Top tips for managing employees as lockdown ends

(and what you should avoid)

Managing employees as lockdown ends

As the UK draws closer to the end of lockdown and employees return to the workplace from furlough, employers and HR managers have a busy few months ahead.

Between managing the safe return to the workplace, coping with the backlog of annual leave that employees have built up, the ongoing management of furloughed employees and, of course, no company is exempt from the dreaded sick leave.

Beyond this, the upcoming months are also likely to involve implementing more permanent working from home solutions. COVID-19 has been a turning point for many businesses to recognise just how beneficial flexible working can be.

Recent research found that the most popular post-pandemic work option among employees was to return to the office three (34%) or four days (20%) per week, while only 6% favoured continuing to work from home full time. Therefore, in the long term, we are likely to see a big shift in the dynamics of the workplace, and we are unlikely to return to pre-lockdown levels.

In this guide, we highlight important HR tips and best practices to remember as we approach the return to the workplace, even if it's just on a part-time basis. Plus, our team of employment law experts reveal what you should avoid doing.

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1. How to manage the annual leave backlog

With lockdown still in place across the UK, many employees are saving their annual leave for when restrictions are lifted. However, as restrictions are lifted, managers will likely be in a situation where many employees will ask to take leave at the same time.

Moreover, key workers who are unable to take all their statutory annual leave entitlement due to COVID-19 are allowed to carry over up to four weeks of unused holidays into the next two years. While this flexibility is necessary to protect workers' rights, it has caused an annual leave backlog that could become a real nightmare for employers to manage.

Annual Leave Requests

Where possible, managers should allow the leave. However, they also need to ensure business continuity. Therefore, it is important to balance the employee's request about the timing of leave against the needs of the business.

To avoid a build-up of leave that employees will want to take when they are back at work, employers can require employees to take annual leave on dates chosen by the employer as long as they give twice as many days' notice as the period of leave the employee is required to take.

Offering to buy back employees' holiday days that are in excess of the statutory minimum is another method that can be used. However, this could end up being expensive and hard to manage for employers. So, what is the best option for all parties involved?

While it might not be possible to please everyone and give them their requested time off, it is important that you deal with annual leave requests in a way that is transparent and fair.

The most popular policy of granting annual leave is on a first come, first served basis. While this policy is the fairest, depending on the system in place, it can still be difficult to keep track of which employee requested the leave first. With an online leave management tool, such as BrightPay Connect, you don't have that problem as you will be able to see the order in which requests come in.

Employees

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2. How to simplify leave requests

Annual leave management can still be a manual, spreadsheet, paper-based or, worse, email heavy exercise. It is especially important in today's world where the majority of employees across the country are working from home or are on furlough leave, to eliminate the need to request leave in person.

By introducing an employee self-service app, such as BrightPay Connect, employees will be able to request leave anywhere, anytime, directly from their smartphone or tablet, meaning they don't need to be in the workplace to request leave. Employees would also be able to view their past and scheduled leave, and view their annual leave entitlement and leave balance remaining, without needing to contact HR.

When an employee requests leave, you will get a notification to login to your online portal to approve or reject the leave. You can access a company-wide calendar displaying who is on leave and when so that you can ensure adequate staffing levels before approving the leave request.

Online annual leave tools completely eliminate cumbersome people management tasks. You also have the added benefit of eliminating paper processes, improving your sustainability efforts.
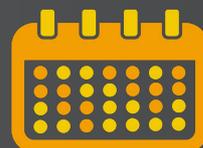
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*Read about **BrightPay's sustainability journey** and goal of becoming net-zero by 2023.*

3. How to share the administrative workload

HR managers should not be the only people involved in the leave management process. You should also involve department heads, line managers, and team leads to relieve you of the admin burden. By delegating the responsibility among department managers, you can free up time to spend on other important HR tasks, such as introducing a Vaccine Policy.

Department managers are likely to have a much better understanding of their project timelines and deadlines than the HR department. By allowing these managers to have control over leave requests, they can better manage their team's schedule and workload.

With BrightPay Connect, you can set up unlimited users, each with their own user permissions. For example, department managers can be set up so that they can only view employees within their department. You can also limit their access so that they can only view the leave calendar and approve employee requests, without having access to the payroll information or HR documents.

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4. How to simplify furlough pay calculations

As the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) has been extended until the end of September, furlough leave is not going away anytime soon. Depending on the industry that your business is in, you might not bounce back as quickly as other sectors when lockdown is lifted. The ugly truth is that **many businesses will need to avail of the furlough scheme until its very end.**

With the Government contribution changing every month from July onwards, it is important that you are using a [payroll software](#) that makes calculating furloughed employee's pay easier.

