PAVE THE WAY FOR A RETURN TO THE WORKPLACE

Examples of internal communications



*About this guide*

**OBJECTIVE :** This guide will help users effectively communicate information regarding a return to the workplace to their employees.

**AUDIENCE :** The change manager, the communications expert or members of the team in charge of planning the return to the workplace.

**CONTENT :**

* Preliminary information necessary for communication
* Useful tips
* Proposed list of activities
* Model
* Example of a message to employees (see appendix A)
* Guidelines for launching a survey (see appendix B)

# When preparing for a return to the workplace, it is important to manage this complex and potentially difficult process that we face. Communications should be frequent, employee-centered, empathetic and nurturing, while taking into account the context and circumstances surrounding the return. To ask employees to return to the workplace, the timing of communications should be sent out with reasonable and appropriate notice to allow everyone to prepare. Internal communications teams may even need to be expanded in the short to medium term to support this major change management initiative.

**Preliminary information necessary for communication**

When communicating with employees, it is important to make them aware of the expectations of the organization as well as the upcoming changes. You will need to explain the **WHY** and **HOW** of the return, and more importantly **HOW** employees will be supported through this period of change. Before planning and implementing communications with employees regarding the return to the workplace, the following elements should be defined:

1. The organization must have a clearly defined vision for the return to the workplace, whether it is in a modernized environment or not.

1. A sponsor and/or champion(s) should be designated to communicate the messages. Best practices suggest that the first messages about the return vision should be communicated by the most senior leader in the organization.
2. Make sure you have the answers to the following questions, as they will form the basis of your message, which should be oriented to the organization's vision:
   1. What are the objectives of the return to the workplace?
   2. What impact will this return have on the organization and on employees?
   3. What will be the benefits to the organization and its employees?
   4. What is the desired workplace experience? How does it contribute to achieving the organization's vision?
   5. What level of flexibility will employees have in choosing where they prefer to work? Will employees have access to alternative work locations such as the co-locations?
   6. Is it a return to a modernized or traditional workplace?
   7. Will there be a change in the way employees work? If so, what will it be?

**Helpful Tips and Considerations** icone conseils utiles

* The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the way we work for two years now. Returning to the workplace may be a source of anxiety for some employees. It is therefore important to **consider the particular challenges and situations that the pandemic has left behind**. It may be interesting to use personas to better understand the views of different types of employees, such as the ones proposed in this document created by BGIS: [Employee Experience Tool Guide](https://gcconnex.gc.ca/file/view/89129461/rtw-employee-experience-tool-guide-by-bgis-en?language=fr).
* Change often creates a degree of uncertainty among employees. Leaders can dispel rumours and reduce anxiety by **communicating clear and consistent messages**.
* It's important to **use the right language** in communications. Over the past two years, employees have proven that they can be as effective at home as they were in their original workplace; it's not a return to work, but **a return to the workplace**.
* **It is never too early to communicate.** If you can't announce a specific date, you can tell employees that they will be given X number of days before they are asked to return to the workplace (if that is the case). Or simply tell them that a decision will not be made for X number of months. However, because it is important to communicate with employees frequently (especially if it has been several months since the last update on the subject from senior management), **managing employee expectations becomes paramount**.
* **Employee consultation and internal communications should not be treated as a one-time** event; rather, they should form the basis of the return strategy.
* **Communicate desired behavioural changes**: If the anticipated return requires a change in employee behaviour, internal communications should clarify what these new expectations are and why they are important to the organization and to the individual - what's in it for me (WIIFM)?
* **Encourage real-time feedback**: This feedback can be collected in a variety of ways, including one-on-one meetings between the manager and the employee or through surveys. Consultation is best when employees feel that they are being heard and the organization takes responsibility for this feedback. This method of consultation also allows for a real-time response to changes as they occur, so that the organization can address the various sensitivities as they arise.
* **Ensure that employees have a reference point** (document, intranet page, guide, etc.) to which they can refer if they have questions (e.g. where to park, reservation system, services available in the building, health measures in place, etc.). It is important to have this information available to employees, however, it should not be the main message of communications. Instead, messages should focus on the vision and the employee experience.
* **If the return to the workplace takes place in a workplace that has been modernized, a communication and training plan will need to be put in place to inform and educate employees on how to use this new space and the tools and workspaces included.** The project and change management milestones are available as a dashboard in the following document: [PM-CM Intergrated Plan](https://wiki.gccollab.ca/images/3/34/RTW_PM-CM_Integrated_plan_-_Change_inventory_and_impact_assessment.xlsx).

