



Employment Standards Office  
Qatar Financial Centre

كلايد اند كو  
CLYDE & CO

# Return To Work

A Practical Guide For QFC Employers and Employees



# Content

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

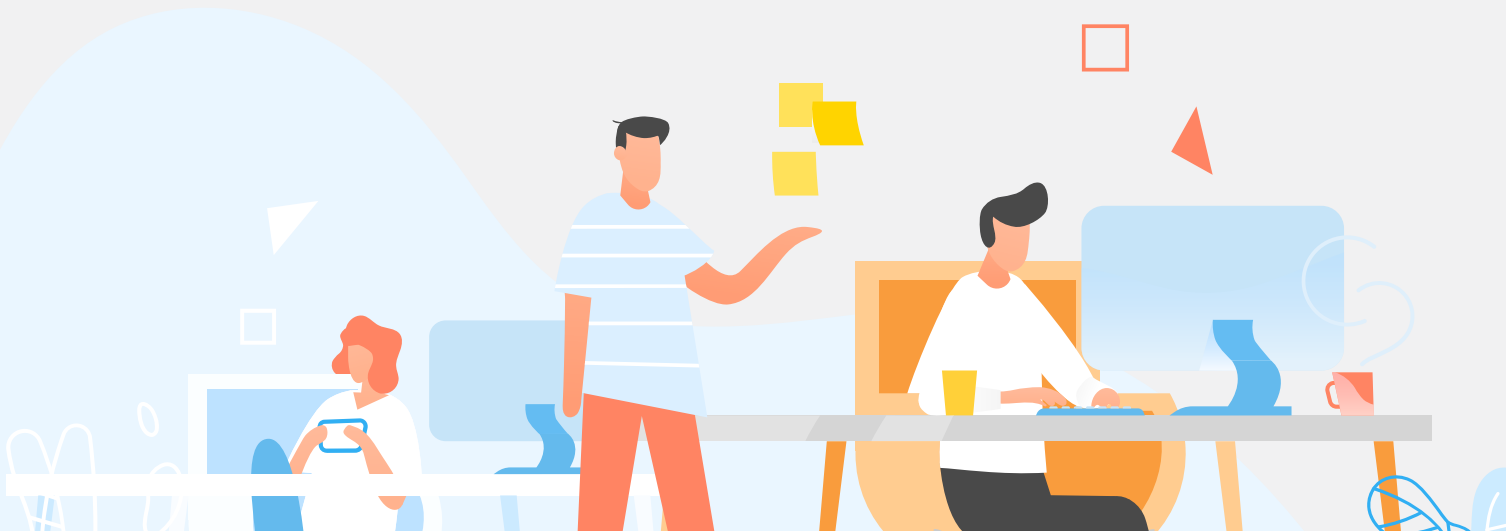
## Objective of the Guide

The Employment Standards Office (ESO) of the Qatar Financial Centre (QFC) has partnered with Clyde & Co Law Firm for this “Return to Work Guide” (Guide), the purpose of which is to provide practical guidance and recommendation to employers operating in the QFC on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) practices, general approaches to reducing the spread of COVID-19 during the transitional period of returning to the workplace and helpful tips on how to continue to handle working from home practices.

The recommendations contained in this Guide aim to guide employers in preparing a safe workplace and facilitate a gradual and safe return of employees to the workplace as restrictions ease, in line with local guidelines and international best practice including the restrictions pertaining to reduced working hours and the requirement for 80% of the workforce to work from home (subject to certain exceptions) introduced on 18th March by the Council of Ministers of Qatar.

In view of the ongoing measures pertaining to social distancing and sanitation requirements, workplaces will need to adapt to a new form of ‘normal’, and adjust business needs, practices and the workplace accordingly, to ensure enduring stability.

Given that knowledge on the COVID-19 virus is still being collated and new information may come to light in the future, employers are encouraged to continue to monitor relevant health and work requirements published by the Qatar government on a regular basis.



