

Covid-19 Return to Work Cover Letter:

With many people returning to their work place post lockdown, it is worth taking the time to consider how lockdown has impacted on all colleagues, but be aware that lockdown may have had a different impact on autistic colleagues, and that they will face some different challenges than their non-autistic colleagues. During lockdown many autistic people may have felt:

- Increased anxiety due to changes in their routine, being unable to access preferred foods, detergents, locations, facilitating home schooling while working and coping with illness.
- Decreased anxiety due to not having to socialise, being in an environment more suited to their sensory needs, having fewer choices and decisions to make and making life “simpler”.
- A mix of both increased and decreased anxiety at various points regarding different aspects of their lives – these extremes, or highs and lows, can be overwhelming, and cause a build-up of anxiety over a prolonged period.

The return to a workplace, regardless of their experience of lockdown, is likely to be accompanied by an increase in anxiety and raise questions like - What will the workplace look like? Are there different smells? What are the new social rules to be adhered to? Will I be able to carry out my role effectively? Many autistic people have been able to mask their autistic traits much less during lockdown, and many may be concerned about returning to spend time with other people, so there may be anxiety around working with colleagues too. There will also likely be concerns about dealing with an increased amount of sensory input – even the most sensory appropriate of workplaces may include more or different noise, smells, textures, and visual inputs than in the home. Increased anxiety can also lead to increased sensory sensitivity, and the autistic person possibly presenting more autistically.

We have also seen an increase in the number of people who are starting to query whether or not they are autistic. Either due to their increased or decreased anxiety, or because the time away from their usual demands has allowed them to reflect on who they are, their needs, and how best to support them. We are anticipating that more and more people are likely to come “out” as autistic to line managers and colleagues upon their return to work.

To effectively support autistic employees back to work, it is essential that you take the time to discuss their needs and their strengths. It may not be an easy transition back to work, and consider if staged transitions, increased support with sensory needs and a discussion about communication preferences would be useful. Bear in mind that the changing landscape of lockdown is likely to have an impact on us all, and having understanding colleagues will benefit everyone.

We understand that there may have to be changes to some roles and some changes to the working environments given the current climate, but we would suggest that discussions take place with the employee to explore these changes before decisions are made. Consult with autistic employees whether staying in the role they applied for is something they still want (as some will, and some may wish to seek a change). Any changes to their work should be done with plenty of time to discuss why changes may be necessary, why you feel this particular employee is suited to the new position, and where there is room for negotiation. Consider whether the employee needs support, training or a period of adjustment before taking on a different role. Take the time to listen to their concerns and take their views seriously. Imposing change without discussion could severely impact the mental health of an autistic employee.

We suggest that autistic employees and their line managers use the following document to discuss what autism is, how autism informs the experiences of the autistic individual in their work, and what adjustments would help. It could be used alongside a one to one risk assessment before returning to the workplace. The transition back to work is likely to be difficult for many people, autistic or not, and our hope is that this document will help make that transition a little easier for everyone.



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