

BACK IN THE SWING OF THINGS



A guide to coming
back to work after furlough



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BACK TO WORK

As the UK government's furlough scheme changes in August, we've pulled together this guide with some of the simple things you can do to make coming back to work a success.

Furlough is not a concept that was commonplace in the UK before March this year, so there isn't an established model of the best way to do things. However, at Obelisk Support we've helped hundreds of people who've taken longer career breaks to get back to work, so here's the best of our tips based on that experience.

Our intention is also for this guide to be a useful resource for employers to share as they manage the needs of their business and support those returning to work. The pandemic continues to require fresh reserves of flexibility and resilience from us all. This new challenge of teams re-forming will, I hope, be made a bit easier with this advice.

Wishing everyone the very best of luck as you settle back in,



DANA DENIS-SMITH

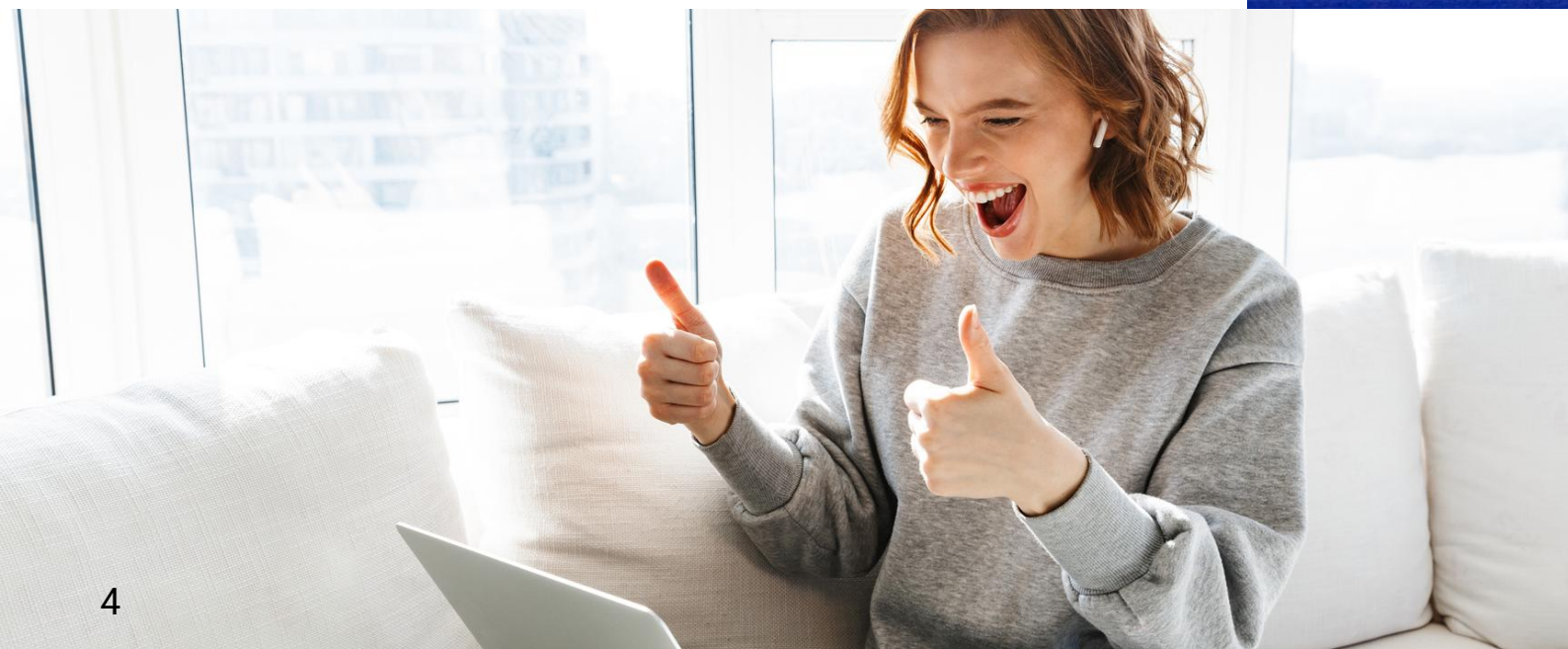
CEO, Obelisk Support

GET THE LOGISTICS STRAIGHT

First, you need to agree whether or not you will be coming back to work in the office or not. Many teams are still working remotely all or part of the time, so if you need to work from home, think about how this is going to work. In particular:

- Check your internet access - will it support video calls?
- Review your workspace - is it comfortable and quiet enough?
- Check whether there are any security issues or system access issues you need IT support with.

