

NeuroTeamC19

Returning to Work

“Sometimes it is the people no one can imagine anything of who do the things no one can imagine.”

Alan Turing OBE FRS, English mathematician, computer scientist, logician, cryptanalyst, philosopher, and theoretical biologist.



Creased
Puddle



Welcome

A message from Creased Puddle CEO Caroline Turner



Although we are still a long way from life getting back to normal, people will start to return to their jobs and their physical places of work over the coming months.

Many will have spent an extended period of time working from home and others will have spent many months not working at all. Lifting the spirits of returning employees will be a crucial ingredient for a sustainable future.

It might surprise you to know that a minimum of 17% of your workforce will fall into a neuro minority group such as, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADD/ADHD, Autism or Tourettes. The prospect of returning to work, or to the workplace, will be a challenge for many.

Our expertise lies in developing and supporting neurominorities, yet with COVID-19 we are seeing our services extending to other conditions such as Chronic Fatigue, Fibromyalgia and Depression. The team at Creased Puddle have put together this guide for you, the employer, to assist you in supporting your teams as they return to work and understand some of the challenges a neurodivergent member of your team may experience.

Thank you to the many Neurodiversity specialists who have worked with us to put this guide together. We hope you will find it helpful, but if you need any additional support the Creased Puddle team are here to help.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caroline Turner". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Caroline Turner
Founder and Director of Creased Puddle Ltd

The Impact of Covid on people

According to the British Medical Journal, many of the anticipated consequences of quarantine and associated social and physical distancing measures are themselves key risk factors for mental health issues.

Mitchell Elkind, professor of neurology and epidemiology at Columbia University, refers to the effects being “long-term neurocognitive problems,” including decreased concentration and memory.

We also need to pay attention to our teams who have had COVID-19 as there is much research that patients are reporting a long-term impact on fatigue, concentration and mood.

Potential effects on your employees?

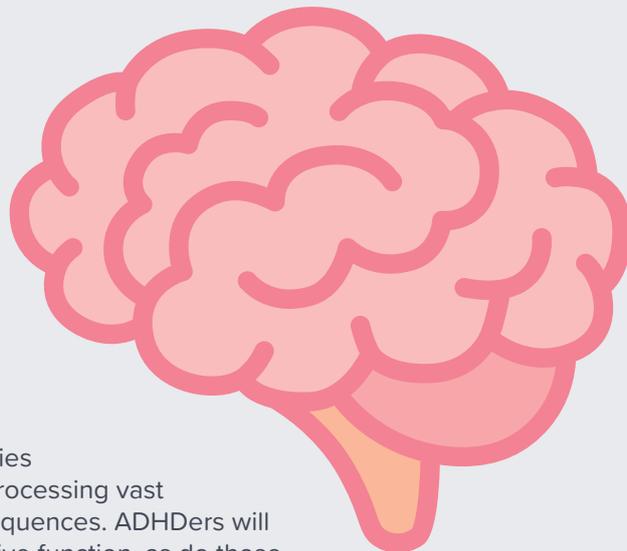


The effects on those returning to work are likely to be wide ranging and complex. They may be physical, mental or emotional depending on the individual and the reasons why they have been away from the workplace. Understanding what their journey and experience away from the workplace has been will be key in supporting them. They could be returning:

1. From being furloughed
2. To the physical office space
3. From sick leave due to having COVID 19

Each scenario will pose different challenges for the individual.

Executive function



Executive Function is an umbrella term for many abilities including: planning, prioritising, short-term memory, processing vast amounts of new information and following multiple sequences. ADHDers will know only too well the challenges of impaired executive function, as do those Autistic and Dyslexic employees.

For some individuals, being away from the stresses of a daily commute and a busy office environment, may have helped to improve their executive function. Coming back to the workplace may re-highlight these challenges as they have to deal with more distractions and stress caused by travel.

Others however, may have found the lack of routine and structure caused by working from home to have caused a decline in their executive function. On return to the workplace it may take time for their executive function to return to what it was before and that could cause self-doubt and frustration.

What this shows is there will be a period of adjustment for neurodivergent employees coming back into the workplace, and it is the role of the employer to recognise that and understand what steps they can take to support individuals as they return.

Sensory Overload

The impact on executive function in a busy, distracting environment may also result in Sensory Overload for some individuals.