## Occupational Safety and Health during COVID-19

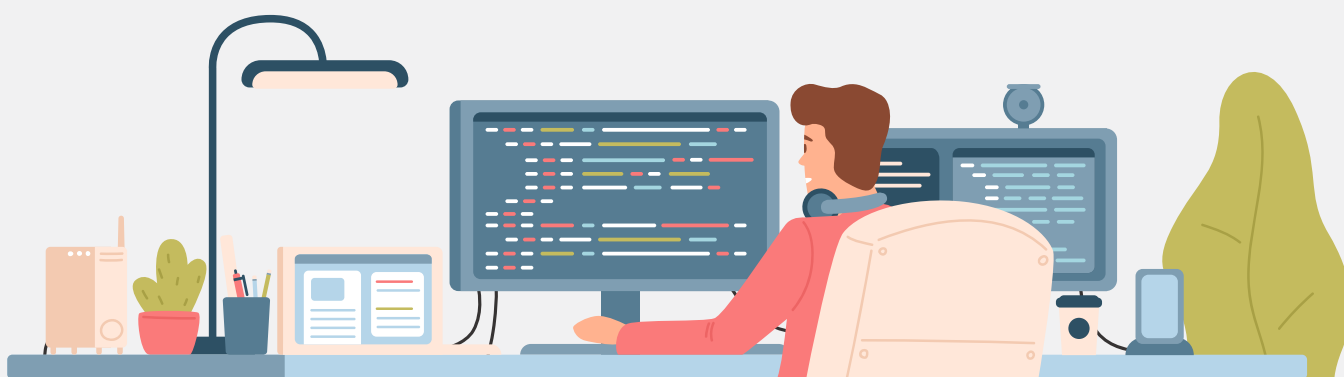
Article 43 of the QFC Employment Regulations (Regulations) places a duty on the employer to safeguard the health and safety of its employees by implementing precautionary measures at no costs for the employees (Article 45.2). Given the current ‘work from home’ measures in place and additional protective requirements, in the present COVID-19 era, OSH takes on a broader dimension in widening the concept of “workplace”. Employers should adapt their practices so as to encompass the present environment in which they are in and ensure they are in compliance with their general duty, as set out under the Regulations.

To this end, employers should ensure that their employees are able to fulfil their duties when working from home. This may include ensuring that their employees have the appropriate IT and telecommunications equipment available and in good working order and any other particular requirements based on their job description or needs.

Employers should also take steps to confirm that their employees’ home workspace is adequately and safely set up. Within the employer’s office workspace, employers should ensure they are in compliance with the protective measures in place pertaining to COVID-19, such as implementing the required social distancing, and that they can accommodate the workforce as and when more employees are permitted to return to the employer’s workplace.

Employers cannot refuse to take the required precautionary measures; if this happens, employees can request the intervention of the ESO, that will take the appropriate measures including, if needed, the suspension of the business until the cause of the danger is eliminated.

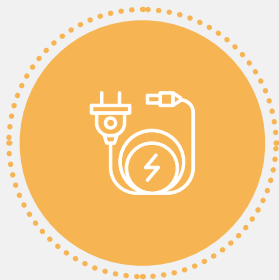
To aid employers in achieving a safe workplace which is compliant with the present COVID-19 measures, set out below is a six-step plan.



## Step 1: The Risk Assessment

The identification and assessment of risks in the present circumstances require employers to revise their OSH risk assessment to include the risks connected to the new hazards and related preventive measures. Employers can refer to the [Risk Assessment Template](#) circulated by the ESO in March 2020.

Notwithstanding the majority of employees are currently working remotely from home, employers are still required to undertake a form of health and safety assessment. Given that employers cannot physically inspect their employees' home workspace, employers can assess the health and safety risks by providing their employees with clear and specific guidelines and standards that must be respected while working from home. Employers may wish to consider having in place a health and safety checklist in which employees fill out to ensure their home 'workspace' is adequately set up, specifying considerations such as:



A safe work space free from trip hazards (such as rugs and cables)



A broadly safe environment including an exit and a first aid kit



Appropriate lighting and ventilation



Ergonomic requirements such as a desk large enough for tasks, phone and mouse within reach



