

Return to the workplace safely



Why employee listening is more critical than ever?

Over the past few months, millions of employees have been working remotely to prevent the spread of COVID-19. But many organizations are now making plans to bring their workforce back to the office. In fact, some have already started. According to Mercer's readiness diagnostic of Canadian companies, 40% report that at least three quarters of their workforce are required to return.

Based on recent research, these plans may be met with mixed reactions. Various data sources show that employees have a wide range of opinions and expectations about returning to the office. One recent survey¹ found that nearly three out of four employees are eager to return to work. Another study² found that almost half of workers want to continue staying home after quarantines end. Based on our own field studies, **just 23% of employees think now is the right time to bring employees back to the office**. And with case counts spiking in many communities, it's likely that attitudes will fluctuate over the course of the summer.

These studies raise an important question: what's the mindset of your workforce? Are they eager to return, determined to stay home, or somewhere in between? The only way to find out is to ask. Most organizations know that employee listening is critical, particularly during a crisis. But surprisingly few are. Based on our latest research³, **just 38% of organizations have increased their focus on employee listening during the pandemic**. Given the disruptive nature of the current events, that's a strategic mistake.

If you are making return-to-office plans for your organization, now is a critical time to reach out to employees and ask for their feedback. By engaging in a dialogue with your employees, you can help your organization in three critical ways. First, you will gain valuable ideas and insights. Your employees have probably been thinking about returning to office for a while now. By asking about their concerns, challenges, and apprehensions, you can help build a return strategy tailored to their needs. Second, listening builds trust, support, and psychological safety. When employees know their voice matters, they are more likely to be engaged and committed. Finally, collective conversations can be empowering, especially after months of remote work and social isolation. Through dialogue, leaders, managers, and employees can learn from each other and build a stronger sense of community.

So what's the best way to engage in a dialogue with your workforce about returning to the office? We recommend gathering feedback at three critical points.

¹ <https://www.glassdoor.com/blog/new-survey-return-to-the-office/>
² <https://www.scotsman.com/business/consumer/half-workers-do-not-want-return-office-after-lockdown-2874273>

³ Mercer Global Survey #5: <https://taap.mercer.com/covid19results>

Designing a listening strategy to help employees return to the office

1 Pre-Return Concerns 2 Initial Return Experience 3 Defining a New Normal

TIMING	1 to 2 months before return	First four weeks after return	1 to 2 months after return
PURPOSE	Explore employee questions, concerns, and suggestions	Evaluate employees' return experience and ensure physical & psychological safety	Brainstorm new ways to work collaborate, innovate and perform
METHOD	Digital focus groups & core concerns evaluation	Weekly Pulses & Team discussions	Digital focus groups, crowdsourcing & future

1. Pre-return: One of the best ways to prepare your employees for returning to the office is to start a conversation. While your workforce is still remote, it is important to start a two-way dialogue with your employees to understand their perspectives. This can be done through manager-led discussions, virtual town halls and listening sessions, or online focus groups. During these discussions, we recommend sharing preliminary plans, soliciting feedback, surfacing concerns, and brainstorming solutions. Framing these discussions as collaborative opportunities to design a safe return is critical. The earlier you have these conversations the better; this will allow your organization to adjust plans based on feedback. At a minimum, plan to conduct these conversations one to two months prior to return.

2. The first month back in the office: Once employees have returned to the office, it will be important to gather feedback on a regular basis. We recommend setting up a COVID-concerns hotline for employees to share their questions, reservations, and observations. We also recommend conducting a series of brief pulse surveys, followed immediately by team discussions, over the course of the first month back in the office. The purpose of these pulse surveys

and discussions is to ensure that employees are having a safe experience across all aspects of their workday. Are your employees comfortable with their commutes? Are colleagues maintaining appropriate physical distancing? Are workplace hygiene practices sufficient? No matter how carefully you have planned, there will likely be unanticipated challenges that emerge when people return to work. By creating feedback loops, your organizations can make real-time adjustments and increase workplace safety.

3. One to two months after return: Most organizations are going through a period of great disruption. The pandemic has set off a chain reaction of economic and societal changes that will forever reshape life both inside and outside of work. To survive in a post-COVID world, many organizations will need to rethink critical aspects of their people strategy, redesigning everything from employee experiences and employee value propositions to physical work environments and operating structures. The best way to ensure that these change efforts meet the needs of your workforce is to allow your employees to help define the future. By engaging your employees in reflective conversations

about how the pandemic has affected them, what they have learned about themselves, their colleagues, and their customers, and what they think the new normal will look like in upcoming years, you can start building a more resilient organization. In the months that follow your return to the office, you can start these conversations through town halls, team discussions, and virtual focus groups.

Researchers⁴ have found that hope flourishes when employees have a compelling vision of the future, a clear sense of how to proceed toward that vision, and a collective sense of motivation and purpose. Through these future-focused conversations, you can spark hope and help your employees envision a brighter tomorrow.

Bringing your workforce back to the office is no small task, especially given the wide range of possible scenarios⁵ for the next phase of the pandemic. Constant vigilance is critical. By asking your employees about what they are observing and experiencing, you can identify issues before they become problems. If you want to keep your workplace safe and productive in upcoming months, now is the time to implement an employee listening strategy that will help your decision-makers tap into the collective wisdom of your workforce.



⁴ <http://c.r.snyder.socialpsychology.org/publications>

⁵ <https://www.statnews.com/2020/05/01/three-potential-futures-for-covid-19/>

Reshaping the future.

About Mercer

At Mercer, we redefine the world of work, reshape retirement and investment outcomes, and define new possibilities for health and wellbeing. Our aim is to look to the future by focusing on the needs of today. We help our clients navigate uncertainty and a rapidly changing environment that is transforming the way we work.

With more than 70 years of experience, we provide trusted advice and solutions by understanding data and applying it with a human touch. We drive change by turning ideas into action, positioning our clients, colleagues, and communities for the future.

How We Can Help

Continuously rethinking purpose and priorities drives HR transformation. Shaping the future of work requires improved strategies around investment and retirement, health and wellness benefits, talent and communications. We believe in the value of investing in the future to build resilience for your business and your employees.

Together with our clients, we find ways to elevate the employee experience with effective compensation and communication strategies. Through investments in reskilling and learning, we focus on developing strengths that the workforce of the future needs.

Investments and retirement require sophisticated solutions. We approach these with a big picture view that prioritizes long term financial wellness. We offer research and advice on assessing risk and designing benefits programs while keeping in mind the need to optimize throughout changing times.

As part of our forward-thinking approach, we provide strategies to foster healthy lifestyles with innovative health and wellness benefits. Mercer Marsh Benefits consultants help you provide personalized benefits options that suit a range of employees' needs. We understand that today's workforce is multi-generational and diverse, and we're prepared to create solutions with you that support employees, wherever they work.

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