

Managers Guide Furlough Leave and Wellbeing

Just a few short weeks ago, most people had never heard of, much less used the phrase furlough, now it is used daily and many individuals are experiencing it first-hand as they wait to return to work, benefiting from the Government, 80% of salary coronavirus job retention scheme as an alternative to perhaps losing their Job.

In this piece we are going to talk about what organisations, can do to support the health and wellbeing of staff on Furlough Leave.

What effects will being Furloughed have on your people?

First and foremost, you have to remember that, all people are different, it is unlikely that you will be able to put together a one size fits all solution to tackle the effects of furlough on every individual.

For example, some individuals may well welcome being furloughed as it may help them with childcare or caring responsibilities, others may see it as an opportunity to tackle the list of jobs at home, they had been putting off.

Others, however, may find the whole furlough process is considerably more difficult for them due to personal circumstances and their home environment.

At the same time, many individuals may be worried about whether they will have an employer or a job to come back to, when social distancing and self-isolation ends. They may well be experiencing feelings that they are not valued enough through being placed on furlough, while others are still at work.

We know from speaking to clients and colleagues that some individuals have mentioned experiencing feelings of guilt, especially if they hear that remaining colleagues are very busy, due to increased workloads and client needs. Other individuals have spoken about the fact that they worry about being isolated, especially if they live on their own, without someone else to talk to on a regular basis.

What can you do to support individuals through their furlough process?

Organisations need to be clear and transparent with individuals. Explain why you are making the decision and why they are continuing to be on Furlough leave and do not make false promises or raise hopes and expectations. Be understanding of the differing emotions people may be going through, which may well include being upset or even angry.

It can help to plan your meeting with each individual. This is where it can help if you know individuals and their personal circumstances. Where possible, make sure you talk their line manager to gather more detailed information and where possible have them take part in the meeting.

There are some things you should think about before every individual meeting:

What support can you and should you offer to individuals?

If you have an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) furloughed individuals will still have access to this. Remind them of the details and encourage them to use it. Most EAP's provide counselling services and advice on family and financial problems. So furloughed individuals may find this useful.

Consider regular wellbeing calls with furloughed individuals. While individuals are prevented from helping with work, you can talk to them about how they are coping, and non work-related things. It may be useful to do this with a group of furloughed individuals so they can share best practice with each other. This will also help with any feelings of social isolation. Encourage individuals to think about their mental wellbeing and how they can manage it during the crisis.

Talk to individuals about their goals during their leave. Have they thought about any skills they want to learn? This might be things that will help them when they get back to work. For example, the open university has over 1,000 free to learn courses as do many other educational establishments. Perhaps they could use Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram etc to find new skills, hobbies, or craft activities to learn.

Suggest individuals to try to keep in contact with colleagues who are also furloughed, but only if they want to do this, accept that not everyone will. You may want to facilitate this and set up a group chat on Facebook or a WhatsApp group. This will help individuals to still feel part of the organisation and a larger team. If you send out newsletters make sure furloughed individuals are included.

Talk to individuals about volunteering. Furloughed individuals can volunteer, as long as they can return to work when needed. Volunteering can really help someone's mental wellbeing. Many people may have already signed up to the **National Care Force**.

And there are many other local and national organisations who need volunteers to support vulnerable people.

Does the individual staff member live alone?

If so, how are they managing their individual mental wellbeing during isolation? If they have underlying health issues, have they a way of getting medication, food, and other supplies? Organisations should make sure that they have details of support groups local to them as well as charities providing support.

They are not at work, what is happening in their life?

There may be relationship issues, domestic violence, family medical issues, substance abuse problems etc. How are individuals managing these when they are at home for a significant period?

You should not be digging for problems but listen for clues while chatting to people. Listening is a skill to really sharpen and is vital to use at a time like this.

There may be financial problems as a result of the pandemic? Again, organisations should be able to signpost individuals to local organisations and charities that can help.

What else could you consider?

Think about the support you may need to make available to individuals when they come back. If they have been off for weeks or even months, they may find it difficult to re-adjust to being back at work. Remember their entire daily cycle and perhaps their time clock has changed during the outbreak, their children may not even be back at school and with all these changes could impact their ability to work at the performance level required when they return to the business environment.

Furloughing staff will inevitably lead to a decline in staff morale, so try to come up with innovative ways to improve moral and focus on any positives you can identify for the individual. Do not forget the working staff and include them too. Remaining staff may very well feel resentful of those who are furloughed, after all working for 100% of your salary when others are getting 80% for not working may not be accepted in a positive way.

There will inevitably be a tightrope to walk for all organisations as they try to negotiate what is a difficult balance to keep furloughed and working individuals fully engaged with not only the business but each other.

As we said at the start, providing clear, honest communication is key. Make sure that those individuals still working are aware of wellbeing support available such as Employee Assistance Programmes too and encourage them to look after their mental wellbeing. Wellbeing should be an agenda item at your staff meetings. Replace open door policies with the freedom for staff to contact you if they want to talk, ensure they have your contact details.

Things people may choose to do to maintain their wellbeing could include, internet based exercises classes with Joe Wix or the myriad of on line personal trainers, equally others may resort to growing a beard, enjoying food, drinking wine and beer, are all acceptable in moderation as are many other activities such as donning lycra and running or cycling, yoga, Pilates, gardening or just reading a book.

The important thing to realise is each member of the team has individual needs, there is no one size fits all solution and we can only try and help each other through this outbreak and make the best possible use of the change of situation to learn a new skill or hobby and come out the other side as a stronger person.

We can be grateful for the coronavirus job retention scheme being implemented by the government and it is worth remembering that on an individual basis it is an opportunity to maintain employment and a salary of 80% (or £2,500 per month cap).

For Mental Health Wellbeing see our additional documents in this client guide pack

Should you need further advice or support at this time with the management of Furloughed staff please contact Park City via our office number or direct to our team of HR and H&S Consultants.

You can also obtain additional resources via our web site. www.parkcity.co.uk