



Mental health and hybrid working

A guide to supporting your team



Introduction

Early in the lockdown, we put out a guide to help businesses support their team members' mental health and wellbeing. Luckily that guide is starting to feel a little dated. But only a little.

It's clear that Covid is something we're having to adapt to, to live with, and that some of the changes that came about from the pandemic are here to stay. One of them is hybrid working, which many businesses have moved towards following the success of remote working.

But hybrid working – in a time where many people still feel uncertain – isn't without its effects on our mental health and wellbeing. As we've spoken to customers and others, it's become clear that mental health is slipping down businesses' priority lists.

But it shouldn't. Though hybrid working is helpful in many ways, it also means that your teams' visibility won't be as high – and that will be your new norm. It's one thing trying to navigate that through a pandemic, but it's a whole other thing adjusting to that as your norm and the future.



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What ways can people be affected? Communication isn't as easy; meetings are made more complex; social events are more complicated, and then we still have Covid hanging over us, which has left many people nervous still. So, if you've taken a hybrid approach, you have to accept that office life has changed for good.

We want to highlight why you, as managers, have to keep mental health at the forefront of your mind and provide you with practical tips that you can use to support your teams' mental health.

We hope this guide is helpful.



Returning to the office

The pandemic has kept us away from our offices for a long time. The world has shifted since then and Covid hasn't completely gone away: therefore, naturally there are going to be some anxieties around returning to the office.

Here are some to look out for:

Seeing and socialising with colleagues again

This can be hard, especially for people with social anxieties. Covid may have given people a reprieve from socialising, but now it's time to get back out there. Managers need to be aware that this can be difficult and be sensitive to people's worries about this. Check in with your team and get a sense of whether this is going to be an anxiety for them, so you can put plans in place. (See: Social Events, for ideas on how to approach social events.)

Covid

As Covid is still around, make sure you ease people's minds by showing that it's still being considered. Or, if they are reluctant to come into the office because of it, be sensitive to that. Having regular and open communication – especially with those who are nervous about it – could help ease their mind.

Visiting the office for the first time

If anyone has started a new job during the pandemic and is now going to be meeting their colleagues or spending more time with their colleagues in person, then there may be some initial nerves and anxieties. Especially as interacting in the office is different to virtually. Make sure you check in with your new team members to see how they feel, and do everything you can to make them feel welcome in the office.

When introducing new colleagues to the office, why not try some of these ideas?

- **Introductions.** Take the time to introduce them to other new colleagues in the office, especially those who they have not worked with before.
- **Show them around.** Give them a tour of the office – remember, it's new to them.
- **Team lunch.** Have a team lunch on their first day in the office – it's a great way to give people a chance to chat.





Structure and work/life balance

During the pandemic, it was difficult to find a work/life balance. As the two merged into one in our homes, it was important to find and set boundaries. Even though we're in the office, which naturally helps create a structure, we mustn't lose the habit of striving for structure when we're working at home, or remotely either. Here are some tips to help maintain boundaries between our professional and personal lives.

Plan your workload according to your location

You may have work that is better completed in the office, or vice versa. Plan your workloads and days so you're getting the most out of your location. Do you need time to focus? Then it may be best to do that work in the location that best allows you to do that. Do you need to have lots of meetings that are best done face-to-face? Then plan those in the office. Or plan to do tasks that can still get done despite the chatter of the office. This is great for your wellbeing as you're making sure you're getting the most out of your location.

Build in breaks

It is easy for our workdays to run away with us while working remotely, and with no impromptu conversations creating natural breaks (as if they do in the office), we can easily forget to take them. Whether it is a screen break, a coffee break or a chat with a colleague, these breaks are vital, especially if we want to avoid 'digital' fatigue.

Team office days

A way to structure your week in a hybrid setting is to encourage whole teams to come in on the same day. It's great to be able to catch up and work with colleagues side-by-side and many find it a huge boost to their wellbeing, even if it's only once a week.

Press pause

We recommend that anyone working remotely take a moment in their day to shift their mind from their professional life to their personal life, and vice versa. There are various ways to pause between these roles, whether that is some breathing techniques, a walk, meditation, or yoga. Pausing techniques can be used at any moment during the day (such as on a break) but are especially beneficial at the end of work, as they enter their evening.

End your workday

When working remotely, it is especially easy to allow our work to spill out over into the evening. But it is important to keep to a routine so that we have a clear break between our professional and personal time. Encourage your team to 'mark' the end of the day, for example, by clearing their equipment away. This will allow them to relax and give their mind a rest in the evening.





Re-building working relationships

With less time to chat, interact and get to know our colleagues, our working relationships may have been affected by the pandemic. They may not be as strong (or, if you're lucky, they may be stronger!), so we need to make that extra effort and put the time in, especially when we're back in the office. You could:

- **Arrange walks** – either as a team, or one-on-one. Walking is a great way to get a break, get some fresh air, as well as a chance to catch up and talk about life outside of work.
- **Team lunches** – there's nothing like a meal to bring people together. Encourage team lunches as a way of re-connecting.
- **Take a break** – remember the advice to take breaks? Use those breaks to reconnect with a colleague, or encourage the team to take a coffee break together.



