

Planning to Return to the Office FAQs

In partnership with

Jane Harrington and Steve Riley from Clarity BT



BTA

BUSINESS TRAVEL
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Contents

01

**Introduction from BTA CEO,
Clive Wratten**

Page 1

02

**Top 10 Tips for Planning to
Return to the Office**

Page 2

03

Questions for Planning

Page 3/4/5/6

04

Questions for Employees

Page 7/8

05

**Summary from Jane Harrington
and Steve Riley**

Page 9

06

External Resources

Page 10

Dear Members & Partners,

Despite the introduction of a 14-day quarantine into the UK, I know that many of you are beginning to plan a return in some shape or form to the office for your teams.

This is not an easy step and one rife with considerations, so, we wanted to help the process by consulting a team that are going through this themselves.

I would like to extend huge thanks to Jane Harrington and Steve Riley from Clarity BT for taking the time over this long weekend to consider and answer our questions on behalf of you all. We may not go back to the same type of office routine as we had in February 2020, but, I hope this guide helps you all to consider how to move forwards and live in the new Covid-era.

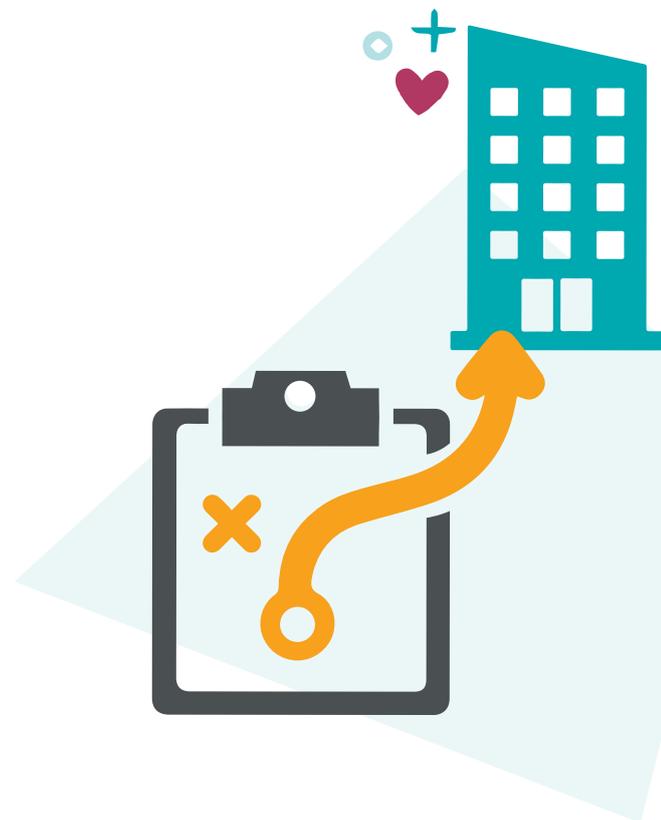
There are clear signs of new growth in the business travel sector and we will continue to campaign for greater clarity on your behalf as well as the lifting of quarantine measures at the earliest possible time.

Please do get in touch to share your views or to contribute in this series. We are stronger together and I welcome building on our shared experiences.

Best wishes,



Clive Wratten
CEO, The BTA



Top 10 Tips for Planning to Return to the Office



1 Stay Connected

Three circular icons representing people, connected by dashed lines, symbolizing communication and staying connected.

2 Plan and Review

An orange gear icon next to a black silhouette of a head with a white checkmark inside, representing planning and review.

3 Pool Ideas

Two black silhouette icons of people with colorful thought bubbles above them, representing brainstorming and pooling ideas.

4 Set Hygiene Standards

An orange hand sanitizer bottle and a black hand being washed with blue soap suds, representing hygiene standards.

5 Tell the Team

Three speech bubbles in orange, pink, and teal, representing communication with the team.

7 Phased Approach

Three overlapping circles labeled 1, 2, and 3, representing a phased or sequential approach.

6 Communicate Expectations

Three smiley faces in teal, orange, and pink, representing communication and expectations.

8 Monitor and Measure

A magnifying glass icon and a red double-headed arrow, representing monitoring and measurement.

9 Review Changes

Three stars in teal, pink, and orange, with a black hand cursor pointing at them, representing reviewing changes.

10 Maintain Open Feedback

A black silhouette of a person with a curved arrow pointing back to them, representing maintaining open feedback.

Questions for Planning

How do you begin planning to go back into an office environment after a crisis like Covid-19?

