

Back to Base : A Leader's Guide To Getting Buy-In

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 Spread the word!



As the world emerges cautiously out of lockdown, more and more people are venturing back to the workplace. This is good news for the economy, but like so much about the COVID-crisis, it's, well..., complicated. With a vaccine still a long way off, companies need to get employee buy-in on the next steps or risk fear, alienation and distrust.

A straw poll among AltoPartners in Czech Republic, Germany, India, Poland, Romania, South Africa, Switzerland and the US, revealed a consensus among clients that while working from home was expedient in the face of the threat of COVID-19, key operations work best when people are together, and organizations anticipate returning to this model as soon as it is safe to do so.

"Going forward, we see a hybrid evolving, where people take the best of working from home, combined with their specific circumstances in terms of localized infection levels and business demands. Even where it is possible to work very effectively from home, face to face meetings oil the wheels of engagement and create an environment that is essential for collaboration and inspiration, as well as facilitating the practicalities of onboarding, mentoring and managing," says [Sonal Agrawal](#), of [Accord India](#) / AltoPartners India.

This is not to deny the epidemiologist in the room. The threat is far from over, and everyone will respond differently to the call to return to work. Ensuring that your organizational values remain intact requires leaders to walk a fine line between employee safety, respect for individual situations and keeping the enterprise afloat.

The AltoPartners' guide to navigating the return-to-work conundrums that lie ahead:

1. Have solid frameworks in place.

Update your Work from Home (WFH) Protocols to reflect the easing of the lockdown and ensure that clear guidelines are in place for those who need to continue to work remotely. Ditto, a Return to Office protocol, setting out the steps that are being taken to protect



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employees, customers, suppliers and visitors.

Top tip: There are many online checklists available covering everything from temperature screening to deep cleaning and essential travel. Tailor one to your workplace and invite employee input, advises [Toraj Patel](#), Accord India / AltoPartners India.

2. Establish the rules of engagement.

Hygiene has a domino effect: it only takes one breach to put everyone else at risk. In a hierarchical structure such as the workplace, it's important to create a culture whereby the receptionist may comfortably remind the chairperson to wash their hands. Communication is key to creating a framework in which to model best practice, says [Thomas Markwirth](#), [MPB Recruitment Group AG](#) / AltoPartners Switzerland.

Top Tip: Invest in a communication campaign with the aim of letting everyone know that the only correct response to being asked to wash your hands, stand further back, wipe down your chair after a meeting, wear a mask, or cough into your elbow, is "thank you" followed by rapid compliance, regardless of your status in the organization. Insisting on a script of "Thank you" and "You're welcome" will go a long way to neutralizing any tension that may arise out of these exchanges in the workplace.

3. Be transparent.

If desks are to be wiped down twice a day in a specific way, or employees are required to work with windows open even when the temperature drops, then clearly cite the medical and scientific basis for the decision and be willing to update the protocols as new facts emerge. If employees think a pet project is being smuggled in under the guise of an anti-COVID measure, then it may cause people to disregard other critical safety measures. Additionally, insisting on onerous protocols without sharing the basis for those decisions, puts your credibility in jeopardy. Just ask some world leaders.

Top tip: Maintain the same levels of employee-engagement that you did during the lockdown. Encourage employee feedback and address concerns openly and frequently.

4. Clearly communicate why you need people back in the workplace.

Do you want the comfort of seeing everyone at their desk or are there broader, more urgent issues that need to be addressed?

Top tip: "Open and mindful conversation with employees is the key. Discuss the need to get everyone together again in order to rebuild team-spirit and focus on business, and be prepared to listen to employee ideas and suggestion," says [Hansjörg Meine](#), [AltoPartners Germany](#).

5. Identify the pathfinders.

A phased approach back to work is generally safer and more likely to help overcome the fear factor. "Those who refuse to return to the office out of fear of infection will not be convinced by any sanitary measures you put in place. These individuals should be able to stay isolated without paralyzing the organization," says [Jana Martinová](#) of [Accord Group](#) Czech Republic / AltoPartners Czech Republic, who believes that business leaders need to rely on team dynamics to build a return to office momentum.

Top tip: Identify the pathfinders and give them a voice. These are not necessarily people with high status or authority, but those with influence who are capable of rallying their teammates and setting an example.



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6. Embrace flexibility.

Many companies have used the learnings from lockdown to review their WFH policies and offer permanent flexi-schedules. Even those who wish to return to work may find it difficult to do so if schools and child care facilities are closed or running at reduced capacity, or if they are caring for sick family members. Logistics are also a contentious issue: employees who endure a crowded commute are at particular risk in areas where the infection rate has yet to slow, so finding ways to help employees prevent long daily commutes on public transport will help to keep everyone safe, says Nico Vlok of [Search Partners International](#) / AltoPartners South Africa.

Top tip: Even before COVID, flexible work hours were among the main reasons cited for changing jobs. Flexibility of work hours gives employees a sense of control which is good for productivity, well-being and morale. Executives want to retain their best people, especially in a difficult economy, and they should be making accommodations to ensure that happens, advises [Dale Jones](#) of [Diversified Search](#) / AltoPartners USA.

7. Don't victimize the ones who stay home.

Ensure that HR policies are clear and fair and that treatment is even-handed. The key is to approach this with empathy and compassion, says [Sorin Popa](#) of [Accord Group](#) Romania / AltoPartners Romania.

Top tip: Beware of an 'us' and 'them' division opening up. There is a risk that employees working from home feel as though they are no longer part of the company.

8. Exercise extreme patience.

Don't expect it all to snap back into place overnight, says Dale Jones of Diversified Search / AltoPartners USA. *"The best analogy I have heard is the campfire one: people want the crisis to be over so that the economy can be flipped back on, like a light switch, when it is actually more like a fire that has been doused and now slowly has to be rekindled. The transition back to our office work lives is similar. It will not simply be a case of 'See you all in the office Monday!' Goodwill and equanimity will be key assets for executives seeking to adjust their companies to this new normal."*

Top tip: Expect it to be a stop-start process and commit to managing expectations through continuous communication.

9. Acknowledge the burden that lockdown placed on parents - particularly mothers.

The COVID-Pandemic has exposed the degree to which [women's economic participation in society](#) is dependent on childcare. *"We realized very early on that our employees with younger children at home would be among the most impacted. We reached out to them directly and told them we would do whatever it took to make arrangements that would work for both them and the firm. They were all relieved and also very conscientious about partnering with us to find workable solutions,"* says Dale Jones.

Top tip: Single parents and mothers are exhausted. Acknowledge the dual roles they played and the additional work load they took on. Finances and lockdown levels permitting, a spoil in the form of a pedicure or a spa day, or a bonus leave day (once everyone is back at school!), would not go amiss.

10. Review and update your business continuity plan.



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Now is a good time to prepare for future emergencies and to put infection and disease protocols in place in anticipation of a possible second COVID wave that may result in localized lockdowns.

Top tip: "Create a back to work task force to ensure that the needs of all departments are considered and factored in and appropriate contingency plans made. This team needs to continuously monitor external and internal data and implement and adjust protocols accordingly. There also needs to be a plan in place that recognizes the possibility of having to re-close as COVID-19 infections may rise and fall again, triggering more stay-at-home orders and supply chain disruptions," advises [Steve Morreale](#) of Diversified Search / AltoPartners USA.