



COVID-19 Outbreak: Supporting employee wellbeing

March 2020

Introduction

Government strategies across the globe continue to evolve as they seek to address the threat posed by the COVID-19 outbreak. From a workplace perspective we anticipate that an increasing number of employers across the EMEA region will ask their employees to work from home as a key part of a broader 'delay' strategy¹.

Many employees will be used to working from home and are comfortable with it, even if the thought of working this way for an extended period might prove challenging. For many other employees they might be used to the concept of flexible working, but the remote working scenario might be less familiar territory.

Working from home can have many upsides, for example, empowering the employee to have more control and flexibility over their working day, potentially less distractions, less commuting time and the ability to properly build in healthy habits to the working day. However, there can

be downsides too, which can potentially be exacerbated by extended periods of home working. For example, there is a risk some employees will feel isolated in their new working environment, they might be feeling anxious in uncertain times, they could struggle with making the separation between home life and work life or being productive in a potentially crowded household.

Employers have a significant role to play in helping their employees thrive in this new working environment, however temporary. The purpose of this document is to outline some key suggestions we believe employers should consider in order to support their employees in these challenging times.

Best regards



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¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-action-plan-launched>

Wellbeing and COVID-19



Supporting employee wellbeing



The World Health Organization recommends that adults undertake at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity per week¹.

Physical activity has many positive effects, including reducing the risks around non communicable disease, for example, CVD, type 2 diabetes and preventable cancers. In addition, engaging in regular exercise is important for maintaining a healthy weight and staying emotionally fit.

During this period where work routines are likely to change it is important employers remind employees how important it is to engage in regular exercise.

Even if someone is housebound, for example due to self-quarantining, there are still options available. For example, providing access to digital fitness solutions or using technology to maintain social interaction through corporate challenges, are effective ways of promoting physical wellbeing, connecting colleagues and injecting some fun into the working environment.

3 Suggestions

- **Make online workouts available to your employees allowing them to engage in physical activity**
- **Use a corporate health app to launch corporate challenges to get employees engaged in physical activity and networking with colleagues, such as Well One**
- **Provide access to digital tools that offer sleep assistance to employees**

¹ https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44399/9789241599979_eng.pdf?sequence=1

Supporting employee wellbeing



In their study about the incidence and determinants of loneliness across Europe, the EU Science Hub found that lonely people are more likely to have poor health, poor cognitive performance, emotional health challenges and pessimistic views¹.

A Loneliness in the Workplace study by Cigna found that reduced productivity, increased sickness absence, higher turnover and reduced performance were some of the key outcomes associated with workplace loneliness².

During this period of increased remote working, employers should make a concerted effort to ensure employees don't feel isolated and that they maintain a strong sense of purpose. Tactics employers could consider using to address this issue include:

- Utilising video technology for virtual meetings to try and replicate in-person meetings as much as possible, making sure everyone has the chance to contribute
- Encourage virtual 'watercooler moments' to build or maintain work colleague connections
- Encourage verbal communication and feedback rather than over-using emails or other electronic messaging methods

3 Suggestions

- Offer Parents & Carer and Digital GP support services to employees
- Provide access to a virtual personal trainer who supports physical health for different age demographics, plus able bodied and disabled employees
- Provide access to an EAP and bereavement support services to offer independent and confidential advice and counselling in difficult circumstances

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/how-lonely-are-europeans>

² <https://www.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/cigna-2020-loneliness-factsheet.pdf>

Supporting employee wellbeing



Based on Aon's Employee Mindset Study Ireland 2020, 69% of employees expect their employer to encourage balance between work and personal commitments and 31% of employees view this as a differentiator¹.

Flexible working can play a key part in helping employees achieve the correct work life balance and in many respects an extended period of home working can be viewed in a positive light.

However, employers should take the opportunity to engage employees on how they can get the most from their remote working experience, for example:

- Encouraging physical exercise
- Taking regular breaks
- Eating healthily and the importance of hydration
- Switching off, not being connected 24/7, enjoy the benefits of not having to deal with the regular commute
- Setting up the remote working environment properly to maximise productivity and mitigate the risk of potential neck, back or repetitive strain injuries

3 Suggestions

- Utilise an Occupational Health provider to support ergonomic risk assessments for home-based employees
- Offer a physical therapy exercise app for home support and rehabilitation
- Make discounted healthy food subscription services available to employees

¹ Aon Employee Mindset Study Ireland 2020

Supporting employee wellbeing



At Aon we describe financial wellbeing as the ability to confidently manage financial life today, while preparing for the future and anything unexpected along the way.

Poor financial wellbeing has many downsides, including having a detrimental impact on an individual's health and ultimately their ability to retire, which in turn becomes an organisational issue.

During this period where many employees are embracing different working practices, employers may like to consider taking the opportunity to execute on some of the key components of their financial wellbeing strategy, including:

- Encouraging employees to take advantage of a better work life balance opportunity presented by home working to dedicate time to really understand their financial situation, whether this means getting control of their household budget, setting their financial goals or understanding their pension
- Set challenges around saving, particularly if employees have less daily expenditure during this period, then encourage them to save this money instead
- Signposting employees to the support services and provide employees with access to the relevant financial protection benefits available and how to access them

3 Suggestions

- Provide access to technology that can support employees, understanding of their financial wellbeing, such as Well One Money
- Set up Financial Wellbeing online sessions /WebEx as part of social interaction time
- Make a Discounts and Offers platform available to employees

¹ Aon Employee Mindset Study Ireland 2020

Supporting employee wellbeing



According to Mind, nearly half of employees have experienced a mental health issue in their current job¹.

A wide range of factors can contribute to or cause mental health issues, for example, addiction, having caring responsibilities (childcare and/or eldercare), financial concerns, sleep deficiency, job security and relationship breakdown.

COVID-19 could be exacerbating some of these factors as well as causing employees anxiety in terms of how it might impact them personally or other family members and how they might meet family care commitments.

Extended periods of remote working, potentially self-isolating, could further fuel feelings of anxiety and loneliness due to less connection with colleagues or making it difficult for employees to switch off and balance work and home life.

Employers should ensure that if employees need help during this period they know exactly what benefits and services are available to them and how to access such support.

3 Suggestions

- Provide access to technology that can support employees with their emotional fitness, for example Headspace
- Mobilise your Mental Health First Aid Network to support with health, wellbeing and resilience
- Offer access to counselling and bereavement services in case employees need extra support

¹ <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/half-of-workers-have-experienced-poor-mental-health-in-current-job/>

Summary

The outbreak of COVID-19 means employers are tackling some significant challenges. Quite rightly the immediate focus has been on supporting employees and looking out for their safety and wellbeing. As the virus spreads, we anticipate corporate policies around business travel, workplace protocols and onsite safety procedures will continue to evolve.

In these unprecedented times employers should consider increasing their focus on supporting the wellbeing of their employees in practical ways, particularly as we anticipate seeing working norms change and remote working becoming the new norm, at least for a temporary period.

In this document we have outlined some suggestions that we believe are practical, may supplement any strategies already in place, and can help employees look after their wellbeing. Aon has pre-negotiated arrangements in place with numerous vendors that can help deliver on the suggestions outlined in this document, please contact us for more details.

- March 2020

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