Difficulties In Re-Adapting to Working From the Office

by Patrick M. Doman

Technology should make our lives easier, but it seems like just being away from the office for a week or two leaves us scratching our heads and asking ourselves, "What in the world is going on here?" We all need a little updating now and then. The Covid-19 pandemic has given all of us many challenges. For some, it meant being required to work from home. That presented a number of challenges including adapting to a new routine, technology woes, communication issues and not having all necessary resources at their fingertips.

Now some employees have returned to work or will be soon and, surprisingly the transition to returning to the office hasn't been as smooth as one would think, especially given the fact that employees followed an office routine less than a year ago.

Here is a list of some issues that can affect employees returning to the office and some potential guidelines to help them get through it.

1) **Adapting to New Routines**
   Issue: Working from home, employees got into a routine. They could get up later, do a load of laundry on their lunch break and/or have their pets keep them company in their home office space. Returning to the office changes this routine and that can be hard to get used to.
   Solution: Employees need to adapt to a new routine when they return to their office. Their families and pets likely have to adapt too. Employees need to realize that getting back into the routine of leaving the house for work can take some getting used to, again. They're going to have to plan for the morning and afternoon commute. They'll also need to reaccustom those around them to the change in routines. For example, if the employee is a parent, they may not be home to see their child off at the bus like they did when they were working from home. The household routine for chores may also need to be reconfigured. Workers shouldn't be afraid to ask their families to help them out at home, and to explain the impacts of the changes, so everyone is on the same page.

2) **Additional Safety Regulations**
   Issue: A lot could have changed in the months that the employee worked from home. This can include the safety regulations related to the workplace. These changes might

include having to have their temperature taken when they get to work. They may also be required to wear personal protective equipment like masks or shields for all or part of a day, depending on their working environment and proximity to co-workers. Some organizations now require their employees to change their clothing on entering and exiting the building. Others also restrict the amount of movement employees can make in an office and change the rules for the employee breakroom.

Solution: First, the employee should take a minute to process the changes and get a clear understanding of what is expected from him or her. Next, they need to accept that hopefully the changes are not permanent – they are pandemic measures. Some of the measures can be frustrating but the implementation of procedures such as additional handwashing, mask wearing and allowing only one employee to sit at each table in the break room might be the only things standing between the virus and safety. Notifying employees of changes in the workplace before they return can ease the transition.

3) **Germs on Devices**
   Issue: Devices like smartphones can carry germs from place to place on their cases and screens. Employees touch the devices and then they touch other items. This can propagate the spread of pathogens.
   Solution: Employees need to learn how to clean their devices and do it often. Not all products are safe on phones – especially on the screens. Some employers have invested in other cleaning solutions like UV light sterilizing systems. Extra hand hygiene around the use of a handheld device can also help to limit the spread of germs.

4) **Compatibility Issues**
   Issue: If an employee worked on documents on their home computer using one program / version of the program, and then returns to work which might have a lesser or greater version of the software, there could be some compatibility issues.
   Solution: Employees need to take a minute to breathe when they encounter these sorts of issues. Some are easy fixes such as converting the files into another version of the software, such as with Microsoft Office programs. If the issue is bigger and the employee isn't sure what to do, they can do an online search which can often help guide them from others' experiences. If the organization has an IT department, they may also be able to offer some assistance and guidance.

5) **Driver Updates**
   Issue: Some drivers may be updated when employees get back to work even if they had been updated while the employee worked from home.
   Solution: If we take the example of a portable deposit machine which allows employers to deposit cheques without going to a financial institution, an employee might have updated the driver for it when they were working from home, but find that it was outdated when they return to work. The reason for this is that when the employee

worked from home, they likely had to install the driver directly onto their computer, since the machine may not have been able to connect to it through the remote desktop. A return to work means connecting directly to the network without the use of the remote desktop. Therefore, the driver would need to be updated on the workstation. It should be an easy fix. It may just require patience as some drivers take a bit of time to update or download.

