



Employment COVID-19 Update: Maintaining Staff Morale

The present pandemic has undoubtedly led many employers to reconsider the supports in place for staff during this difficult and challenging time.

While many of the changes introduced to date have focused on cost-cutting measures, such as outlined in [our recent article](#), shrewd employers will also appreciate the importance of introducing these measures in a manner that preserves staff motivation and job security. Indeed, given the level of uncertainty surrounding exactly when businesses are expected to return to normal, many employers have welcomed this time as an opportunity to enhance employee performance and development.

This article identifies a number of key measures to help employers manage disruption while maintaining staff morale and looking at their workforce to see what steps can be taken to help save costs, without defaulting to redundancies and layoffs.

Updating company policies and procedures: If your business has not implemented policies or procedures to cater for staff working from home, it's not too late to address this issue now. This may include amending the current company handbook to refer to remote working or implementing a standalone policy. Businesses should also update its grievance procedure, disciplinary policy, health and safety policy and IT/appropriate usage policy to ensure it takes into account remote working. On the other hand, where your Employee Handbook has been updated with these changes, IT use and/or remote access policies should be circulated to your employees and made accessible. This will ensure that the business is prepared to deal with any issues as they arise, and that employees are clear about what is required of them.

Communicating with Employees: Good communication is key to keeping employees connected and motivated. This includes regularly checking in with employees through online video conferences to keeping employees up to date with any changes implemented by the business or in contemplation. Given the level of uncertainty regarding when employees may return to work or indeed job security generally, providing transparent and prompt communication when information is available will be more important now than ever before.

Providing additional training and upskilling: The need for staff to continue to upskill has not diminished. In fact, encouraging training often considered a welcome distraction for many employees. In addition, this reinforces the organisation's commitment to the long-term success of the employee. Training and upskilling will also be essential for organisations that are considering restructuring the business and staff roles.

Health and wellbeing: Employers should be cognisant of the health and wellbeing of employees during this time. Where employers do not currently have an Employee Assistance Programme ("EAP") in place, employer may wish to consider implementing this in order to offer staff free and confidential supports. In addition, online supports such as mindfulness and yoga courses, may offer the respite required.

Supporting workers who are parents: Family leave options including paternity leave, parental leave, parents leave and perhaps force majeure leave may present viable solutions to help support parents who are working from home whilst also managing childcare responsibilities. Parental leave is unpaid leave, and while it may not suit an employee to take blocks of parental leave, an agreement could be reached with the employee that means, for example, they take every Friday

as parental leave. The benefit to the company is they are reducing costs, by maintaining staff and while the employee's wages will be reduced, he/she gets more time with their family, retains their job and still continues to accrue annual leave. However, there is no one size fits all, and in certain circumstances availing of this leave may not be suitable or desired. To best support employees in the circumstances, employers should to go straight to the source and ask them what they need in terms of support.

Annual Leave: Employers should not be shy to ask employees to take annual leave, indeed they should be encouraged. 2020 is the year for stay at home vacations and keeping safe. As a country we like to go abroad when we take our annual leave, but the reality is that will be unlikely in 2020, or at least permitted in very limited circumstances. Employees need to take time off from work and rest, so employers must ensure their staff do this and even suggest some fun ideas that they might do during their annual leave. Consideration can also be given to allowing a certain number of annual leave days being carried over into 2021.

Flexible Working: This could take the form of job sharing, part time hours, working from home or hot desking. Employers should consider whether the work is required on a full-time basis or if the workload could be shared between two employees. This will help minimise the salary costs, but also ensuring job security for staff. Additionally, employers may start to realise as part of this pandemic that workers can work from home more easily and perhaps the need for larger office space is not as essential. So why not consider looking at your office space to see if staggered working patterns can be agreed, with employees working from home more, resulting in the need for smaller office.

For many employers, this pandemic may be the first time they have considered the possibility of remote working, and whether this could present the possibility of providing agile working options for employees on a regular basis in the future. Updating policies and procedures and ensuring staff are supported during this process will be integral to ensuring the present and future success of the business.

The Employment & Corporate Immigration Team at Leman Solicitors are available to advise organisations on remote working in the context of Covid-19, drafting communications and policies, and advising on how to respond to risk situations. If you have any queries or wish to discuss, please contact Bláthnaid Evans or Sheila Spokes on +353 1 639 3000 or visit www.leman.ie.