

The official requirements to return to the workplace and a practical approach to managing this return.

As more businesses prepare to ask staff back to the offices, it is clear that, not only must they manage the physical separation now required to keep them safe, but also offer reassurance to all who may be feeling anxious when using communal spaces such as shared kitchens and toilet facilities, or simply when entering the building. The threat of the virus is real but the threat to our mental health is perhaps more so as we return to our workplaces.

The Government has now issued clear rules regarding what must be adhered to when staff return to work, and for most organisations it is going to unfortunately be both disruptive and an unwelcome expense in the current climate. At Mocha, we have been through the 32 page document with a fine tooth comb and have assessed that the following key points issued relating to office and call centre workers are:

- Staff must retain a 2m distance between each other when working if at all possible
- If this is not possible screens or barriers to separate staff must be installed
- Back to back or side to side working is better than face to face
- Frequency of surface cleaning must be increased
- Increased hand washing throughout the day should be maintained
- No sharing of items – pens, cups, personal storage units
- No hot desking – one desk, one member of staff
- No communal touchpads to access rooms or conference calls
- Hand sanitiser should be available at all entry and exit points and in lifts
- Cleaning wipes are to be provided for keyboards, handles, printers
- Additional bins to be provided for used wipes
- The number of contact points should be reduced – if possible have multiple coffee points for a few staff rather than communal kitchen for all
- Operate a 'one-way' system around the office with floor signage to clearly show route and direction of travel
- Stagger arrival and leaving times to reduce traffic in lifts and on stairways
- Where possible staff should remain working from home

A link to the complete document can be [found here](#)

It's important to note that the above measures are not optional. Any business with greater than 5 staff must have carried out a written risk assessment of their office space and looked to address all the above points. Furthermore, this cannot just be done by the bosses – the assessment must be carried out in consultation with a union rep if there is one, or an appointed representative from the staff if not. Once completed and actioned, the risk assessment must be written up and displayed on site and on the company website and enforcement notices will be issued for companies not complying.

Clearly this represents a huge challenge for most businesses and almost a u-turn in modern work space design. In a world where we have spent the last 15 years moving away from one person, one desk towards fluid spaces that encourage interaction and communication at all times, suddenly these open inclusive spaces are exactly what we are being told isn't acceptable.

So what can be done to help solve these issues? Of course we all agree that we need to be kept safe, but not many have a bottomless wallet to sort everything out in one go. We think that there are achievable and practical things that can be done to meet the new requirements however, and these are:

- Keep as large a percentage of your staff as possible working from home permanently.
- For those companies where this isn't possible, work out how many staff will be returning to your office and re-plan it to suit. This will be different for every business and it may be that simply using every other desk gives the capacity required while maintaining social distancing. Where this doesn't work, the installation of **protective screens** will need to be looked at, or reconfiguring the office to add permanent desks into previously communal spaces such as breakout areas, hot desk zones and meeting rooms.
- If storage units are shared, such as coat cupboards, additional storage units or personal lockers will be required to allow each member of staff their own storage space.
- Ensure staggered arrival and leaving times for staff are clearly communicated and adhered to.
- Set up a one way flow around the office so staff are not passing each other in confined corridors and walkways.
- Place hand sanitiser dispensers around the office but particularly at entry and exit points and outside lifts and stairwells with handles. Try and make them **hands free** if possible.
- Ensure that anti-bacterial wipes are available in all communal spaces such as toilets, kitchens, and where touchscreens cannot be avoided.
- Provide anti-bacterial wipes to all staff to use daily on their own workspace – desk, keyboard, mouse, printer, etc,
- Issue personal hand gel bottles to all staff so they can sanitise each time they return to their own space from communal areas.
- Provide touch free bins to be for disposal of wipes and usual waste.
- Use antibacterial soap in all toilets.
- Staff to bring in their own food, cutlery, plates and cup. No communal items in kitchens to be used including microwaves, café tables and chairs, etc. Food should be eaten outside where possible or at your own workspace.
- Use meeting rooms only when absolutely necessary and with chairs removed – socially distanced, short, standing meetings should be the norm. Zoom meetings preferred even among staff in the same building.

We hope the above helps to summarise the comprehensive guidance issued by the Government and provides a roadmap of how to take practical steps to implement this within your business. No two businesses will have exactly the same solution, to not only comply with what's required, but also to be responsible employers. It's vital to ensure their most valuable asset can return to work feeling safe and able to fully concentrate on getting the business they work for moving forward again. What is absolutely clear is that every business will need to make changes.

We at Mocha have a huge amount of experience in [helping businesses change their work spaces](#) and are ready and waiting to help you in this challenging time. Whether you need space planning to adapt to social distancing, help with supplying and installing protective screens, advice on reconfiguring your existing furniture or supplying new furniture, speak to us and we can work with you to come up with a solution to get you back to work as safely and with as much peace of mind as possible. We can also supply, [hand sanitiser dispenser units and personal PPE consumables](#) such as wipes, hand gel, masks, gloves and soap to ensure the workplace stays safe as the months progress. Home working packages can also be provided as if staff are now going to be working from home on a more long term basis, employers should be providing the correct ergonomic equipment for them to work safely at home. A dining chair at the kitchen table should only ever be a short term solution.

There is no doubt that the next year will present a challenge to all our businesses. It isn't going to be easy but speaking to lots of business owners over the past couple of weeks everyone seems determined to come out the other side still intact, smiling, and a little bit wiser - if perhaps with much drier hands. If we can help you in any way, do [contact us](#).