



Nuance in a Binary World - Part 3

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In this more practically minded article, we are looking at the things to consider as we plan our return to the office. In part 1, we discussed the WHEN and HOW of our return. This time I'm describing a more holistic approach that focusses more on the human and psychological factors of our return.

The timing of the world's return to work will vary from country to country. In Singapore we're in the early days of Singapore's phase 1 mode, following the 'circuit-breaker' period that came to an end at the beginning of June. Details of the return phases will be determined by governments, based on advice from scientific bodies. While timing will vary from country to country, the principles are broadly consistent.

Fundamentally, this is an exercise in detailed operational planning. We are arguing here that the most challenging aspect is not the logistics, but the feelings of staff as they return. Of course, staff need reassurance that their employer will make the right preparations, and experience this consistently for their confidence to rise over time. But a safe return isn't solely the responsibility of our employers.

We have responsibilities to ourselves and the teams to which we belong as we return. This relates to the 'circle-of-trust' model I described in part 1 of this series (click [here](#)).

We have to widen this circle, beyond our family to our colleagues. For this to happen, we need evidence that our colleagues take the right actions at work; i.e. wearing masks, personal hygiene and safe distancing etc. In return, we have to play our part in demonstrating that we accept our personal and societal responsibilities in a social contract with our colleagues and employer.

This will enable us to feel more comfortable over time, resulting in greater confidence in being at work.

Note: I'm using 'confidence' to encompass a number of factors:

- Health – are we going to be safe from infection
- Trust – can I be confident in the actions of my employer and colleagues
- Support – Managers (with HR) need to communicate well to help staff re-adjust
- Purpose – understanding our contribution, especially if the business has changed
- Economics – financial uncertainty as businesses need to thrive to preserve jobs
- Targets & objectives – will I meet my bonus criteria or secure promotion



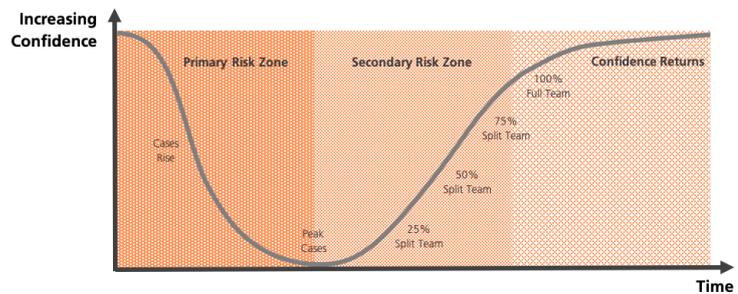
Hygiene is critical as we return. With offices having been unattended for extended periods of time, we recommend a professionally executed deep clean, prior to staff returning. The hygiene benefits are obvious, and the action will demonstrate to staff that the company is serious about managing a safe return. If the company hasn't been seen to act, it's not credible to then ask staff to play their part.

It's important to resist temptation of gimmicks, particularly those with pseudo-scientific claims – if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is ... Use credible vendors and check the quality of cleaning materials/devices, by checking the integrity of their claims.

Timing of our Return

As you can see in the graphic, once the local case peak has passed (with confidence at its lowest level), governments begin to open up the economy.

While this gives the population a boost, very quickly we start thinking about the practicalities as we head back to work.



Note: The graphic shows each phase being equal in duration - in reality this won't be the case. Assuming there are no 2nd or 3rd waves of infections, phase 2 is likely to be longer and the curve shape won't be identical for all countries.

We are recommending a phased, split team return + reduced occupancy model, which includes a continuation of existing work-from-home strategies (WFH).

In Singapore, like many other countries, this remains the required default mode of working wherever possible. This is common practice for MNC's and is a safe and practical solution. It's easy for staff to relate to the approach and it simple to communicate effectively.

We are suggesting that organisations with larger headcounts (1000-1500+) commence with 25% of staff returning in the first wave, rising over time (assuming no reported infections). Peak occupancy must be balanced with the workstyles of each team. Some teams may require a slightly higher figure depending on their process and/or equipment needs for them to do their jobs effectively. The percentage figure should be taken as a guideline rather than a literal figure to be applied indiscriminately to overall headcount.

The spatial implications were described in part 2 of this series (click [here](#)). Without going into too much detail in this article, it is worth noting that organisations have very different starting points and some adjustments to space & behaviours may be required or even mandated by government policy.



There are some countries where workplaces are relatively dense and increasing distance between work-settings may be required (Hong Kong and Japan come to mind). As a result, it's not possible to be prescriptive and you will need to review the specifics of your own space, which may include changes to circulation, refreshment areas and collaboration spaces.

Increasing Confidence

Building staff confidence will take time and can be achieved by taking visible actions. There is some interesting anecdotal evidence for this hypothesis post the 9/11 tragedy in New York. In the immediate aftermath, workers were reluctant to return even to the city, let alone enter large buildings. These feelings eased over time, as workers experienced the improved security measures that were visibly in place. This is a critical success factor for a successful return, and we must first recognise the problems and deliver practical solutions quickly.

Examples for a post COVID-19 world are contact tracing apps and temperature screening measures at building entrances. These methods ensure that anyone entering a building is healthy and that measures can be taken quickly if someone appears to be at risk.

We can't sit back and expect others to do everything for us; we have to take responsibility, engage and participate, so we can all resume our lives safely and productively.

Doing this job well means spending time engaging with your teams, listen to their concerns and fears and communicate the solutions simply and clearly. Develop high quality spoken and written content and try to avoid a 'technocratic style'. Having a message is one thing; being able to deliver that message with authenticity is something else entirely.

Thanks for taking the time to go through these important topics, we hope it's been informative and feel free to contact us if you have any questions; details below.

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Return Checklist

Here are some practical actions that we can take to accelerate the rise in confidence:

Landlord Responsibilities

- Building entry temperature screening (tenants & visitors)
- Building staff to wear surgical masks (or equivalent)
- Thorough cleaning programme in all public & semi-public areas
- Hand sanitiser provision visible in all public & semi-public areas
- Visitor entry tracking system (QR code or government Apps)
- Contactless entry barriers (instigate a regular cleaning regime if not possible)
- Contactless lift access (instigate a regular cleaning regime if not possible)
- Washroom cleaning, minimise paper towels for hand drying (use air dryers)

Employer Responsibilities (provision mode)

- Run a Deep Clean prior to re-entry with a reputable firm
- Increase cleaning frequency in all office spaces – increase disinfection focus
- Add CV19 mitigation measures in to BCP and HR policies
- Review all storage space and dispose of old and unwanted items
- Written communication to explain the return strategy & describe preparations
- Arrival briefing to show new office changes/features & cleaning programmes
- Company to provide backup surgical masks for staff (or equivalent)
- Manage ramp up of staff via split team working
- Work-from-home WFH policy to be permanent
- Attendance tracking
- Consider early stage 'no visitor' policy
- Avoid physical contact (no hand shaking etc.)
- Engagement sessions to talk about the return - so staff can express their worries
- Discuss team and individual performance - what has changed and makes plans
- Review meeting procedures – a great chance to remove unnecessary meetings!

Employee Responsibilities (self-serve mode)

- Staff to wear surgical masks in the office (or equivalent)
- Hand sanitiser provision visible in all working areas especially shared areas
- Don't come to work if you feel ill - for any reasons not just CV19 symptoms
- Eating only in designated café/refreshment areas
- 'Wet-wipes' or equivalent provide across the whole workplace for staff to use
- Staff need to understand how to manage distance in the space via site briefing
- Reduce number in meeting rooms
- Work-from-home (WFH) policies to be leveraged

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