6) **Missing Tools**
Issue: At home, employees may have used a laptop with a microphone and camera for connecting to virtual meetings. These meetings may have had to be connected from the employee's personal home screen and not from the remote desktop, since the microphone and camera were installed on the actual employee laptop and not through their work applications. Employees may return to work and be using a desktop computer or other device and find that they no longer have access to a microphone and camera. Even though employees are back in the office, they may still be required to attend virtual meetings with colleagues to limit gatherings.
Solution: Some employers have extra laptops that can be loaned to employees so they can connect to a virtual meeting. Another option is to ask the employer to provide the employee with a camera and microphone that can be connected to the work desktop computer.

7) **Printer Issues**
Issue: At home, employees may have been connected directly to their home printer. When they return to work, they'll need to be reconnected to the network or to the printer in their office. Updates made to the drivers of those printers or to the network that they are on could create some issues.
Solution: The first thing to do is be patient and evaluate the situation. The solution may be as simple as changing the default printer in the settings or re-initializing wi-fi on the printer. If the employee is unable to fix the issue, they can make a request to their IT department.

8) **Outdated Security Updates**
Issue: When employees were working from home, they may not have performed all the necessary security updates on their personal or work devices (if they took it home from the office). Therefore, when they return to the office with their work device or their own device to transfer files onto their work computers, it could put the network at risk. Similarly, on work computers that haven't been touched for months, there might be several updates that haven't been done, if they weren't set to automatic.
Solution: If the employee is taking a device from home back to work, they should do the security updates on it before going back. It can sometimes take several hours, so it is recommended that they put these updates on when they don't need to use their device.

If IT departments are able to update work computers prior to employees returning to the office, it could help ensure maximum security from day one.

9) **Security Issues With Devices**

Issue: Even if all updates are installed on the computer, there could still be some problems. Home devices or machines that were taken from work to home could have been used to visit a number of sites and visit numerous sites for work and pleasure. There could be mal-ware, viruses, or a build up of junk that slows the system on the computer.

Solution: If the IT department can verify all devices before they are plugged back into the network, that would be ideal. However, if the IT department doesn't have the manpower to offer this then the employee should be asked to run anti-virus scans and a cleaning program like CCleaner on their device to help make the network safer.

10) **Overloaded IT Departments**

Issue: With so many employees returning to the office at the same time, IT departments may be overloaded with a number of requests for assistance reconnecting to the network, fixing printers, and fixing program compatibility issues and security updates. If the company relies on an external IT company for their support, this can lead to additional issues since multiple employers will be requiring the IT company's support at the same time.

Solution: If possible, make the return to the office progressive so that the internal IT department isn't dealing with requests from every employee all at once. Doing so will create less stress for the employees and the IT department. If the employer relies on the services of an external IT company, it is important that they coordinate with the company to ensure that there is time for their employees to transition. In this case, a progressive return may be a helpful approach.

11) **Differentiation Between Work and Home**

Issue: When employees worked from home, they often used the same device for their personal and business needs. This means that when they return to work, they may have a hard time adapting to work and home mode. When employees worked from home, it wasn't unusual for them to take a few minutes out from their days to answer their personal e-mails or assist their child in a virtual check-in with their teacher.

Solution: Remind employees about what they can and cannot do on their work time. Communicating with employees about their allocated break times and work times can help ensure that everyone is on the same page. Employers can also choose to block websites such as social media on the work network to help employees avoid the temptation of having a website open at the same time that they work.

Hopefully, this extensive list of issues that companies and employees can face when they return to work will help to prepare them for what is to come. It is important to remember that the switch from working in the office to working from home, took some getting used to. Returning to work in the office, despite the fact that employees may have done it for years, will also require patience and adaptability. Don't forget, employees are not returning to the office that they used to know. It may look the same, but they're returning during a pandemic, which has a list of challenges all of its own.

The pandemic relocated IT to the center of almost every workforce. We need to keep it accessible to all those it touches . . . and it touches almost all of us in one way or another. To smoothly return employees, who have been working at home to the office environment will require changes for the employees, perhaps their work computers (updates and drives, etc.) and changes in their work habits. A good transition will require clear directions for employees of the changes to their work computers, the changes in the security and plant requirements, as well as changes in work conditions, adequate time and directions will enable employees to make an easier transition back to the office.

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