**Proposed list of activities and objectives**

***Note: All of the following activities should be communicated by the Return Initiative Champion and/or Sponsor.***

| **Activity** | **Objective(s)** |
| --- | --- |
| Define the vision and guiding principles of return to the workplace | * Better focus on the return to the workplace’s vision * Establish guidelines for employees |
| Ensure that the management team is committed to the return to the workplace’s vision. | * Get buy-in from leaders and explain what is expected of them * Provide key messages |
| Inform the management team of the announcement of the upcoming return to the workplace | * Prepare the leadership team for next steps, upcoming milestones, upcoming communications and their role |
| Inform middle managers of the upcoming return to the workplace announcement | * Prepare middle managers for next steps, upcoming milestones, upcoming communications and explain what is expected of them * Provide key messages |
| Send the first communication to all employees | * Generate interest in the context, vision, etc. of the return * Inform employees about next steps, upcoming milestones and what is expected of them |
| Hold a general meeting with all employees | * Generate interest in the context, vision, etc. of the return * Inform employees about next steps, upcoming milestones and what is expected of them * Inform employees about how they will or will not be encouraged to return to the workplace * Inform employees about how they will be supported and educated throughout the return to the workplace process |
| Launch a survey or focus groups (in real time or asynchronously) to understand employees' expectations and experience of returning to the workplace | * Reiterating the workplace vision * Collect data on the experience of employees who have returned to the workplace, either full-time or in a hybrid mode, as well as those who work at home and want to continue working at home |
| Communicate and explain the results of the survey or focus groups | * Inform employees of the improvements the organization is committed to making to provide a better employee experience (if necessary) * Inform employees about next steps, upcoming milestones and what is expected of them |

Employee announcement model

Here is a template that you can adapt to your organization’s situation. The following elements should be included in your communication with employees:

* The context of the return to the workplace
* The return trigger: the what, the why, the who
* How the return will affect employees and the organization in the short and long term
* What's in it for me/what's in it for us (benefits from an employee perspective)
* A clear vision of the workplace (whether it is a modernized environment or not)
* Clear expectations on the part of the organization regarding employee involvement; what is expected of them
* How the organization understands the range of emotions associated with change and demonstrates empathy
* Next steps

Hello,

It seems hard to believe that it's already 2022 and it's been over [*X months*] since both our daily lives and the way we work have changed dramatically. In that time, we've demonstrated that much of our [*branch, division, sector*] can work effectively from home, while continuing to collaborate with stakeholders, drive our agenda forward, and implement important initiatives for all of our customers.

The last two years have brought change at an accelerated pace and in ways I could not have predicted. Whether we like it or not, this is truly an unprecedented opportunity to adapt positively and build a better workplace. The resilience that I see throughout [*name of branch/department*] is truly inspiring and I sincerely appreciate the compassion, collaboration and resourcefulness that I continue to see every day despite so many months of uncertainty. In recent [*weeks/months*], many provinces have relaxed their health measures, and the President of the Treasury Board has issued a statement on updated occupational health guidelines for the federal public service. We are reaching out to you today about the implications of these developments for [*name of branch or department*] and how we see things unfolding in the months ahead.

As workplaces and ways of working have changed dramatically, it is important to plan for a return to the workplace that will combine telework and office presence in some instances. In addition, as mentioned at the [*name of meeting*] meeting, the nature of our work has also changed considerably, which will have an impact on how we use our workplaces.

In order to begin planning the return to our workplaces and the modernization of [*name of building/space*] with all of these changes in mind, [*name of organization*] has been working with [*name of organization*], as well as [*name of organization*]. We are working on [*type of return to the workplace*]. Our ultimate goal, which you have heard from our [*title of senior leader*], is to present [*vision for the workplace (e.g., redesign in the original workplace, transition into a transition space, transition into modernized environments*)]. We intend to achieve this one in [*how to achieve your goals*]. I want to say that I am the champion of this return for [*name of organization*], and that your contribution to help us lead by example can have a lasting influence on [*name of organization*] and the way we work.

More details will be revealed in the coming [*weeks or months*]. With this in mind, it is time to have a conversation with your manager about [*insert what is expected (e.g. how we want to work in the future, how we plan to use the workspace, how mobility will be integrated and supported)*]. These conversations are crucial to ensure that the return to the workplace goes smoothly for all parties involved.

We are leading the way in [*name of organization*] in finding better ways of working and creating the best possible work environment. You have already demonstrated how well you embrace change and new ways of doing things, and I know you will apply the same attention to this initiative.

Thank you and take care of yourself.

**Appendix A: Example of a Communication**

*This is a very good example of a clear and concise message that is done early on for employees, which helps to manage employees' expectations of a return to the workplace, without mentioning a specific return date given the current time uncertainties.*

*However, a few sentences mentioning the* ***requirement to*** *gradually return to the office without further explanation as to the number of days and the determination of* ***who, what and how,*** *may be confusing to employees who have been working from home for two years.*

*This type of announcement should be surrounded by more context and explanation so that employees understand exactly what is ahead for them.*

**Striking the right balance in a hybrid workplace**

COVID-19 restrictions have been eased in many jurisdictions in recent weeks, and the President of the Treasury Board has issued a [statement](https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/news/2022/02/president-of-the-treasury-board-statement-regarding-the-evolving-public-health-situation.html) on updated occupational health guidance for the federal public service. We are reaching out to you to communicate what this means for [*name of organization*] and how we see things unfolding in the coming months.

