



CANADIAN
MANUFACTURERS
& EXPORTERS



MADE SAFE™

COVID-19:
EMPLOYEE
RE-INTEGRATION
BEST PRACTICES
FOR GROUPS OF 10
OR MORE

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EMPLOYEE GROUP RE-INTEGRATION

IN THE MANUFACTURING WORKPLACE

As the curve begins to flatten in some Canadian jurisdictions, employers across the country are wondering when the time will be right to bring employees back to work. Manufacturing office workers have been working remotely for many weeks. While the sector has been designated as an essential service, some companies have nonetheless had to place large groups of employees on temporary layoff as new business orders dried up or supply chain issues impacted operations. The timing of an eventual mass return to work will differ by jurisdiction as public health officials work diligently to develop the criteria for re-opening the country. Regardless of when our workforce is recalled, it's never too soon to think about how your business will re-integrate scores of employees who have been working from home or who have been temporarily out of the workforce. This tip sheet contains best practices to guide manufacturers as they create return to work plans for their teams.



PRIOR TO THE PHYSICAL RETURN TO WORK

Step 1: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate.

Employees are experiencing a wide range of emotions. Helping them manage those emotions while away and during their return to the workplace will make the transition smoother for everyone. Reach out, listen with empathy, and ask what they are learning during this period. These actions will help employees to feel a sense of control and stability as they begin to plan for a return to the workplace. Ideally these touchpoints will be conducted with some regularity by the employees' supervisor, although this may not always be feasible. Transparency is always key and that openness will pay forward.

For employees working from home, make sure that your leaders are aware that their people may not have the capacity to learn a new skill (remote working), homeschool children for eight hours per day, put in a full day of top notch work, maintain connections with the people that they are quarantined with AND stay on top of all the latest news... and this is 100 per cent okay. This pandemic is brand new territory for us all and maintaining or struggling through is enough. Just keeping things going for one more day is a win. Encourage your leaders to congratulate their people for the wins their teams *are* achieving right now.

For employees on layoff, maintain regular contact to provide support and updates on critical information. Respect that they may be hurt and working through emotions regarding being laid off. For most people, work provides a sense of pride and meaning. It is not easy to adjust to the absence of that, and they may not be interested in small talk. Be transparent about the current state of the business and your ability to forecast the next few weeks. If you are able to, share learning opportunities they may be interested in taking advantage of, but do not have expectations during this time. For those that are interested in staying connected, provide a forum for community and support. Note that in manufacturing, not all employees will have access to email so consider alternative forms of communication, like text messages.

For leaders and supervisors, ensure your leaders are equipped to navigate these initial discussions with their teams. If you have a leader for whom communication is not a strong suit, this will be even more evident during the coming days. Explore the options available to build that skill in this critical time. [Brene Brown's video on Empathy vs. Sympathy](#) is a great primer. Make sure that the leader understands that they are listening to their people to make them feel heard, not to solve problems. Helping your leaders become better listeners makes them better leaders. For additional training tools, Julian [Treasure's 5 Ways to Listen Better](#) also contains important insights. Coach your leader and help them refocus for the 2nd call, the 5th call and the 20th call. Reach out early, and consistently and let your people know what steps you are taking.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This information is intended as best practice guidance, not as medical or legal advice. Information about the Coronavirus changes rapidly. Always refer to a public health authority for medical advice, and consult legal counsel regarding legislative concerns.

Step 2: Create a Return-To-Work Plan

The best plans will incorporate gradual and phased in approaches. There are two factors to consider:

- When your business re-opens/orders pick up
- When employees' personal lives resume to 'normal'. This includes daycare and schools re-opening, once public health orders ease in your jurisdiction

Communicate the plan to your internal stakeholders and ensure any physical changes, policy updates, signage, etc. are completed prior to the return of staff. Keep in mind that childcare facilities and schools may not yet be open, and your workers may need accommodations or time to make alternate arrangements. Consider whether employees will be returning en masse, or in small groups over a set interval to allow the system time to adjust. The latter can reduce strain on your organization but carefully consider the order in which you will be recalling groups and communicate your rationale accordingly.

Think practically through the application of current health guidelines as you create your plan. If re-training is needed, or you typically hold large employee assemblies, you will need to re-think those aspects and plan accordingly. This will mean smaller group sizes, which means more coordination is required to minimize non-production time.

Be aware that the risk of sprains and strains will be greatest for your returning workers in the first three weeks of the return. Planning a graduated return to full duties, whether shortened days, job rotation or simply reducing the amount of heavy physical labour needed in the operation, will help mitigate risks. The more planning you do up front, the smoother the return to work will go.

Work hardening prior to a full production schedule will be key heading into the summer months. As the days get warmer, understand that your facility will achieve peak temperature at roughly 2pm and begins to cool down at approximately 10pm. Plan heavy physical activity accordingly so that your workers who are no longer acclimatized to the work environment are exposed to the risk of heat related illnesses.

UPON RETURN TO THE PHYSICAL WORKPLACE

Step 3: Communité, Communicate, Communicate (again!)

