Some will have experienced illness, or bereavement. Even if staff have carried on working and participated in video meetings, they will still need to adjust to working in a physical shared environment with colleagues again. The transition from working from home to returning to the workplace will be harder. Some may take more time than others and it is likely that most people will need a period of readjustment and reintegration. Some members of the staff may have concerns about travelling to work on public transport – or it may not be as readily available. Many may find that they are still coming to terms with the significant change which society has seen, and the familiar workplace routines could feel very different. If your business has an Employee Assistance Program access to Occupational Health advisers make staff aware of the services they can provide. Refer to the CPHR’s webinar on “[Well-Being & Mental Health Support During COVID-19 Pandemic, and Beyond](#)”, and offer resources to your team like [Wellness Together Canada](#).
- You may want to consider a re-orientation process as it may be vital for returning staff. Encourage and support every manager to have one to one reintegration meetings with every employee, where a key focus is on health, safety and overall well-being. Managers need to have a sensitive and open discussion with every individual and discuss any adjustments and/or ongoing support they may need to facilitate an effective return to the workplace. This is especially important for those who have been laid off, and should cover topics such as changes in company services or procedures, how specific customer queries or issues are being addressed, or changes in supply arrangements, as well as any changes to their work duties or tasks. Consider that some employees may require a phased return to their full role, or want to discuss a new working arrangement, especially if their domestic situation has changed because of the pandemic.

- Finally, it will be important for every employer to ensure that the organization's culture is inclusive, and that every employee feels they are returning to a supportive and caring environment. The pandemic has had an unequal impact across the workforce in many ways, as different groups of employees, and individuals, will have been affected in diverse ways according to their job role and individual circumstances. Some organizations will have people who have been laid off, for example, while others may have continued to work or even had increased workloads. The uneven nature of people's work and personal experiences and the challenging environment of the lockdown and ongoing situation means there could be potential for some negative feelings in regards to the employment relations. Therefore, it is important that the organization fosters an inclusive working environment, and managers are sensitive to any underlying tensions and are confident about nipping potential conflict in the bud. If your business has an Employee Assistance Program or access to Occupational Health advisers make staff aware of the services they can provide. You may wish to refer to CPHR's webinar on "[A Responsive Workplace Conflict Resolution Toolkit](#)" for advice.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

There will also be a number of employment law and administrative issues that need to be covered. You may wish to refer to [CPHR BC & Yukon's Virtual Legal Symposiums](#) accessible via PD On Demand for pertinent legal information.

- Employment legal advice provided throughout has been that you should seek written agreement with staff to be laid off. Even if you put in a clause allowing for an immediate recall, you should still give employees a reasonable period of notice of requiring them to return to the workplace. This is particularly important given that many people will have additional childcare or other responsibilities, which they may need to make arrangements to manage. You'll need to ensure that your payroll staff or provider are aware that layoffs have ended for these employees and they should return to full pay.

- Even if you can address the crucial health and safety aspects and are confident you can protect people's health (some of which were covered above), is it sensible to want all staff to return to work at your premises? Would it be more appropriate to continue with some staff home working on a longer-term basis? If so, make sure you have a clear rationale as to why you need particular staff or roles to return physically. Everyone's lives will have been severely disrupted by the pandemic. People's expectations around work, and how they fulfil their role, and reconcile work and domestic responsibilities, could have changed dramatically. This is an ideal time for employers to think more creatively about effective ways of working, and harness more agile and flexible working practices to meet individuals' changing expectations. This approach could also help employers to develop more effective people management practices that are more productive for the organization. This may require employees to review existing or produce new policies on flexible working.
- What criteria will you use to recall staff? Will it be simply business need? Will you consider individual personal circumstances? Remember not to use discriminatory criteria; be fair and inclusive and keep in mind your organizational values and any diversity and inclusion aims.

As restrictions ease, your business may still not need to bring all of its existing workforce back. In this case, you may need to consider reduced working hours for some or all staff, layoff staff for a further period if possible, or consider terminations. Your business may not be able to continue, or you may only have enough business to require significantly fewer staff. In such cases, you need to follow the correct procedures and employment laws and take any steps you can to support employees through this process. Termination will be a crushing blow to many people, at a time when they have been through a very challenging time – be very mindful of how you communicate, continue to support them and treat their health and welfare as a priority.

We encourage you to seek legal counsel or refer to our [HR Consultant Directory](#) for advice.