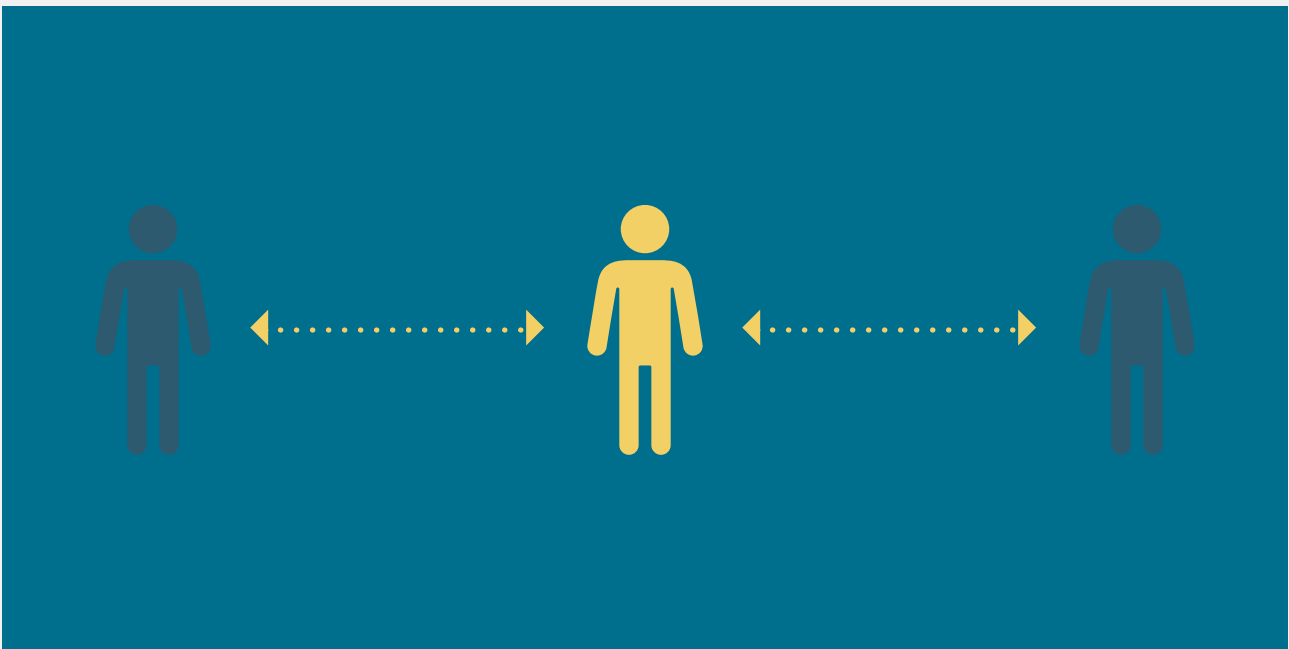
A chair that can adjust in height



A computer screen positioned in the appropriate height

A risk assessment of the employer's workplace should be undertaken and adjustments made accordingly so as to ensure compliance with present COVID-19 measures and the ongoing safety of the employer's employees upon return to the workplace. Employers should update the risk assessment documentation regularly in light of the evolving situation and potential new risks and revise and implement the action plan accordingly.

## Step 2: Workspace capacity and social distancing measures



As a priority, social distancing measures will need to be implemented and adapted to as national guidelines are updated. In assessing and implementing the social distancing measures, employers will be able to ascertain the workspace capacity and identify the number of employees who must remain working remotely in order to maintain employee safety.

As a priority, employers should implement social distancing measures and assess not only the volume of the space, but also factors such as access points and lifts, optimising flows and minimising bottlenecks.

## Step 3: Resumption of activities and return of employees



A gradual resumption of the business is likely to require a staggered return of the workforce in order to comply with social distancing measures and safety requirements. This may require employers to define activities, departments, teams or employees required to return to work first as well as a possible change to working hours in order to ensure compliance with safety and health requirements.

Accordingly, a significant part of the workforce will inevitably continue to work remotely to limit congestion in the workplace. The employer will need to take into consideration legitimate business reasons and the **non-discrimination** provisions stated in Article 15 of the Regulations.

In the event employers are required to continue remote working practices or the workplace cannot be adapted so as to comply with COVID-19 measures, employers should consider how best to manage continued remote working practices, as well as ways of maintaining work-life balance, minimising stress and maintaining employee motivation and productivity.

## Step 4: Communication and training



Article 44 of the Regulations obliges employers to inform their employees of any work-related risks and hazards and the safety measures to be taken. Employees are also required to comply with safety and professional health instruction prescribed by the employer (Article 19F and Article 46 of the Regulations).

In preparing employees to return to the workplace employers should involve and make their employees aware of the new work arrangements and train them on the ongoing safety measures adopted during this transition, to make sure they are aware and prepared to cooperate.

