**Why returning to the workplace will be a huge transition for many**

Last week I worked a full day in the office on campus for the first time in over a year and to say it felt strange is an understatement. I didn’t sleep well for the three nights leading up to it and in hindsight I think I was nervous and anxious about the many ways in which my working day was about to change, again.

I have been really looking forward to being back on campus for weeks now and yet the nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach when I arrived made it feel like I was starting a new job, not returning to the place I have worked for over four years. I just couldn’t understand this until I sat down with a friend and discussed how I had felt going onto campus and how my anxiety reduced as the day went on and I got used to being there.

In addition to the enormous change to my working environment, there are of course all of the new procedures and rules on site to make it Covid-safe, and although they are part of our everyday lives now, and mask-wearing has become second nature, it added a layer of uncertainty to my return and extra things to think about and get used to doing – I walked around in a big circle just trying to get into the Ref!

**We are living in a new normal, not simply switching back to how things were before Covid**

One way or another, Covid-19 has impacted all of our lives, and it is completely normal and expected for us to feel uncertain and concerned about things that perhaps before we never would have spent time thinking about.

Individually, we have had to deal with a host of different changes and challenges in our personal and professional lives, and it’s important to realise how far we have come and how much resilience we have shown. Who would have thought when we left the offices in March 2020 that we would spend this long under restrictions as we have done?

**Tips for making the transition**

Many staff are already back to working on campus, or have been for a while, but you may still find these factors interesting to consider.

* **Plan and Prepare**

I found I was thinking a lot about the practical aspects of the return, less so about the role itself, but considerations like how to get to work in the safest way, what technology I would have available / need, whether I could organise meetings online still if working in a louder environment… the list went on and although it did stop me sleeping, it helped to think through the various practicalities and how I could prepare myself.

* **Take things one step at a time**

It wasn’t an overnight transition for me and it probably won’t be for you – don’t expect too much from yourself straight away. I am starting with two days a week in the office and will increase it gradually, not putting pressure on myself to always stick to it, but trying to as much as possible as I know it helps me personally to have a routine. Things will look different for everyone but it will help to keep communicating with colleagues and managers to understand their plans and expectations.

## Monitor and review how you are getting on

Similar to this time last year, as things change it is important to have regular check-ins with yourself and with your line manager. Ask the questions Is there anything we could do differently to work better together? and Do I have the support I need to make this a successful transition? This way you can address issues as they come up and start to plan and prepare together.

**Line managers: what you can do to support your staff through the transition**

1. **Look after yourself**

Most of us have heard the analagy about fitting your own oxygen mask before helping others, and it definitely applies to line managers at the moment. Make sure you have the information and support that you need in order to reassure your own staff and plan for everyone’s safe return.

1. **Be aware of your team members’ situations and challenges they may face**
* Personal circumstances – everyone’s situation is unique
* Concerns around returning to campus if they have not yet been vaccinated
* Changes to their work environment
* Personnel changes
* Processes and procedures on campus
* Workload – be prepared for differences in productivity
* Technology – does your team have what they need to work effectively in both locations?
* Travel – factoring the time into their day, concerns over safety, incurring costs…
* Responsibilities outside of work – many colleagues will have childcare to consider, may have caring responsibilities or other commitments which have also been impacted because of Covid
1. **Make the most of the resources available to you on Staffnet and from your own line manager**
* [Supporting your staff](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/hr/health-and-wellbeing/supporting-your-staff.aspx) (resources for managers)
* [Managers Toolkit – accessing support and resources](https://staffnet.stmarys.ac.uk/coronavirus/Documents/Managers%20Toolkit%20-%20accessing%20available%20support%20and%20resources.pdf)
* [Safe return to campus Managers’ Guidance](https://staffnet.stmarys.ac.uk/coronavirus/Documents/Safe%20return%20to%20campus%20-%20Managers%20Guidance.pdf)
1. **Have a return-to-work conversation with each of your staff**

This is a chance to identify your work priorities and raise any concerns or questions that you have, but mainly to ask how they are feeling about the transition to blended working and what concerns they have.

Balance and compromise will be key – I have found it difficult at times, but it is important to do your best to strike a balance between business needs and productivity and the needs and concerns of your staff. There are bound to be tough decisions to make and not everyone on your team is likely to be happy with them, but I have found it has helped to explain my decisions and be as reasonable as I possibly can.

1. **Regularly conduct a Team Stress Risk Assessment**

Do you know how stressed your team members are feeling? Is there a lot of pressure on them which you may not always be aware of, especially working remotely? It may be worth asking them and assessing the team’s stress levels as a whole and individually.

There is information on Staffnet about conducting a [Stress Risk Assessment](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/hr/hr-forms-policies-and-procedures/overview.aspx) (See Health, Safety and Wellbeing section), which can really help line managers to identify and address issues before they arise and support staff in ways which will reduce their stress levels and in turn improve their mental wellbeing.

**Finally…**

However long we have been in our role, or at St Mary’s, we may be physically returning to the same place, but very few things will be the same.

**Everyone is finding and navigating their own path.** It is important to be kind to yourself and to be kind to others as we all try to create our ‘new normal’.

**More resources and tips:**

[People Manager’s Mental Health Toolkit](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/hr/docs/health-and-wellbeing/mental-health-toolkit-people-managers.pdf)

LinkedIn Learning Training: [How to Support your Employees’ Wellbeing](https://www.linkedin.com/learning-login/share?account=90562354&forceAccount=false&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.linkedin.com%2Flearning%2Fhow-to-support-your-employees-well-being%3Ftrk%3Dshare_ent_url%26shareId%3DgG3yE5u9SJig%252FHOPvwk3ag%253D%253D)