Certainly for those who are autistic, the stress of having to commute to the workplace once again is likely to be further exacerbated by the need to wear a mask as part of their role, and on their journey to and from the workplace.

Signs to look out for:

Staff missing deadlines or taking longer to finish projects

Difficulty keeping on track with conversations, particularly in longer meetings, whether on Zoom or in a new socially distancing office

Individuals missing verbal instructions

Some may start to become frustrated when commencing a new project, when previously they would have got on and even got ahead

There may even be staff who are less productive

Energy drains

Challenges with executive function and sensory overload may also be energy drains which can manifest as physical symptoms such as fatigue, depression and sickness.

Friend and associate of Creased Puddle, **Helen Needham who is the founder of Me.Decoded**, talks about being more productive whilst working remotely and the possibility of being less productive by going back into the workspace. Some of your staff might actually become less productive.

What can we do as managers, colleagues and employees?

There are some simple and practical steps we can take as managers, colleagues and individuals to help minimise the impact of returning to work. Please share these with your teams and use them as a conversation starter.

- 1 Pace, Plan, Prioritise** is the advice given by Royal College of Occupational Therapists – whether your team are recovering from a home bout of COVID-19 or they were hospitalised. Similar advice is given to many with Chronic Fatigue.
- 2 Rest** – take breaks, take micro 30 second breaks. Mini mindfulness can be excellent. Simply pause and take all your attention from your busy head and notice your toes. Yes your toes. Take 3 breaths. Your usual breath. And notice, where your attention goes the energy flows and you will slow down.
- 3 Phased** return to the ‘work space’. Build in a staged return to work rather than jumping in. Members of the Diversity and Inclusion NE group shared their strategy of inviting staff in for one hour.
- 4** Taking advantage of the **quiet vs busy times** rather than the traditional back-to-back meetings. Learn to block out ‘down time’ before the next meeting or even arrange to end all meetings 5 minutes early for a bit of down time.
- 5 Manage the Noise!** Video, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Googlehangouts are all a huge drain on the brain. Those people not on these calls can become overwhelmed sitting along from someone who is constantly online! And for the person constantly on these calls it can be even more draining.
- 6 Mindfulness** can be 1 minute, 5 minutes or 20 minutes. Deep mindfulness is a way of life, a way of being, yet many of the principles of Mindfulness can be a gift to those of us feeling overstretched and drained.
- 7** Encourage your team to **go for a walk**. When we walk our biology uses both the left and right hand side of the brain. It engages the full brain. So, if we are stressed or struggling with a task, having a walk allows both sides of the brain to gently work together as they take in the environment – better still if your offices are near nature.



What else can employers do?

- Connect with the great coaches and psychologists of the Creased Puddle network. They are all hugely talented and experienced at working one on one to build confidence, strategies, new ways of working when the current ways no longer seem to be impactful.
- Train up Neurodiversity Champions (roles similar to those of Mental Health First Aiders). This will mean that not only can they support neurominority employees, they can support those who are struggling with COVID-19 as we are seeing cross over symptoms.

Case Study: Sky Betting and Gaming

Educating, raising awareness, creating space for uncomfortable conversations, and sharing perspectives is a huge part of how we approach Inclusion and Wellbeing at Sky Betting and Gaming. We work towards devolving accountability to all leaders and employees to achieve our People Vision; to build and promote a culture where difference is valued and everyone can be the best version of themselves.

We know that in times of crisis, Inclusion and Wellbeing can often be the first things to be sacrificed, so throughout the pandemic we continued and dialled up on our work to ensure our employees were supported to be their best.

We are now beginning to think about our return to the office and one of the pieces of work that's really helped us with this is our brand-new Neurodiversity Training offering, which we built in collaboration with Creased Puddle.

In November 2020 we worked with Creased Puddle to deliver a Train the Trainer course for 12 employees from our People Team and Wellbeing Champion community, who are our trained Mental Health First Aiders. We created 4, 90-minute, bite-size workshops that can be delivered on an on-demand basis to employees and leaders across our business; Appreciating Neurodiversity, Appreciating Autism, Appreciating ADHD and Appreciating Dyslexia and Dyspraxia.

The aim of the training is to help us become better equipped to support and empower our neurodiverse candidates and employees, both present and future. This includes being able to understand and support employees with the everyday challenges they may face at work and really utilise and leverage their strengths.

It has also helped us to think about how we will support our neurodiverse employees back to work.