Employers should provide information and training in relation to COVID-19 symptoms, restrictions, physical distance requirements and reasoning, details on preventive and protective measures as well as additional information on company policies, processes and practices, and practical steps being taken by the employer. Employers should maintain a record of employee training participation (i.e. requiring employees to sign an attendance sheet) in order to ensure all employees receive training. Further training and information should be provided as measures change. Employees should also be made aware of the relevant personnel to contact in the event they require further information.



Communication, transparency, employee engagement and participation are key in successfully ensuring the measures implemented are accurately followed. Both the employer and the employee must do their part in limiting the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

## Step 5: The workplace strategy

Maintaining social distancing and hygiene is crucial. Employers will need to ensure they have in place clear cleaning protocols in order to be able to reassure their employees. Suggested practical measures are set out below:



### Hygiene

Increasing cleaning operations during the day and in 'high traffic' areas will increase employee reassurance and confidence with respect to the safety measures adopted. Hand sanitiser should be placed throughout the workplace, and the employer should promote hand washing using posters, email reminders and other means of communication.



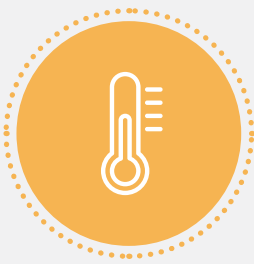
### Workstations

Workspace adjustments will have to be made in order to comply with physical distancing rules. This may require a re-assessment of meeting rooms, the potential removal of desks, additional screens between work-stations (transparent where possible, to promote connectivity) or modular and flexible solutions to accommodate employee needs.



### **Collective and Personal Protective Equipment (CCP & PPE)**

Use of CCP such as plastic screens and walls to compartmentalize workspaces together with organisational measures such as staggered working hours and breaks and/or adapting a sequence of tasks/shifts to maximise distancing are also recommended. Floor markings showing safe distance between workstations and PPE such as face masks in line with national requirements and best practice, should also be considered where appropriate. When possible, sharing of work tools between co-workers should be discouraged or prohibited and a regular deep clean encouraged.



### **Temperature Screening**

Where not otherwise mandatory, consideration should be given as to whether regular temperature checks should be undertaken prior to accessing the workplace in accordance with present guidelines. The employer should ensure that reliable equipment (e.g. infrared thermometer) is used by qualified persons. Employers should also make clear that such checks do not substitute medical testing and diagnosis. Any data collected will need to be stored and managed in compliance with the QFC Data Protection Regulations. In this regard please refer to the [Data Protection COVID-19 FAQ](#).



### **Meetings and Travels**

In the present environment, virtual platforms should be used to host meetings and on-line training. If a face-to-face meeting is necessary, it should be kept as short as possible, with the minimum number of attendees in a ventilated room and respecting the social distancing requirements. Keeping the list and contact details of the attendees for at least 14 days is also advisable to facilitate contact tracking if needed.

## Step 6: Leadership and legacy

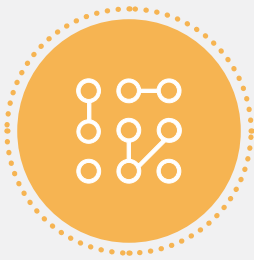


The COVID-19 crisis has presented business leaders with the opportunity to lead from the front and look at human resources from a different perspective. Employers should ask themselves what kind of leader they want to be, what do they want to be remembered for and what are they doing to be remembered the way they wish.

The COVID-19 pandemic will not last forever. It is important to acknowledge that business is also about putting employees and human capital at the core, and remembering that short-term decisions must be part of a long-term vision and goal. This is particularly relevant in times of crisis, as the decisions taken and the manner in which they are implemented may have an impact on reputation.

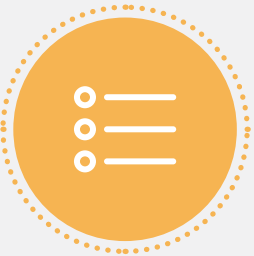
### Working from home pointers

Working from home has become the norm for the vast majority of companies, and whilst such arrangement affords many benefits, it can also present its own set of challenges and problems if it is not managed well. The following tips are designed to assist in maintaining an effective and productive workforce during a period of remote working.



### Technology

Ensure employees have been set up with the correct equipment required to undertake their work and ensure that everyone is equipped to use video conferencing software and any other tools required. Employee should also have access to tech support to ensure business continuity and productivity.