If you are going to be travelling into the office and you normally use public transport, then you'll need to make sure services are running as you expect or agree a different start/finish time with your employer. Finally, you may need to have childcare in place. With many Summer schemes and camps for school-age children not running as normal, this may mean that your availability is restricted until September. Ask about working flexible hours or outside the traditional 9-5:30 pattern temporarily.



PUT IN SOME PREP TIME

If you work in an area where there could be new regulations to get up to speed with, either pandemic related or not, spend some time before you start back catching up.

If you have access to a industry information service (for example, lawyers may have LexisPSL or TR's PLC), catch up with relevant briefings or newsletters. Alternatively, look at the relevant regulators' and government websites. Book out your first day back to go through your email and catch up with everything that you have missed.

To make sure you have some uninterrupted time, ask your line manager if it's OK to let colleagues know you are back in the business a day later. On that first day, schedule a call with your line manager so that they can give you their take on any changes that have happened in the organisation while you've been away. At the same time, ask them to clarify your immediate priorities and remember, these are likely to have changed. Ask them to take you through any changes in the team or the wider organisation - you may find that people have moved on while you've been away. Ask for a briefing on any key client or supplier contacts that have changed, as well as any changes to the standard positions that you take in negotiations.

Build on this agenda for your first one-to-one:

- *Personal catch up ...if you haven't been in touch while you've been off, catch up on their news*
- *Priorities...where do you need to focus? What's changed?*
- *People...new contacts, new roles/structures/reporting lines/responsibilities*
- *Processes...are there any new ways of working that have developed while you were away?*
How is working remotely going?

UP YOUR EQ

That's your emotional intelligence and you're going to need it to be working overtime as you settle back in. Everyone has had a very different experience over the past few months, some colleagues may've found lockdown difficult, or even be grieving, for others it may've been surprisingly positive. If you are picking tasks back up from those who have been working while you've been away, be prepared to be diplomatic. Work might've been approached differently to the way you would've done it, or not been completed at all. Remember that these have been extraordinary times and be kind.

At the same time, make sure that you do pick all your relevant work and responsibilities back up quickly. Some people may be reluctant to hand work back, so be sensitive but firm. Make it clear you are back in the business and expect to pick up the reins again. Be prepared for a period of adjustment. Colleagues may have got into new habits or routines while you have been away, especially if they have all been working remotely, so don't feel afraid to ask for extra information or ask to be invited to new calls or meetings.

You also need to be prepared for the fact that colleagues who have been working throughout may be feeling tired or burnt out, whilst being back at work may be energising for you. Unfortunately the media narrative of trips to the beach and yoga in the park hasn't created a realistic picture of the nature of being furloughed and some may feel, incorrectly, that you've enjoyed an extended holiday and be resentful. Be alert to any differences in energy levels with people you work with and try to mirror them in your own behaviour to show you empathise with them.

UP YOUR EQ

Finally, you need to be prepared for the fact that you or your colleagues may be grieving. Your organisation may have lost staff or customers to Covid-19, or a colleague may have lost a family member. It can be very difficult to know how to respond to others' grief, especially if you are the only person in the team who has been away. Similarly, if you have lost someone then others may find it hard to know how to behave around you. If you feel you need support, contact your organisation's employee assistance programme, a mental health first aider or a service like the Samaritans, Mind or Cruse.

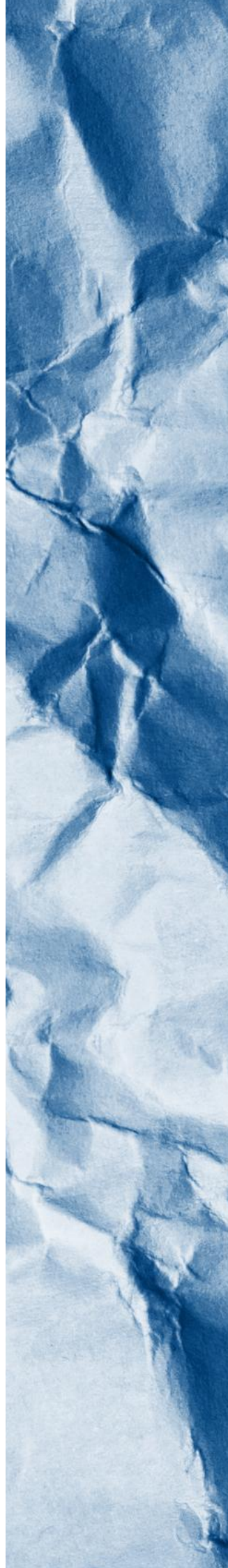


CUT YOURSELF SOME SLACK

You've been away from work for some months. Across that time, there are likely to have been many changes in your working environment and the colleagues and clients you work with. Expect to have a few weeks where things feel like harder work than normal while you get used to being back. Even with the most conscientious preparation, you are going to need some time to adapt. Help yourself, if you can, by;

- Reducing social and family commitments for a few weeks
- Making sure you get plenty of sleep
- If you are working from home, make sure you are still getting time outside at least twice a day, try faking a commute by taking a walk before and after work
- Again, if you are working from home, invest in a headset to make video calls more comfortable and remember to take screen breaks and rest your eyes
- Commit some time to something you find relieves any stress for you - for example mindful meditation, exercise or cooking.