OTHER ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Employees who are at risk and advised to self-isolate

Some of your employees may still be required to self-isolate because they are 'extremely vulnerable' and at particular risk from COVID-19 infection. Others may be very concerned because they live or care for someone who is classed as high risk. If individuals are still self-isolating as restrictions begin to be lifted, you should either allow them to continue to work from home. If this is not possible, look at other options to retain them.

Employees who have suffered a bereavement

While deaths from COVID-19 are still comparatively rare in Canada, it is possible you may have employees who have suffered the bereavement of a partner or other family member.

Remember that, while all deaths affect individuals, in the case of COVID-19 family members may have been unable to see their loved one for some time before death, and not been able to attend the funeral or take any bereavement time. Employees who have suffered a bereavement are likely to need ongoing flexibility and support to grieve. Make sure you make them aware of any mental health support (such as Employee Assistance Programs) you offer, and that managers are trained to have sensitive and supportive conversations with people.

In very rare cases, you may have an employee who has died from COVID-19. You will need to support their colleagues and again, direct employees to any mental health support you offer.

Managing holidays after the return

Review your vacation policies, particularly for employees who have vacation days carried over from the previous year and have been unable to use them.

- Encourage staff to take previously agreed holiday dates – even if working from home, people still need time away from work.
- Have a clear policy to allow as many people as possible to take leave this year while still maintaining key business services – perhaps relaxing normal rules around maximum numbers allowed off at once. Have a plan in place for approving vacation so that the essential functions of your business do not suffer.
- Consider that some employees will be worried about taking time off for fear that their role may be deemed non-essential. Remind your employees that taking time off is important for their health and well-being.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND TRAVEL POLICIES

- If your business operates internationally, you will need to plan based on the restrictions and/or guidance of different countries. Some may maintain stricter lockdown arrangements than Canada; others may be lifting restrictions sooner. Adopt a consistent approach while ensuring you are aware of local circumstances.
- International travel is likely to remain disrupted even when other restrictions are lifted. Some countries have strict quarantine rules for those entering, which may prevent travel. Even if this is not the case, some employees may have concerns about travelling to other countries where the risk of COVID-19 is higher. Be aware of your health and safety responsibilities and keep business travel to an absolute minimum. As many have realized during the current lockdown, many (though not all) business meetings can be done via video-conferencing.

- In addition to health and well-being, employers should bear in mind the importance of diversity and inclusion in any decisions or plans made. From ensuring that decisions do not discriminate against certain groups of employees (e.g. decisions about flexible, home or part time working due to school closures where women could be disproportionately affected leading to potential discrimination claims) to fostering an inclusive working environment that takes account of the different experiences people have had during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Communication with your employees is key. Keeping people informed of what your business is doing, whether it is good or bad news for individuals, will help them to make their own decisions and give them some degree of security in very uncertain times. Knowing they are valued and supported by their employer – and that you continue to prioritize their health and safety – will be pivotal to their well-being.

Pay specific attention to staff who have particular requirements (e.g. health issues, disability, childcare or other caring responsibilities). They may not be in a position to return as quickly to 'normal' working. Be aware that some employees who had a reasonable adjustment before may need a different one on their return to a workplace. Similarly, many individuals who did not previously have a mental health condition may have experienced mental health challenges and need to discuss changes to help them overcome any barriers and fulfil their role.

A guide such as this cannot possibly cover every business situation, but it should help you think about the sort of issues that all businesses will need to consider as restrictions begin to be relaxed. You will find a list of resources below that we urge you to consider as you create and amend your plans. And lastly, keep checking and following the [latest government advice](#).

DISCLAIMER: The materials in this guidance are provided for general information purposes and do not constitute legal or other professional advice. While the information is considered to be true and correct at the date of publication, changes in circumstances may impact the accuracy and validity of the information. The CPHR BC Y & Yukon is not responsible for any errors or omissions, or for any action or decision taken as a result of using the guidance. You should consult a professional adviser for legal or other advice where appropriate.

SOURCES

- [CIPD](#)

RESOURCES

National

- [WHO – Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Pandemic](#)
- [Cleaning and disinfecting public spaces during COVID-19](#)
- [Risk mitigation tool for workplaces/businesses operating during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [Information for Government of Canada employees: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#)

Provincial (BC)

- [BC's Restart Plan – Next Steps to Move BC Through the Pandemic](#)
- [COVID-19 and returning to safe operation - Phase 2](#)
- [COVID-19 Safety Plan](#)
- [BC Centre for Disease Control – COVID-19](#)
- [BC Centre for Disease Control – Signage and Posters](#)