

# Returning to the Workplace: Navigating the Hazy Medium-Term –

## BC Work & Family Center

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[1 article](#)

It has been a busy few weeks at the [Center for Work & Family](#) with conversations and concerns among BC Workforce Roundtable Members not surprisingly focused on returning to the workplace. While weeks ago the dominant theme was managing the transition to remote work, now both employees and leaders are planning and preparing for a return to the workplace. But huge uncertainty and very real barriers to returning persist: a lack of child care, still-evolving protocols to ensure safe work environments, a fear of returning among employees, and above all the trajectory of the virus and the local public health conditions, which will dictate when a phased re-opening can take place for employers.

We have entered a period of “chronic crisis” in which individuals and employers will need to develop coping strategies that are sustainable and allow them to adapt over the long run. **The energy and willingness to adapt quickly during the early days and weeks of the crisis are now giving way to both a sense of exhaustion and the need to plan for a hazy medium-term.**

In our semi-annual Roundtable Meeting two weeks ago, and several [open forums](#) among our members since then, we have heard from members grappling with how to support employees who are fearful or unable to return to the workplace. Top of mind is **how much discretion they can give employees to determine how and when they return**, or continue to perform their jobs

remotely. Many of our members have announced that they will allow employees to continue to work from home for the foreseeable future or for a specified grace period such as 90 days. Others are expanding child care benefits where they can, including increasing the number of backup care days and reimbursing employees for caregivers of their choice, whom they hire and vet on their own.

Our members are very focused on **how to embed this type of flexibility and autonomy into the culture of their organizations for the long term, including shifting managers' mindsets** around how and where work gets done. Key to this is standardizing the process by which jobs or aspects of jobs, not individuals, are evaluated to determine what can be done remotely and what must be done on site. In addition, many are using employee sentiment or pulse surveys to gauge employee attitudes about and barriers to returning. With an objective set of data in hand, managers can make informed and equitable decisions about phasing employees back to the workplace. Finally, leaders are sharing their own work from home arrangements and explicitly asking managers to model and encourage this themselves.

Perhaps the biggest concern among our members is employee well-being and **the burnout that employees are beginning to feel from this prolonged period of uncertainty and stress**. With work and family responsibilities so deeply intertwined, employees are working longer hours than ever and finding it hard to turn "off". Developing resilience in individuals and organizations is more important than ever.

Our members are undertaking an impressive array of approaches to address burnout and promote resilience and mental well-being: webinars on managing stress, yoga and mindfulness sessions, regularly scheduled "well-being breaks" and "mid-day mingles", and increased access to health coaches and work-life therapists. Similar to the "many small solutions" approach to COVID that Gary Pisano suggests in his [HBR article](#), the cumulative impact of our members' efforts in this area has the potential to be enormous, especially as employees return to the workplace.

The Center is privileged to work with so many innovative and thoughtful organizations. We look forward to continuing to facilitate sharing best practices among our members and helping them navigate this "hazy medium-term". As organizations continue to prepare for a return to the workplace, they will be learning how to adapt from each other and, we hope, develop sustainable strategies that promote greater employee autonomy, flexibility and resilience.

*Please visit the [Center's website](#) for additional resources, including upcoming events and tip sheets.*