Update staff on changes or policies that were made as a result of COVID-19 and clearly communicate which of those changes will become permanent and which will eventually return to pre-pandemic states. Be particularly clear in re-stating what the new normal operating expectations are for the purposes of creating a safe work environment (both physical and psychological), and to satisfy legal requirements. This includes, but is not limited to:

- New PPE requirements
- New SOP's
- Any potential short-term changes that might have been made to attendance, vacation or sick leave policies
- New break and schedule times

Step 4: Debrief and Reflect

Taking the time to debrief and reflect with your teams is critical. Employees will have mixed emotions about returning to the workplace. While many will be energized by the socialization and other aspects they may have missed, some will have realized they found unexpected benefits in how they performed their work at home. Ask your employees what they let go of, or found little or no value in. Practice the tools of a Lean operation to identify wastes while looking to insights and best practices that could be formally adopted as the new normal. Explore these options together where you can. It will be interesting for all of us to reflect on what may have previously seemed difficult or impossible, yet we were suddenly able to achieve.

Step 5: Review Roles and Responsibilities

A review with each team member should include a discussion of what may have changed as an organization, down to a departmental level, then again cascaded to the impact at an individual level. Perhaps an employee in procurement now needs to source new/different PPE. Or as a company you have determined it is a high priority to review your supply chains and look for more local suppliers. For manufacturers who re-tooled their assembly lines, it will be important for everyone to understand the new customer base and demands. Engineers may need to draw new floor plans to accommodate long term health directives on physical distancing.

Step 6: Consider the Psychological and Physical Impacts

Be mindful of the impacts of working from home, or not at all, on an employees' return to work. Some employees will have found healthy routines while they were away while others may have experienced the opposite. Depression and anxiety may have settled in, and may carry over even as the world returns to "normal". Where possible, take lead from your usual return to work practices. Any large scale graduated return to work will place additional burden on your front line leaders, and safety team. Ensure that production output expectations are realistic and appropriate, and that this has been communicated to your frontline leaders clearly. Stretch breaks become even more important while EAP programs and supports are helpful reminders. Talk openly about what a huge change this is. Join your employees at coffee breaks, be present, and be empathetic to what employees have experienced over these past few weeks and months.



Step 7: Resilience

Post-pandemic, manufacturers in all industries will find themselves reflecting back on this experience from all angles. As leaders, we would be remiss if we did not look back and ask ourselves how prepared we were in hindsight. How resilient was our company, our leaders and our employees. Did we equip our people with the tools they needed to weather this storm? Identify lessons learned and work with your HR partners and other business support teams to explore training and development plans to build on any leadership gaps that came to light through this experience.

The COVID-19 fight will be a long one, with most experts identifying risk management measures will be required until a vaccine can successfully be introduced. By all estimates, we are still 12-18 months away from this milestone. It can be difficult to picture what life will look like again, at home, and at work. While daunting, in other ways this presents an opportunity on a massive scale to re-imagine how we perform our work.

WORKERS WHO DECLINE TO RETURN TO WORK FOLLOWING A RECALL

Some employees remain confused on their obligations to return to work during a recall and may mistakenly believe they can choose to remain at home and collect the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Unless the employee is at home to care for a school-aged child in jurisdictions where schools and daycare remain closed, or to care for someone who is ill with COVID-19 or are ill themselves, workers do not have the option to choose. If a worker declines to come back to work following a recall in the absence of these conditions, they are in essence resigning. This makes the employee ineligible for CERB, which will likely need to be repaid later upon audit. Some employees may also decline to return to work claiming their right to refuse dangerous work. While all employees in Canada have the right to refuse unsafe work, employers can protect themselves by following their safety and health best practices and exercising due diligence as outlined in CME's [Social Distancing in the Manufacturing Workplace tip sheet](#), [Guidelines for Healthy and Safe Operations During COVID-19](#), [Protocols for a COVID-19 Positive Employee](#) and [Using Disinfectant Correctly tip sheet](#). An employee who declines work on the grounds of danger must also follow proper procedures, including first reporting the hazard to a supervisor and allowing for an internal investigation to validate and mitigate the risk.

ACCESS TO EXPERTS CME AND MADE SAFE ARE HERE TO HELP

Our team is dedicated to helping manufacturers through the COVID-19 pandemic; with resources that run the gamut from national advocacy to local shop floor solutions.

Contact our team of health and safety experts for manufacturing-specific insights and supports:

INFO@MADESAFE.CA | CME-MEC.CA



SAMPLE RETURN TO WORK PLAN

Timely return to work assists injured workers or workers who have been away from the job to return to suitable tasks as part of their rehabilitation or reintroduction to the workplace. A Return to Work (RTW) plan progresses the worker back to their regular duties in a specified time frame. The primary focus is safe, timely return to work.

The template below will assist manufacturers as they integrate groups of employees back into the workplace. Modify or adjust the document for your own use as you see fit. This plan may be used for an individual employee, or for groups of employees or by department.

| | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| COMPANY LOGO HERE | Return to Work Plan | DOCUMENT ID # |
| | Page 1 of 1 | Date: |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Department: | Job Title: | Supervisor: |
| RTW plan start date: | | Resume normal operations date: |
| Plan prepared by: | | Plan approved by: |

| Date/Hours per Day | Job tasks / Instructions |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
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| | |

Worker's Signature_____ **Supervisor's Signature**_____

Expectations/special instructions

- Check in regularly (at the end of each day) with your supervisor or designate to let them know how you are progressing on the return to work plan.
- Immediately contact your Supervisor or RTW Coordinator if there are any issues with the start-up of equipment or missing tools or raw materials needed.
- Sprains and strains are most likely at the beginning of the return

Strategies for a safe return to work

Stretching should be done prior to the beginning of each shift and following breaks.

Micro-pauses are short pauses (1–5 minutes) where you will be able to step back from the work and stretch or rest and then go back to the work activities. They are not additional “coffee breaks.”

You have access to mental health support!

Internal Support Contact Info:_____ **External Support Contact Info**_____