



Stratis Points to Significant Workplace Issues to be Addressed by Businesses in Transitioning to the “New Normal” as Emergency Measures are Relaxed

The Irish Government is designing a strategy to gradually exit ‘lockdown’ measures. We can expect this will allow some businesses to reopen and have employees return to the workplace, with some countries and industries already having made the first moves.

Employers now need to consider how the transition can be best carried out. Employers in the coming weeks and months need to decide how to facilitate a safe return to the workplace, looking at when the return will take place (gradual reopening), how it will happen (e.g. team splits, social distancing, protective gear), who will return (e.g. employee and visitor screening, dealing with employees’ refusal to return to the workplace) and on what terms (e.g. business travel and annual leave policies, extended probation periods).

The implications for employment relations and employee engagement will also need to be considered. There is much learning to be gained from those employers in essential services who have continued to operate during this period. Some of the key Issues which will need to be addressed by employers are set out below:

1. Facilitating safe return to work.

- Businesses will need to create operational frameworks for people to confidently get back to work while social distancing and other OHS measures remain in force at the workplace.
- Health and safety protocols will need to be updated for the temporary economy, driven by physical distancing and businesses are likely to have to change work practices to ensure compliance.
- Whilst public health advice concerning Covid-19 remains effective, firms can expect they will have to do a safety review, and in some areas e.g. in construction engaged on large contracts they can expect to have to appoint a Covid-19 Compliance Officer.
- Digital solutions enacted to sustain remote skilling and matching such as online training, eSignatures, online identification, and skill checks need to be promoted and sustained.
- For roles which are front line, have high levels of human interaction and are public / customer facing, the provision of personal protective equipment, hand sanitizers and masks will be a priority.

- Workplace policies on building access, use of time and attendance systems, access to communal areas and on temperature testing may need to be considered, informed by public health advice. Similarly, directional signage, enhanced cleaning and hygiene routines, along with guidance on use of meeting rooms and shared equipment will need to be considered.
- Other adjustments to work, to workplace and workstation design will need to be considered. Splitting teams into separate areas and/or introducing staggered start/finish times, may be required.
- Random checks may be needed based on appropriate measures to drive compliance.
- Roles and responsibilities will need to be reviewed considering emerging business requirements. This will include the extent to which remote working can remain a viable option for roles where a physical presence is not essential.
- Further implications for business travel will need to be assessed.
- Assess the need to provide workers with additional training or support for relevant skills development consistent with any revised business plans.

2. Implications for Employment Relations and Employee Engagement

In view of the medium-term impact of transition arrangements, businesses should update their continuity plans and have 'return to work' protocols in place for all categories of staff. They will also need to deal with some or all the following Issues:

- Consider arrangements needed to engage and to consult with staff about the issues to be addressed on which it needs support to remain viable.
- Review employee resourcing models to support core and non-core activity and explore the adoption of more flexible resourcing plans and diverse forms of work and contractual arrangements to reflect a continuing period of uncertainty.
- Working time arrangements, break times, team splits and shift planning will need to be revised.
- Anticipate how to deal with any employees' refusal to return to the workplace.
- Changes may be needed to annual leave policies and to allow for extended probation periods.
- Implications of all further temporary or permanent cost reduction measures will need to be considered e.g. of any pay reductions or deferrals, temporary layoff or short time working measures or more fundamental restructuring and resizing the organisation.

- The operation of existing contractual arrangements or collective agreements concerning the operation of grievance and disciplinary procedures will need to be revised to allow for utilising remote technology.
- Notwithstanding the extent of restrictions on travel and meetings, companies may need to use remote technologies to continue internal investigations already underway or to initiate new investigations, where necessary, whilst complying with the latest public health guidance.
- Effective employee engagement during the transition period should be done responsibly. Employees need to understand the changing strategic narrative, have any complex information communicated in clear and simple terms and to have access to structures of 'employee voice' where they can ask questions.
- Businesses are likely to still need to rely on social media platforms and/or online virtual meeting facilities to bring people together as part of a reimagining of teams and teamwork.

Stratis Is Here to Help You Navigate This Uncertainty

If you would like to talk to us about any of the above issues in preparing your business for this critical transition phase, or about engaging your people through the period ahead, please get in touch with me at brendan.mcginty@stratis.ie or any one of our Partners.

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