Firstly, make sure you are familiar with the government guidance for returning to the workplace – these are regularly being updated and need to be factored into any plan.

Next, personalise the plan by conducting a Risk Assessment based on the advice starting from the moment an employee sets foot in your building and continuing right through until each individual leaves at the end of the day.

It's easy for this to feel overwhelming, start with the practical measures like the number of desks, distancing needs, practical interventions such as the need for plastic screens at reception, mapping entry and exit points and then overlay the teams you need and their movements on top of this.

In reality, that means trying to walk through a likely employee day – from their point of arrival, getting safely to their desk, taking coffee breaks, toilet breaks, lunches, having meetings etc.

You need to ask yourself the everyday questions such as:

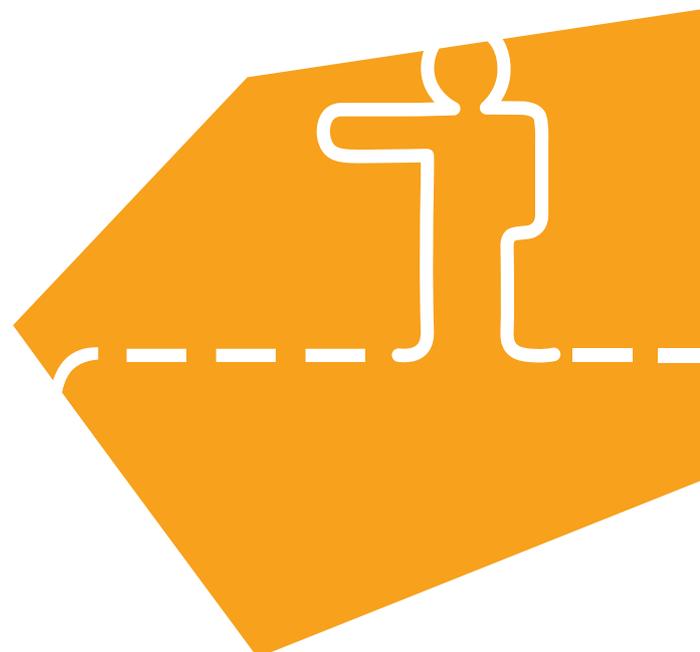
How will they socially interact with other colleagues?

What about their equipment?

How often is cleaning needed?

At each point decide what that step looks like and what measures need to be put into place. In the end, it may become simpler to devise 'shifts' or a 'teams' based solution.

This means that start and end times, breaks and lunches are staggered amongst 'bubbles' of employees and at the most extreme, whole rotation patterns.



Questions for Planning (cont.)

For this to work, employees are given a “time slot” to come into the office in the morning and they go through a process of having their temperature checked and their daily routine mapped out.

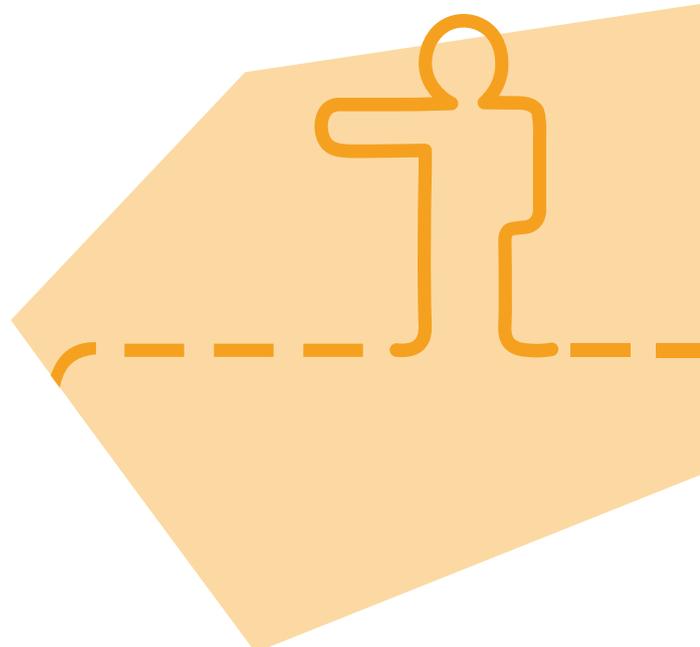
Entry points, door fobs, door handles and any high touch areas need to have extra cleaning rotas and sanitiser on standby. It is better to be overly health and safety conscious than under stocked at this point.

With the practical, on-the-ground measures in place, it’s possible to give true attention to who needs to go back in and in what order. With reduced space, a priority has to be given to the critical functions that need to be office based, those that can’t work from home.