Read: [The Impact the National Minimum Wage Rise has on Furloughed Employees](#)

Did you know?

BrightPay has a furlough pay calculator to help users with calculating an employee's furlough pay each pay period, and this includes support for flexible furlough which is something that many other payroll software providers do not support.

BrightPay also has a CJRS claim report to make it easier for the user when making a claim via HMRC's online claim portal.

5. How to implement furlough agreements

To avail of the furlough scheme, employers **must have confirmed to their employee in writing** that they have been furloughed. Employers are responsible for deciding the hours and shift patterns that their employees will work, and so employees can work as much or as little as the business needs.

For employees who are moving from full-time furlough to flexible furlough or vice versa, you will also need to agree on this with the employee and keep a new written agreement that confirms the new furlough arrangement.

If an employee is already on a flexible furlough agreement, this can be varied to reflect any variation in the working pattern agreed between the parties. The employer does not need a new furlough agreement each time the worker's hours change and can instead issue an amendment if there is a change in working pattern.

[Click here](#) to access BrightPay's free furlough letter templates.

You must keep a written record of furlough agreements for 6 years, along with records of the number of hours your employees are working and the number of hours that they are furloughed for.

Fortunately, employee self-service is about more than leave. You can also upload documents and distribute them to employees. Not only is it a safe way of storing the agreements for the required six years, but you can also use it to communicate with employees who are working remotely. Employees will receive a notification on their smartphone or tablet to let them know you have shared a document with them.

When a document is shared with employees via BrightPay Connect, employers can also track which employees accessed each document, and when. Bear in mind that the employee does not have to provide a written response to the furlough agreement, and so it's a great way to protect you as an employer.

6. How to manage employee sick leave

The rules in relation to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) have changed as a result of COVID-19. Even as we return to work, the risk of the virus is still present, and so it is important for all employers to understand how these changes will affect them.

HMRC have advised that if an employee needs to take time off sick or to self-isolate due to COVID-19, the first 3 waiting days that normally apply for SSP will be disregarded and the employee will be entitled to receive SSP from the first day. Therefore, where an employee is off sick, it is important to be aware of whether or not it is due to a COVID-19 related illness.

With the Coronavirus Statutory Sick Pay Rebate Scheme, the employer can claim for up to 2 weeks sick leave for an employee who cannot work due to COVID-19, and also for those who are self-isolating or shielding, subject to eligibility criteria.

Furloughed employees retain their statutory rights, including their right to Statutory Sick Pay, and so furloughed employees who become ill must be paid at least the rate of SSP, subject to them meeting the eligibility criteria. You can claim back from both the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the SSP rebate scheme for the same employee but not for the same period of time.

BrightPay includes the option for 'COVID-19 Related Sick Leave'. By choosing this option, the payroll software will automatically apply any SSP due to the employee from day one. Whereas, if you were to choose the normal SSP, the software will take into account the usual 3 waiting days.
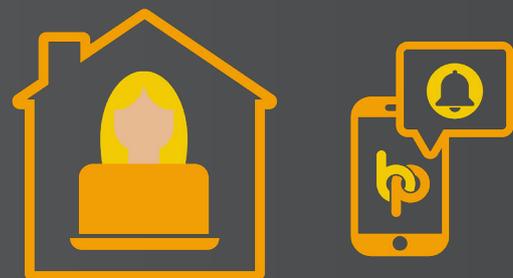
An SSP Claim Report is also available in BrightPay to assist users in calculating the amounts needed for input into HMRC's Coronavirus SSP Rebate Scheme online service.

7. Communicating with remote employees

Regular communication is an essential way to help your teams adjust to home working. Without it, your employees can feel disconnected, morale can dip, and priorities can become confused.
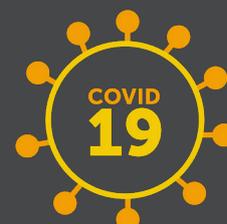
With an online employer and employee portal, you can communicate directly with individual employees, teams or the whole company at the touch of a button. The more you can do to communicate with staff about the measures you are taking and to reassure them of the precautions in place, the better.

Sending this important information directly to the employee's phone is so much more powerful than simply sending a company-wide email. The click rate of a push notification is 7 times higher than that of email, and so BrightPay Connect is a great way of communicating with employees when it comes to important updates. Plus, you have a record of which employees have read the documents and policies.

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There are many useful documents that you can send to employees who are working remotely or on furlough leave, including:

- A COVID-19 Safe Working Policy to let employees know what steps you have taken to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace and to set out any responsibilities that employees will have upon return to the workplace.

- A Returning to The Workplace Staff Survey to help you identify any concerns that employees feel about coming back to work and potential gaps in your policy that need to be addressed.