Our starting point is to acknowledge that none of us has a clear sense of what the end state will look like. As such, there will be a lot of learning by doing and perhaps some experimenting along the way.

Secondly, an overarching driver for our work models will be the efficiency and effectiveness in delivering on our mandate. Over the past 2 years, it has become abundantly clear that we can get the job done even if we are not physically together. At the same time, however, we have missed out on some of the intangible benefits of coming together in person: building strong and healthy relationships and cohesive teams, sharing knowledge and experiences in both formal and informal settings, collaborating and brainstorming on the key challenges that we face as an organization, and welcoming new employees onto our teams, to name a few.

With this in mind, we will work to ensure that we develop a hybrid model that retains opportunities for remote work blended with purposeful time in person in the office. This balance is likely to be different across the organization and may indeed vary over time based on the nature of projects or the cycles of our work. As we move to this next stage, we do not see the need for an arbitrary number of days per week in the office. However, it is important to note that there will be increased requirements for in-person meetings and activities in the coming weeks, as determined by managers.

We can assure you that there will be no sudden changes. This will be a gradual transition that applies lessons learned along the way. We will adjust based on what we learn from our experiences and from other organizations also exploring various options. As you know, we are adapting our workspaces for layouts and practices to emphasize shared collaborative spaces and reflect the advantage of immersion among colleagues and friends. For instance, in the National Capital Region, in addition to co-working spaces, we are creating office areas that we are calling “neighbourhoods.” These will provide more options to bring teams together and meet with colleagues in spaces that promote collaboration. Many employees in the regions have significant experience already in hybrid work models, and we hope to benefit from that as we move forward.

We look forward to what is to come. We are excited to learn, to build on progress and to continue to communicate with you along the way.

We hope you share in this excitement and in our conviction that, together, we can build a department that excels precisely because our people thrive.

**Appendix B: Announcing a Survey to understand employees' point of view**

The following are some indications before sending a survey to obtain employees' views on returning to the workplace:

* 1. **Please inform employees of the importance of providing feedback via the survey, and emphasize that this is an important opportunity to provide their views on returning to the workplace**
  2. **It is recommended that employees be informed of when and how the results will be communicated to them prior to completing the surveys.**
  3. **It is important to note that you are asking all employees to respond based on their personal experience and with honesty - there are no wrong answers and the survey is confidential.**

In summary, the email announcing the survey and requesting employee participation should include the following:

* **Background to the survey** (to gather employees' views on returning to the workplace)
  + Expectations of employees regarding the survey (the minimum participation rate to be achieved)
  + It's time for them to make their voices heard about returning to the workplace
* **Survey Information**
  + Date survey sent
  + Duration of the data collection period
  + Approximate time to complete the survey
  + Link to survey (if applicable)
* **How the results will be used and shared**

Note that if your organization has not had recurring communications with employees about a possible return to the workplace throughout the pandemic, it is even more important to include context in the survey so that employees understand the purpose of the survey.

**References**

[Return to the Workplace - The Employee Experience (PowerPoint)](https://gcconnex.gc.ca/file/view/98841523/return-to-the-workplace-employee-experience-en-retour-en-milieu-de-travail-lexperience-employe-en?language=en)

[Return to the Workplace - BGIS Employee Experience Guide (PDF)](https://gcconnex.gc.ca/file/view/89129461/rtw-employee-experience-tool-guide-by-bgis-en?language=en)

[Return to Work Change Management Kit (ZIP)](https://wiki.gccollab.ca/images/e/e6/Return_to_the_workplace_change_management_toolkit_EN.zip)

* [Change Management Toolkit for Planning the Return to the Workplace (PowerPoint)](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwiki.gccollab.ca%2Fimages%2F6%2F6f%2FRTW_change_management_toolkit_EN.pptx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)
* [Integrated PM-CM Plan for the RMT - Inventory of Changes and Impact Assessment (Excel)](https://wiki.gccollab.ca/images/3/34/RTW_PM-CM_Integrated_plan_-_Change_inventory_and_impact_assessment.xlsx)

[Guidance and practices for the safe return to workplaces in light of the easing of restrictions](https://gcconnex.gc.ca/file/download/66603985)

[Adapting to Change - Summary Sheet, June 9, 2020 (PDF)](https://gcconnex.gc.ca/file/view/67068254/en-adapting-to-change-summary-sheet-june-9-2020?language=en): Created in collaboration with members of the Workplace Change Management Community of Practice to harvest a collection of workplace changes and lessons learned from the current pandemic situation.