



Returning to workplaces: **Inspiring** and **engaging employees** through a **critical transition**

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We're getting more announcements about employees returning to workplaces that have been largely empty since the beginning of the pandemic. Some employers may return employees full time, while in other cases hybrid work schedules are being considered.

There is excitement and hope as we move past the worst of the pandemic but the transition will require thoughtful planning and an understanding of what employees will be experiencing in order to make this transition as positive, safe and engaging as possible.

Our academic partner, Brad Shuck, Ph.D. of the University of Louisville, has outlined a thoughtful plan to help leaders navigate this transition back to work using a "Four R's" approach:



For the **Resetting** phase, leaders will need to think about the "new normal", which may be very different from how work was done and organized in the past. In the **Restarting** phase, employees will be welcomed into the new era of work, which may include returning to a physical location full or part time. Communicating expectations about the restart will be critical. Not everything will go to plan with the restart so there will be a **Recalibrating** phase that will need to be considered. This recalibration must occur because of internal issues and challenges that arise, but also because of emerging needs or external forces we didn't clearly understand. Finally, each organization will always be **Reinventing**, even after return to work is in full swing. One leader recently shared they had learned ways of more effectively transferring critical knowledge and skills to a highly distributed audience in ways that were just as effective and less costly. He said: "We had to reinvent ourselves because of the pandemic and I hope one of the lessons we take from this experience is we can, if necessary, be more innovative and responsive than we thought."

At BI WORLDWIDE, we think a lot about how we can help companies manage transitions such as this that many, ourselves included, are working toward later this year. It will require employees to do things that are new or, on some cases, do things they haven't done in a while. How do we inspire people to work through these transitions?





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Here are six evidence-based ideas to consider:

1. **Facts aren't first. Employees are.**

Employees have experienced many emotions as a result of this last year—fear, grief, anxiety, burnout, loneliness—to name a few. Leaders will need to understand these emotions and communicate in a way where these concerns are heard. As we develop our narrative, we will also want to paint a picture of a future where they can see themselves, tapping into intrinsic feelings of excitement and hope.

2. **When they put a new item on the menu, they don't just run an ad once.**

We've all seen a restaurant chain advertise for a new product—many times in different mediums with a similar message. Your employees will need to hear important information more than once, so don't assume "I sent that three weeks ago in an email" is going to meet the moment.

3. **Small steps lead to bigger results.**

It's easier for us to take smaller steps and be rewarded for doing so. Our partner Dr. Mike Ahearne of the University of Houston has coached leaders to think less about longer timelines, like results by quarter, and focus more on "winning the week." Develop activities with shorter timelines that people can see on the horizon and feel a sense of accomplishment when they achieve.

4. **We look to leaders; we listen to friends.**

Leaders need to be in ongoing communication mode and that communication needs to be two-way. It will also be helpful to have informal leaders ready to talk to peers, answer questions when they can and provide candid feedback to company leadership.

5. **Help me learn when I'm ready and in measured bites.**

Shifting back into the workplace will require the acquisition of new skills and competencies, just like the shift to working remotely did. Having learning at the ready that is easily digestible will help employees retain and apply knowledge in their readjusted work environment.

6. **Extrinsic complements intrinsic.**

Who would have thought that we would be providing extrinsic rewards for taking a vaccine or practicing other safety measures? Welcome to our new world. Identify other outcomes for which you believe providing extrinsic rewards can get more people to take actions that will be meaningful for them and beneficial to the organization.

There is a lot of work to be done to help employees transition from makeshift workstations in the dining room and on the ironing board back into the workspaces they left over a year ago. A thoughtful, phased approach to this transition leveraging the best of the behavioral sciences will increase your chances of success.

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