



# How and When Organisations in Europe are Managing the Return to Office

With the vaccination roll out aiding the pandemic status in many countries across the world, the move to bring employees back to the office has begun. But an endeavour of such complexity raises a wide range of questions. Should your teams be hybrid, remote or office based – and in what ratio? What measures are needed to ensure the safety of those returning, and mitigate against the risks of further restrictions and lockdowns? What risks are inherent in insisting on a return, in a climate of labour shortages and The Great Resignation? We have worked together with our clients in Europe to understand how they are approaching the challenge of returning the workforce to offices, factories, labs and plants.

## **A full return or a hybrid approach?**

From our conversations, only 19% of the companies we consulted preferred a full return of all employees to the office. The majority, 79%, said they favoured a hybrid model. For some, hybrid work is seen as a pathway towards a fuller return in the longer term, for others, as a more permanent transition to a different way of working. We also saw the emergence of an additional group, who are seeing this point in time as an opportunity to introduce a much more fluid, flexible approach to workplace location, with employee choice at its heart.

## **Information gathering is key**

Understanding the needs, opinions and requirements of your workforce is key to ensuring The Great Return doesn't fuel an acceleration in the Great Resignation. Some companies have been performing anonymised online surveys to get a clearer overview of their people's views on flexible working and return to the office to feed into their overarching return strategy. Such surveys were also used to collect data on the overall vaccination status of the workforce, without individual employees having to worry about the effects of disclosure. This approach was also combined with more personalised, one-to-one information gathering on the part of managers – interacting particularly with key staff and those with rare skill sets. When it comes to collecting data, the carrot can be more useful than the stick. One company instigated an internal lottery, with entry being contingent on revealing your vaccination status.

## **When it comes to Hybrid, does one size fit all?**

Some employers are taking a very structured approach to the return – looking at every single role type, and formally categorising them as office, hybrid or remote. This approach does bring advantages. The consistency gives employees certainty and a sense of fairness.

(With more flexible approaches, employers have seen resentment building when employees in similar roles receive different treatment. This disparity seems to be causing particular problems between full-time employees and contractors.) It also allows for efficient planning – for example automatically knowing exactly who your remote workers are so that they can be supplied with the appropriate tech and kit at home.

However, in this approach, some flexibility is lost – particularly for multi-nationals. One company found that there were very different attitudes amongst its workforce in different countries, with employees in Germany and France being much more amenable to returning to their workplace than those in the UK. (Long, crowded commutes and the relative cost of train travel being key factors deterring people from a return to work in Britain.)

Being able to customise your approach is also useful when hiring in new talent – especially if you're looking to attract those with rare skills. However, such flexibility needs to be planned for throughout the whole hiring and onboarding process. There have been instances of hiring

managers promising hybrid or remote work to candidates, only to find that the employment contracts for these positions do not allow for it. (Only 15% of respondents said they had worked to change contracts to reflect the changing nature of the working environment.)

### **Embracing flexibility**

For some, flexibility and employee choice were put at the heart of the solution to the return to the workplace. They rejected the idea of a mandatory return, and allowed employees to apply not only for remote, hybrid or office working status, but also for part-time working or different working patterns. One firm also included options for choosing which country employees wished to work in – with remote working being seen as a route to opening up ever more international career opportunities to the workforce.



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## **Making Hybrid working work**

Return to the workplace is currently on a voluntary basis for many companies, but the setting of a future date when all employees will have to spend some of their days in the office is becoming increasingly common. In our survey, companies were fairly evenly split between those who are making a return to the office voluntary, and those who either have, or will mandate it for their hybrid teams.

The most common time split reported was for 3 days at home and 2 in the office per week. Other approaches included asking for 10 out of the 20 working days each month to be spent in the workplace. A new innovation to try to ensure some sense of community and cohesion is the Anchor day. This sees people in divisions, teams or other defined groups all come to work on the same day, generally once a month.

## **Making returners feel safe and comfortable**

Social distancing and clear mask wearing protocols are pretty universal in the workplace to avoid infection risk and provide reassurance. To alleviate anxiety and ensure that conflict doesn't arise between groups with different levels of risk tolerance or vulnerability, the wearing of red/amber/green wristbands or badges is also being adopted in a number of workplaces. This allows employees to see at a glance what level of interaction an individual is comfortable with. In order to achieve social distancing levels within

offices, a Group A, Group B working model, where employees are split into two groups who come into the workplace on different days is also being widely adopted. One company had also installed testing facilities on site, both to stop infection spread, and take the onus off employees to organise testing for themselves.

## **Clear strategic focus and communication is vital**

Defining your position in the short, medium and long term on where (and when) your people work, and what choice and flexibility you will offer them in this area is key to attracting and retaining the best talent. Whether you're looking to gather information from your people to inform your return to office strategy, deliver internal communications to make sure your employees fully understand your direction of travel, or update your employer brand to include messaging about your new approach to hybrid and flexible working, Cielo can help.