Supporting our Neurodiverse employees in returning to work

One solution doesn't fit all

Throughout the pandemic we regularly surveyed all of our employees to determine how they

would like to work at SBG in the future. We have a huge appreciation for the fact everyone's brain works differently and therefore we need different environments to be at our best. As a result of this, our return to work will be a blended approach of working from home and collaborating in the office, which teams will be empowered to self-manage based on their needs.

Creating the right environment

We've been looking at the way our new Head Office is constructed to create an inclusive and accessible environment on our return, as well as simple practices and processes we can put in place to reduce anxiety of a return, such as preview videos and early open days to explore how the office looks and feels. We've also looked at how we create accessible communications both internally and externally whether that be the colours, fonts and writing style we use, through to integrating assistive technology into our platforms.

Giving leaders the right tools and confidence

Our leaders will play a huge role in supporting our people back to work. As such our Executive Leadership Team experienced a **virtual neurodiversity workshop** to help them think about our return to the office with a neurodiverse lens. Our People Team are building a Future Ways of Working Playbook to give managers an on-demand tool to support them to support our people and our Skills and Development Team are building a Virtual Leadership offering to provide managers with the knowledge and skills to manage teams in the new world.

As well as benefitting our neurodivergent employees, we know many adjustments can have a wider impact, in creating an inclusive environment for all of us. As the workplace experiences the symptoms of an inequitable world, we know we will always face challenges, however we will always seek best practice from expert organisations such as Creased Puddle and the life experiences of our employees to build a better place to work for our people and support them through times of change.

Holly Straker

Inclusion Lead, Sky Betting and Gaming

Kate Lumsden

People Support Principal, Sky Betting and Gaming

Planning for a Return to Work

“Many of my clients are now looking to plan the return back to the office. There is a new focus on a hybrid model office, changing how the office functions and the expectations of the workforce to be present in an office environment. It has been amazing to see more businesses offering more opportunity for choice and flexibility than ever before.

The process of moving to remote working has forced many companies to engage differently with their employees - and more frequently - as they have navigated difficult and challenging times. We are now seeing companies focused on asking what their employees want or need for that return, using multiple mediums and much more frequently than ever before”.

“ Flexibility and choice has always been one of the most important benefits for candidates but it now tops the list. ”

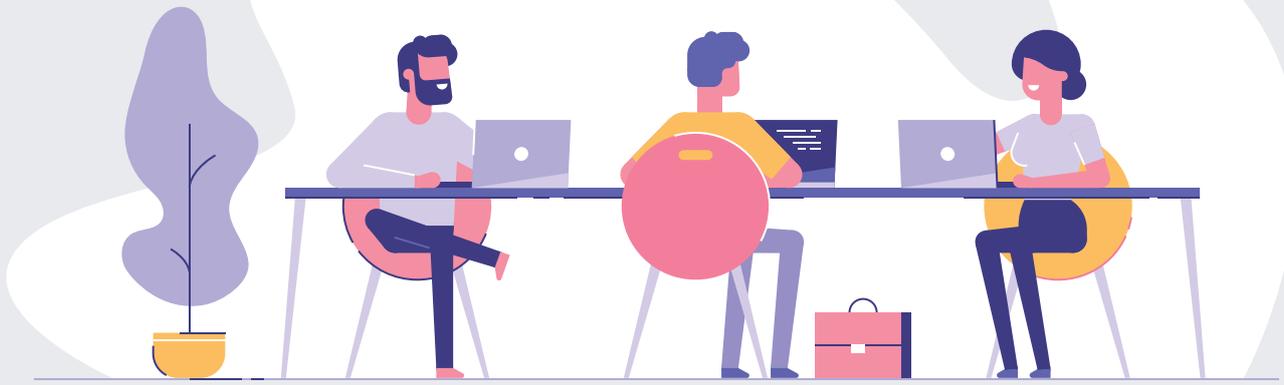
Nicole Minuke Enterprise Client Manager UK: Spring IT & Engineering

9 Top Tips from Do-It Solutions

Professor Amanda Kirby CEO of DO-IT SOLUTIONS and Neurodiversity researcher has produced the following graphic.



Getting Ready for a Return to Work



Assistive Technology and Ergonomics - CBairdConsultancy

The shift to home working has been a huge change for many of us, and with the prospects of returning to the office looking increasingly hopeful at some point this year, now is a good time for employers to start looking at how this is going to impact their workforce. With respect to the use of **Assistive Technology (AT) and ergonomic adjustments** such as specialist mice and keyboards, desktop equipment and ergonomic seating, it's easy to overlook these needs in the move back to office-based work.