As this becomes less clear, it might become worth doing a staff survey to understand the individual circumstances of those working from home so that this can become staggered based on work and individual needs.

Who are you consulting e.g. architect, health professional, employees etc?

For us, it is most important to work with our immediate teams. This includes: employees, our building management, facilities managers, HR, health and safety professionals and any external contractors such as cleaners, regular delivery people to understand what is needed and what can be done. This is an unprecedented time – others may have different viewpoints or suggestions that will help and this all needs to be factored in as early as possible.



Questions for Planning

How are you getting employees to accept the changes?

Early communication is key, clear explanation of why changes are being made and reiterating that the safety of employees is our common goal. Pivotal to this is the reassurance that constant reviews and assessments of measures and policies will be undertaken – this might be regular timeframes or reporting on the efficiencies of the regulations.

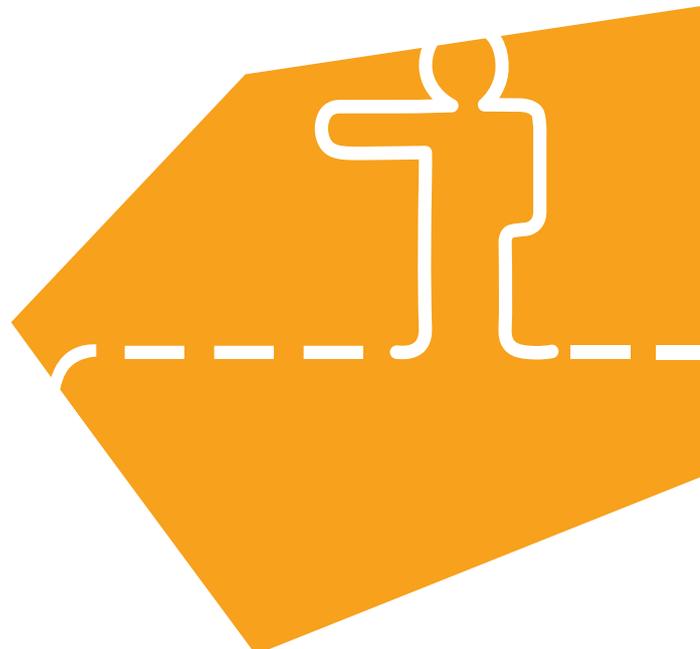
Alongside this, asking for feedback and then being prepared to discuss that feedback until employees are comfortable will help with the crucial buy-in for all measures and the ongoing productivity as well as happiness of teams.

This can't all come from 'the top', managers will need to be empowered to ensure that when specific teams return to the office that there can be clear feedback and channels for improvements from those on the ground.

What are the most common objections you are finding?

Many people want to return to work and an equal number are very hesitant or reluctant due to being able to work from home or for health risks. We must remember that for a lot of TMCs, offices are in town centres where the majority of people travel to and from work on public transport – that is the most common objection to returning.

Others are also concerned that not everyone will adhere to the cleanliness and social distancing requirements that they perceive to be essential to being based in an office. Through lockdown, we have all become used to our own routines and judgement on how to ensure safety.



Questions for Planning (cont.)

Returning to a more office-based environment will be a juggling act between the individual and what is needed/practical in the workplace. This is where communication and feedback will be essential to allow practices to evolve and meet the ever-changing situation.

In a serviced office environment, what questions or reassurances can we expect from the provider?

From the outset, landlords, building management companies and your company's Health and Safety advisors should meet or communicate to create a full picture of what is being provided for employees' safety.

Showing that everyone is being pro-active in sharing their measures will reassure your team and create a community amongst all tenants which has its own accountability. At a minimum you should expect your provider to have their own Covid Risk Assessment and policy that they share with you for your team.

What do you think the future of the office looks like for our industry?

It seems inevitable that the mix of office and homeworkers will change after the end of the pandemic but there will always be a place for the office. Many people either don't enjoy solely homeworking or aren't able to do so. The office is not just a place of work, it's a lifestyle, a social place and often people socialise outside of working hours in the immediate vicinity.

Employers will have to look at how to create a flexible mixture of home working and office hours where possible, as well as maintaining a virtual and in-person community. There's lots we can learn in retrospect from having worked remotely for so long, and a new appreciation for what an office can give us all.

Employees' Questions

Can I say no to going back to the office?