Communication

It can't be denied, working remotely affects how we communicate. Yes, it has many benefits and conveniences, but it also means fewer visual cues and ways of physically interacting with each other. The result? It is more important than ever that our verbal communication is clear and transparent.

When we were in the pandemic, we had no choice in how we communicated; it had to be remotely. But now we've moved to a hybrid style, there is more flexibility. What can you do to make sure you're communicating with your team or business in the best way possible?

Regular meetings

As hybrid working means less visibility of your team, it's easier to miss cues that your team members may be struggling. Regular catch-ups, therefore, are a great way to check in and make sure everyone's alright. Not only does this give a chance to talk about work, or air any concerns, but it's a great way to maintain a strong connection too.

Mix it up

We don't have to have all our interactions online, now we can choose. So, choose wisely. Decide what meetings suit which location. For example, you may want to have brainstorm sessions or workshops face-to-face so you can bounce ideas off each other more easily and help discussions flow more organically. But day-to-day questions or queries, or even 1-2-1s, can still work perfectly well online.

Create a 'water cooler'

Remember the popular advice for creating an online 'water cooler' during the lockdowns? They're still relevant. Make sure those online spaces for chatting continue, even now time is spent in the office. They're still important for those who work remotely the majority of the time.

Communication from senior management

Whether a weekly email or video message, communication from the senior team has proven to be popular. Employees recognise it as the senior team's personal investment into the business and their team, and now there is less opportunity to find things out spontaneously; this communication is a crucial look-in into what is going on across the business.



Meetings: rules and etiquettes

The pandemic taught us a lot about meetings. We discovered there was definitely a thing as too many meetings; getting the right technology is essential to the success of a digital or hybrid meeting, and not all meetings are easily replicated virtually.

We don't want to lose these valuable lessons! It's important to still carefully consider your meetings, even now we're spending time in the office. In our original guide, we put these rules and etiquettes out to help businesses develop a healthier approach to meetings, and the majority of them still stand.

Rules

- Limit the amount you have in a day
- Decide whether it needs to be face-to-face or virtual. To make sure that meetings are held in the optimum way, their method needs to be carefully considered.
- Only book meetings at certain times of the day, such as the morning
- Encourage people to decline meetings if they don't feel they can make them

Etiquettes

- Agree on ways of signifying that people want to speak up, such as putting their hand up, or using an icon. This will ensure that everyone is heard and is confident about contributing.
- Have someone chair the meeting, especially when the numbers are large
- Be mindful not to speak over people
- Be strict with the time
- Make sure you have appropriate conference technology so that the meeting is beneficial to everyone.





Social events

The pandemic showed social events didn't have to be face-to-face to be successful, but it also showed that we are natural social beings who thrive on being around others. Many organisations have welcomed in-person social events again as a result, but don't forget about virtual socialising either.

Virtual events

Virtual events are a great way to keep in touch with each other. Some examples include:

- **Running clubs** where employees can share their running times and routes.
- **Cooking clubs** for sharing recipes and ideas.
- **Film clubs** to discuss favourite films, actors and directors and share recommendations.
- **Weekly quizzes** such as Bingo, Catchphrase or Guess the Celebrity.

Be inclusive

When arranging in-person events, make sure to mix it up and arrange events that satisfy everyone. Be inclusive. You could even utilise the seasons – take advantage of summer to arrange outdoor activities, which will help ease people's anxieties they have about Covid. And at Christmas, arrange a variety of events for everyone, both online and in person.



Make mental health part of the discussion

According to mental health charity Mind*, around a third of adults and young people say that their mental health is worse now than it was before March 2020. This is an important claim that workplaces can't ignore. Yes, all the techniques that we've suggested can help support employees, but what will make a huge difference is being able to talk about mental health.

Everyone has their own journey and circumstances, and there is no 'one size fits all' solution when it comes to mental health; so we must consider the individual – and that's where talking becomes so valuable. We can't ignore that our team may want to talk about any anxieties, worries or concerns that may be causing them distress. Therefore, make sure you are transparent with your team about what ways they can ask for help, and what things you have in place to support.

Mental health champions

To support their team, many companies are assigning Mental Health Champions or Mental Health First Aiders, who act as specific contacts that the employees can turn to.

Mental health resources

It can be helpful to have resources you can pass on to your team if they are worried about their mental health. If you need some guidance, we have put together a mental health and wellbeing pack, which is filled with useful download resources, articles, book recommendations and courses.

Mental health is something we are passionate about at Virtual College. If you would like to find more mental health resources to help support you and your team, visit: <https://www.virtual-college.co.uk/resources/mental-health-and-wellbeing-resources>

*Mind's Coronavirus research: <https://www.mind.org.uk/coronavirus-we-are-here-for-you/coronavirus-research/>