One of the first changes to consider is a very simple question of **portability**. Not every employee will be returning to an office full-time. Ideally, employers will be offering their staff a choice of how they work, with much more flexibility in work location being offered than was thought possible in the world pre-Covid. This means that staff may either have two computer systems (one in each location), or more likely, will have access to a laptop that can be taken from one place to another. If this latter option is the case, some adjustments that should be considered include:

1 Docking stations: Access to power sockets in offices can often be difficult, if not nigh on impossible. Unless there is an easily accessible power socket on the surface of a desk, consider putting in place a docking station or additional power supply that can be left plugged in at the employee's office desk. Not only does this reduce the risk of a power supply being left at home (or at the office), but it means the employee does not have to crawl about under a desk to find a plug socket. This is especially relevant if an employee has a physical health condition affecting their mobility.

2 Ergonomic accessories: Equipment such as specialist mice and keyboards can be bulky to transport and may run the same risk of being forgotten as a power supply does. If an employee is to work from both home and an office, then consider having two sets of equipment to ensure that they are able to work safely and comfortably at all times.

Where **Assistive Technology (AT)** software is in use, there are particular issues that employers need to be aware of with a potential move back to office working:

1 Software licenses: Additional software licenses may be required for some employees. This is especially so if the employee has been given a laptop to work from at home, and a desktop computer to use in their office. However, this is not the case with every piece of software as some will allow the user to carry out more than one installation per software license or subscription. Check the license agreement (or ask the supplier) for each item of software to find out what limitations there are on the number of installations per license.

- 2 Software setup:** Some items of AT software may need to be set up specifically to suit a different working environment - one example of this is voice recognition software. A simple change of headset, or the amount of background noise that is present can have quite a big impact unless the software is configured to take this into account.
- 3 User settings:** Where two different computer systems are to be used by the employee, settings for their AT software may have to be replicated from one machine to another. Not every user will be comfortable doing this themselves and some may need support from people who are experienced in using the software to copy settings across.
- 4 Training:** While some employers have been amazingly supportive of their employees and have helped them to make the transition to working from home easily, this isn't true for everybody. Some employees have lost access to AT software since moving to working from home as it had previously been installed on their office desktop computer. In these cases, the employee may benefit from a few sessions of refresher training to help them get back up to speed with the software they had previously been making use of. We all forget how to do things if we're not doing them regularly!

- 5 Wellbeing** may have gone a little astray over lockdown as some employees may have been working at the kitchen table, in the bedroom using a chest of drawers as a desk, or as I saw someone sitting at their ironing board!

As a result, bad ergonomic and poor **postural habits** may have crept in that need to be addressed to make sure that we are working safely. This may mean additional **DSE** screening is required to remind employees of the importance of things like how their workstation should be set up to reduce the risk of bad posture creating issues such as back pain. In particular, the use of laptops as a main workstation is a very real hazard that employers need to bear in mind and make adequate provision for.

Addressing these points before they create problems is infinitely better than waiting until employees begin to take time off work as a result of poor workstation setup.

Colin Baird is the Director of CBaird Consultancy and provides technology training and ergonomic assessments.

Coaching #return

Our coaches at Creased Puddle report an average 7 out of 10 clients have asked for coaching around returning to the office.

Interestingly, (anecdotally) our clients who are autistic, ADHD dyslexic or dyspraxic appear to have two clear themes:

- Remote working has allowed them to shine, relax, remove distractions, reduce sensory overwhelm and have created a new way of working
- Remote working has been isolating and a challenge being away from the team, structure has been the greatest challenge

“Lockdown was a drain emotionally, I never realised being ADHD I needed people so much. I felt like a caged tiger. Needing that stimulus from others voices and bodies. Now I am concerned I will be like a wild tiger when we get back into the office. I need to calm myself down a bit.”

In our 2020 publication on going into analysing remote working we focussed on the limbic system. Neuroscience tells us when faced with danger our brains can fall into the primitive part of the limbic system – that part which triggers fight, flight or freeze. You may notice:

Fight:

Louder in voice, faster in speech, argumentative or controlling. Complaining that now is not the time to return. Blaming the government for getting things wrong.