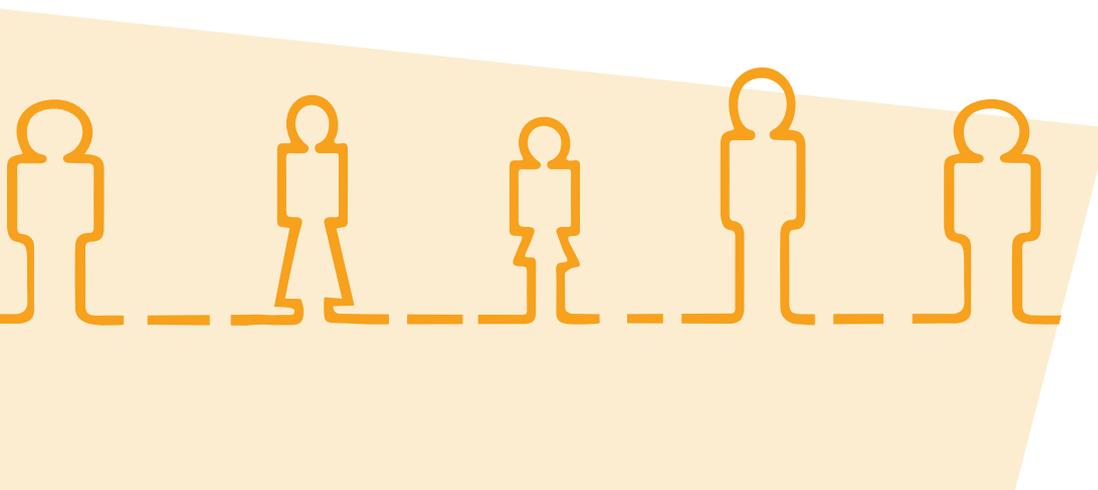
This is a difficult one given the current “If you can work from home then do so” and “only essential travel” advice. Lots of companies have effectively thrown their normal policies out of the window for the last few weeks and it will be difficult for employees to understand why a practice that has been ok for the last few months, such as working on the kitchen table hunched over a laptop, is suddenly not ok when they are asked to return to the office.

Longer term if the government advice changes and “normal” travel to work is allowed and employers can demonstrate that they have a safe working environment to return to, then from an employment contract perspective it makes it difficult for the employee to give a reason to refuse.

It's advisable for an employer and employee to communicate openly before any return to work so that where possible needs and reassurances can be met and given. If there's a specific health or care-giving pressure that might prevent you from returning to work at the point specified then this should be raised in-line with company policy without prejudice.

Can you ask for a more flexible working policy?

Some companies will have the IT and infrastructure as well as the nature of the work that means they will be able to consider a more flexible working strategy. Others may be limited in what they can agree to and may not be able to offer employees flexible working due to cost or customer requirements.



Employees' Questions (cont.)

If in doubt as to where your employer or work fits into this spectrum request to speak to your manager and discuss openly how best to manage the future for both the company and your needs.

How do we know it's safe to return to work?

Physically, employers can control the work environment, they can put practical measures in place for a "safe" workplace. The unknown element is Covid-19 and the human response to safety measures.

Employers have to make sure that all employees in the workplace are following the guidance, but they cannot control what happens outside it – the interactions in shops, on the train, with others.

They will monitor the government advice and guidance closely, but, employees are responsible for having a degree of common sense as to the 'risks' they take and how they might impact on others.

As an employee, you should avail yourself of every safety precaution put in place by your employer e.g. social distancing, cleaning and sanitisation



Summary

From Jane Harrington and Steve Riley

We are on the brink of the next phase of our response to Covid-19. As an industry, we have all flexed and adapted as far as possible to the strictures of lockdown.

We are keeping our industry hopeful and in communication despite the need for furloughs and remote working.

As adapt to a UK that is bound to a 14-day quarantine, we must believe that there is hope on the horizon. With retail shops beginning to open within the next fortnight, there are green shoots for UK business travel. This will begin with domestic travel and then move into international journeys.

TMCs will be there to facilitate every step of this for our customers, but to do so, we must share best practice and learnings as we begin to return to more office-based routines.

The safety and well-being of our teams remains paramount and a marker of the excellence of our sector.

Keep well and stay safe

Best wishes,



Steve Riley

Clarity BT



Jane Harrington

Clarity BT



External Resources

General Coronavirus links

Public Health England www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england

NHS UK: www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-list-of-guidance

Places that need volunteers or online help

NHS Volunteer Responder: www.goodsamapp.org/NHS

Samaritans Online Chat portal: www.samaritans.org/chatdonate/



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