It's also possible that time away from work has made you re-evaluate your working life and purpose. Your reflections may have been positive, and you find yourself full of new ideas and energy. Equally, you may have found that there are aspects of your working life that you feel need to change. Don't rush into action but don't dismiss these feelings either. If there are adjustments you can make to your existing role, plan to approach your manager after you've had time to settle back. If you feel a transformation is in order, then start to investigate other options, like a career change, company change or working freelance.



FIND SOME QUICK WINS

After a few months away from work, it's easy for your confidence to take a knock. One of the best ways to deal with this is to find one or two projects you can turn around quickly and with good results. Look at your workload and prioritise one or two things that are fairly straight-forward to start you off. This will help you settle back in, so you can then start the more complex work from a position of security. It's also a good way to show your line manager that you are back up and running.



PREEMPT OVERLOAD

If you start to feel overwhelmed in your first months back, don't suffer in silence. The best thing to do is to list all the work you need to tackle, prioritise it in terms of importance and urgency and, if you need some extra help to manage it, discuss re-prioritising tasks with your line manager. It's much better to tackle any issues early than to let work mount up without a plan. Be particularly alert to this if you have come back to work part-time. You need to recalibrate what you can deliver according to your reduced hours and make sure you and your manager have a shared understanding of what's possible. It might be tempting to try and power through, especially if you are worried that there might be redundancies or restructuring around the corner. However, if this causes you to burnout or make mistakes, it's self-defeating. Generally it's preferable to ask for support early on.



BUILD UP YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

Almost everything is easier when it's shared. If you're coming back to work remotely, you might have to work a little bit harder to make time to get together with other people coming back from furlough. Take the initiative and see if you can:

- Set up a video meeting so you can compare notes with other returners in your team or across the organisation
- Link up with other professional contacts outside your company and host a Zoom call
- Get together with friends from other industries in a similar position.

Having a bit of time to learn from others' experiences and get ideas for approaching common challenges can give your energy and confidence a boost.



LEAD FROM THE FRONT

If you're a manager, you need to remember to look after yourself as well as your team members, so that you have plenty of energy to share. If you have all been off on furlough at the same time, then encourage each other back into good new habits. If you have some team members who have been working and temporarily reporting into someone else, make sure that you have a handover meeting together when you return.

Again, make a conscious effort to look out for differences in people's attitude and energy levels. Make sure that there's no room for resentment to build up between those who have been furloughed and those who have worked through. Encourage information-sharing and make sure you create some time for social interaction if you are not back in the office - setting aside 30 minutes a week for a coffee & chat on video conference might be all that's needed to help everyone feel like a team again.

Try some other activities to help you move forward together:

- Organise a team meeting where you focus on your objectives for the rest of the year
- Ask those who have been out on furlough if they've had any ideas for working differently while they've been away
- Ask those who have been working what improvements you should keep going now everyone is back
- Check what people are missing about being in the office, if you're all still working at home, are there things you can replicate?
- Share positive progress and celebrate successes together wherever you can.

YOUR BACK TO WORK ACTION PLAN

At least a week before you start back:

1. Agree your hours and location with your line manager
2. If you're going to be working at home, sort out your space and IT
3. Get up to speed with changes in your area/new regulations
4. Clear your home diary as much as you can for a few weeks

On Day One back at work:

5. Read through all your email, including All-employee updates
6. Have a one-to-one with your line manager
7. At the end of the day, let your colleagues know you're back

In Week 1:

8. Catch up with colleagues and clients
9. Agree any handover of staff back to you if necessary
10. Agree any handover of live projects if necessary
11. Book a team All-hands meeting if you have direct reports

In Week 2:

12. Arrange a (socially distanced) meet-up with others coming back from furlough
13. Deliver a couple of quick-win projects
14. Make sure you have made time for your stress-relieving activity of choice

At the end of Month 1:

15. Take an hour to reflect - how are you feeling? Is there anything that's not going well? How can you tackle this? Who can help?



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We help clients of all sizes, from the FTSE100 to the newest start-ups, with legal work across 18 practice areas, including employment, compliance and commercial work.

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