### Set clear expectations

Ensure employees understand what is expected from them in terms of productivity, structure and communication.



### Policies

Have in place and share with your employees your remote working policy and remind your employees of their continued obligations towards IT, confidentiality, privacy, intellectual property and looking after employer equipment.



### Stay in touch

It's important for employers to stay in touch with employees regularly to ensure work productivity and that employees continue to feel integrated. Scheduling regular video calls is a great way to do this.

## Vulnerable employees

Vulnerable employees include those individuals of a certain age or with underlying medical conditions that expose them to a higher risk COVID-19. Such employees are recommended to seek further guidance from their medical doctor and liaise with their employer in terms of additional measures or needs. Any data collected must be kept confidential and treated in compliance with the requirements under the QFC Data Protection Regulations.

## Violence at work during COVID-19

Article 45.1. (A) of the Regulations requires the employer to “*maintain a workplace that is safe, presents no risks to an Employee’s health and that is free of harassment.*” Employers should seek to take into account violence, harassment and associated psychosocial impact of the current circumstances whilst managing occupational safety and health.

The pandemic has reshaped the way many people and businesses work and has changed family dynamics, with many families being together 24 hours a day. Employers should be mindful that remote working does not prevent bullying and harassment, and an increase use of virtual platforms may inadvertently lead to an increase in cyberbullying.

Specific attention should be paid by employers to ensure that prevention and redress of violence and harassment is a key part of their response plans for COVID-19. Addressing violence, bullying and harassment at work has always been a priority for the ESO. In January 2019 the ESO published a [guidance](#) to support employers in preventing and managing any forms of harassment, bullying and violence at work, anticipating the principles of the ILO Convention 190 published in July 2019.

## Mental Wellbeing

COVID-19 has left employees having to adapt to a new way of life. Social distancing, isolation, having to balance homeschool children, relationships and adjusting to remote work can be overwhelming and stressful and navigating these changes has left the business world feeling increasingly uneasy about what lies ahead. With this in mind, to reduce the negative impact on employee wellbeing, line managers and HR managers alike can consider some of the following actions, coping mechanisms and programs to assist their workforce:



### **Minimise feelings of isolation by setting a culture of compassionate leadership**

Line managers should have regular catch-ups with their team members to check in on how they are doing. Encourage employees to meet on video when possible so they can continue to feel connected to their co-workers and consider sending proactive motivational messages with self-care ideas people can use throughout the week to stay productive, engaged, and centred. Encourage employees to share ways they are successfully adapting to working remotely.



### **Encourage online training**

Learning is a life-long journey that doesn't stop during remote working. Remind employees that this is a great time to sharpen their skills with online training. Learning new skills is also a good way to refocus on something more productive than worrying about the present situation. Consider proposing online trainings tailored to the workforce.



### **Ensure employees have adequate resources to support their mental health**

Supporting employee mental health can take the form of implementing employee assistance program (EAP) to providing resource booklets with useful information, exercises and external assistance available such as helplines and useful website links. EAPs assist employees with personal or work-related problems and have a positive impact on their health, mental and emotional well-being and consequently job performance. The ESO has recently launched the EAP for the QFC Authority staff and is available to support QFC employers in implementing similar programs and initiatives.



### **Encourage digital detox and staying active**

With schools and daycares closed, this is not necessarily “business as usual” as employees are possibly having to juggle daycare, homeschooling and remote working. Being at home may mean that employees are continuously plugged into technology, social media, news, messages and e-mails. This may lead to lack of concentration and focus, which in turn may result in reduced productivity and daily tasks taking longer to achieve. Encourage the workforce to stay active and spend time outside where possible. This may improve mood and wellbeing, which can be beneficial during times of anxiety, stress and transition. To avoid burnout employers can create official company guidelines for working from home, set designated working hours, ensure employees have scheduled breaks, and encourage managers to utilise flex time to help their workers adjust to their new remote environment in line with the company’s culture.

To assist employees in managing stress and anxiety associated with the present situation, ESO launched the [coaching services](#) in March 2020. These services are provided free of charge to all QFC employers and employees through the QFC Authority executive coach Dr Clare Beckett-McInroy. This initiative aims at offering an accessible channel of professional counselling that helps employees feel more secure in their new working environment and tackle COVID-19 related stress and anxiety.