

Bird & Bird

COVID-19



Covid-19 and employee wellness

With the unprecedented uncertainty created by the Covid-19 crisis, the initial reaction from companies has, understandably, focused on business stability, financial security and controlling costs; with many organisations already implementing initiatives to balance the books including redundancies, lay-offs, pay cuts and imposing unpaid leave. However, for those employees who remain and are required to work from home under the current social-distancing guidelines (potentially balancing the demands of childcare with school closures), it is equally important that employers implement appropriate measures to safeguard their health and well-being in response to the challenges created by the "new normal" working environment. Some of the employee wellness initiatives that companies may wish to consider include:

- **Health and safety:** reminding employees to take appropriate rest breaks and providing checklists to ensure that staff are working in a safe environment such as desk assessments, good lighting, staying hydrated. This can be harder to enforce without managerial supervision;
- **Maintaining regular contact** - e.g. team update calls, virtual manager 1-2-1s, group email briefings etc. - so that employees still feel connected to the office, work developments and colleagues. This will also assist in identifying if a colleague falls ill and may need assistance;
- **Setting up a support ladder or "buddy system"** to monitor colleague wellbeing and so that everyone has a dedicated point of contact - this is particularly important for colleagues who live on their own and will more keenly feel the impact of social-distancing and self-isolation;
- **Establish a virtual mentoring programme** to ensure that people still have control of their career progression and continuing professional development;
- **Set up a dedicated Employee Assistance Programme** or counselling service so that employees with particular mental health challenges or stresses have access to appropriate professional support if they are concerned about their own circumstances or the wellbeing of a family member or friend affected by the Covid-19 crisis;

- **Establishing innovative childcare solutions** for those who will have to balance working from home with school/nursery closures. This could include changing rotas, offering amended hours or setting up a "virtual crèche" to allow children of team members to interact over FaceTime (or similar) as a way of stimulating development and expanding social circles at a time of isolation;
- **Virtual socials:** encouraging team members to maintain contact and working relationships by having a coffee/beer/gin & tonic whilst interacting over Skype;
- **Assisted downtime:** providing access to and/or creating a library of podcasts and online tools which offer creative suggestions for combatting enforced isolation, including how to exercise at home and without a gym, how to eat creatively and healthy on rationed food etc.;
- **Alternative benefits packages:** subject to any Government restrictions, offering employees a range of solutions to reduce domestic pressures to allow staff to focus on work and childcare responsibilities including ironing services, food deliveries, streaming accounts;
- **Remind staff that HR policies still apply:** so that behaviour still meets expected standards and employees know that they can raise issues and concerns, e.g. bullying or "banter" on instant messaging systems;
- **Keeping staff updated** with the latest company news and Covid-19 developments: Social media plays a vital role in keeping people in touch but can also be a source of misinformation. Employees should be reminded of where they should be looking to get the most accurate information about the company and latest health guidance (government/NHS websites).
- **Ensure processes are in place for employees to continue to take paid holiday** (even if their travel plans are cancelled and they may be self-isolating). This will also be important to ensure employees do not have lots of holiday accrued when the situation improves and the markets recover and business are seeking to return to normal operations.

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