Flight:

Avoiding or cancelling start back meetings/interactions; avoiding the ‘trial hour’ back at the workplace, almost becoming invisible. Not engaging in conversations around how the office has been prepared for COVID safe.

Freeze:

Stopping mid-sentence, forgetting what they were about to say, memory blocks creating small inconsistent errors. Staying out of the conversation when asked ‘how prepared are you to return to the office?’ Having no opinion on whether they want to return or not. Avoiding letting you know exactly when they can come into the office.



When our teams return, it is about getting back into that neo cortex. That part of the brain responsible for creativity, learning, linking and connecting. The part of the brain that learns, develops and has those out-of-the box ideas. This publication has given a host of ideas on how to reconnect to that brilliance of the neo cortex and how to settle the limbic system.

There is also a part of the brain that is known for our need for rules, what is right and wrong, procedures and our tribal and herding instincts. This is often referred to as the mammalian brain. The part of us that needs others to feel settled and move on.

Learning how our brain works can have a life changing effect on neurodivergent clients.

Control

We talked about control in 2020, taking a tip from Covey, circles of control and influence. And control remains a focus as we #return. Some may be feeling out of control and losing the order they created in their home office. Others will be running to knock the door down and regain the order and control which our businesses can give employees.

Our coaches are finding this model is helping many clients to explore the areas they can control and let go of those they cannot. This allows that engagement with the neo cortex and our creative thinking brain once again.



Listening

A word from Cheryl Winter, our Operations Director and Lead Neurodiversity Coach, here at Creased Puddle.



LISTEN.

Then ask again and **LISTEN.**

Listen out for:

- The overwhelm.
- Listen out for the getting stuck.
- Listen for the stress.
- Listen out for the reptilian brain taking over.
- Listen for that shift back into the neo-cortex, that connecting learning centre of the brain as staff problem solve themselves into this new way of working.

Our coaches at Creased Puddle are only too aware of the need for their neurominority clients to download when they have reached overwhelm. There is no stopping it, it simply flows on and on and on. Most people find it really helpful to have someone to talk to.

Managers operate much as our coaches do, by using their greatest talent – listening. Listen to that download, and pause, and pause again before you ask one great question.

“When all of this is happening, what would you like to have happen, right now?”

The question brings them back into the here and now. Yet take note, they may not provide a cohesive answer, you may hear more overwhelm and downloading.

Pause, listen and ask once more ***“And when all of that is happening, what would you like to have happen right now?”***

It may appear an unusually constructed question, yet it is one which may help your team as they prepare to and eventually do #return to the workplace.

‘What would you like to have happen’ is a key question taken from the coaching field of Clean Language www.cleanlanguage.co.uk These tools were created by David Grove, a Psychotherapist working with those in trauma and PTSD.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cheryl Winter'.

Cheryl Winter
Operations Director and Neurodiversity Coach Creased Puddle

Helpful links: Research on the impact of COVID 19

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/dse/>

Health and Safety Executive Guidance

<https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1515>

British Medical Journal : Covid-19: Mental health consequences of pandemic need urgent research, paper advises

<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/risk/our-insights/covid-19-implications-for-business?>

McKinsey & Company - COVID-19: Implications for business

<https://www.advisory.com/daily-briefing/2020/06/02/covid-health-effects>

Advisory Board - What we know (so far) about the long-term health effects of Covid-1

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-53084368>

BBC News - Coronavirus: Calls for awareness of long-term effects

<https://www.rcot.co.uk/recovering-covid-19-post-viral-fatigue-and-conserving-energy>

Royal College of Occupational Therapists - Recovering from COVID-19: Post viral-fatigue and conserving energy

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/helping-people-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-manage-masks-and-covid-19-tests-2020061020089>

Harvard Health Publishing - Helping people with autism spectrum disorder manage masks and COVID-19 tests

<https://www.medecoded.com/adjusting-to-a-new-way-of-life-neurodivergent/>

Me Decoded - Adjusting to a new way of life - lockdown and beyond for the neurodivergent

https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/dont-confuse-flexible-working-with-remote-working/?ID=zzrzf~qt9tzf~qnxhz~W4ik~Ky0gk&utm_campaign=PTDID-SAGE-160221-DE&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&utm_content=newsletter

Personnel Today - 'Don't confuse flexible working with remote working'



Thank you for reading this guide, we hope you found it useful. If you would like to be part of our newsletter or want to know more about our day to day support for businesses, please get in touch:

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