- A COVID-19 Declaration Survey regarding the return to work to ensure that employees do not have COVID-19 symptoms and have not been in close contact with any confirmed or suspected cases over the last 14 days.

- Information and guidance, for example, the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, guidance on staying at home and self-isolating if you do have symptoms, and information on how to get tested for COVID-19.

- Furlough agreements or information relating to furlough leave and furlough pay.

- Other policies such as a Working from Home Policy, a Return to Work Policy, and a Vaccine Policy.

A Vaccine Policy – The Dos and Don'ts

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, it is the employer's responsibility to provide a safe working environment for their employees, therefore it is not unreasonable for an employer to want to have their workforce vaccinated. However, while individuals have been recommended to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, it is not mandatory in the UK.

While employers cannot force their employees to get vaccinated, they can emphasise the importance of the vaccine to their employees and that it would help to return to business as normal. Employers should also provide as much information from reliable sources, such as gov.uk, to educate and inform their employees. An employer may also highlight legitimate circumstances where vaccination is not recommended.

Remember to be mindful and respectful of an individual's right to not avail of the vaccine and plan accordingly by offering alternative working arrangements, where appropriate, and avoid any situation which may constitute discrimination; thus leading to legal issues.

Click here to find out more about vaccinations and the workplace, including managing employees who refuse vaccination and data protection concerns.

Check out our sister product, __Bright Contracts__, which now includes a COVID-19 Vaccine Policy that applies to any business.

This policy is in addition to the COVID-19 Response Plan, Temporary Working From Home Policy and Hybrid Working Policy currently available on Bright Contracts.

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Conclusion

As we look forward to lockdown easing, employers and HR managers must prepare for the safe return of employees to the workplace, with the implementation of a Vaccine Policy. In addition, employers will need to adapt to a future of hybrid working, supporting those working at home and in the office. The document upload feature in BrightPay Connect can help you achieve this. It ensures company documents are organised and that employees can securely access HR information anytime, anywhere.

Now is the time for employers and HR personnel to futureproof the management of annual leave as lockdown lifts to ensure the process runs as smooth as possible. Making simple changes and investing in a HR management tool with integrated cloud access for department heads and managers, can save money, improve productivity and increase profits.

Things can – and should – be much simpler in your HR department. And with **BrightPay Connect**, that's the new reality. By introducing BrightPay Connect's self-service app to your employees, you're giving them the power to access payslips and HR documents, request annual leave and update their personal details, eliminating the admin-heavy HR and payroll tasks that most businesses still face.

Your Next Steps

1 Attend a free online demonstration of BrightPay

Discover more ways that BrightPay and BrightPay Connect can help you eliminate time-consuming HR tasks.

Book a Payroll Demo

2 Start a 60-day free trial of BrightPay

BrightPay's 60-day free trial is a great way to discover just how easy BrightPay is to use without having to make any commitment.

Download Now

3 Join our free COVID-19 webinars

Hear from the payroll and HR experts on the latest changes to the furlough scheme and how they will affect your business.

Register Now

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About BrightPay

Established in 1991, BrightPay offers payroll and HR software products to UK and Irish businesses and accountants. We provide powerful software that is both cost-effective and easy to use. BrightPay has a 99% satisfaction rate and 5-star ratings on both Software Advice and Trustpilot. Currently, our products are used to process the payroll for over **320,000 businesses (and counting)** across the UK and Ireland.

BrightPay Payroll

Payroll Software of the Year 2018 & 2019 | COVID-19 Hero Award

BrightPay is an award-winning payroll software that makes managing payroll quick and easy. The desktop-based payroll software is available for both Windows and Mac and licences can be installed on up to 10 PCs. BrightPay is fully HMRC recognised, supports all RTI submission types and includes full auto enrolment functionality. New and improved features include integration with accounting software and the ability to pay employees directly through the payroll software. **Find out more**.

BrightPay Connect

Optional Cloud Add-On | Online Self-Service Portals

BrightPay Connect is an optional cloud add-on to BrightPay's desktop payroll software that introduces powerful online features including an automated cloud backup, online employer dashboards, annual leave management, secure document distribution and an employee self-service portal. The payroll is still processed on the desktop application of BrightPay but the payroll information is stored online on a secure cloud server. **Find out more**.

Bright Contracts

Ready-to-use Staff Handbooks and Employment Contracts

Bright Contracts is a software package that has everything you need to create and manage a professional staff handbook and employment contracts for each of your employees. Getting these in place has traditionally been an expensive, complicated, and time-consuming process. Bright Contracts makes it quick and easy. **Find out more**.

Here at BrightPay we take environmental responsibility very seriously and are committed to developing our business towards ecological sustainability at both a company and an individual level. **Read more about our sustainability journey**.