



# Engaging furloughed and laid off employees

**Are businesses properly taking care of employees who have been furloughed or temporarily laid off? Many companies will want to or be expected to bring these employees back. And that means engagement and employer responsibility need to continue. Arguably, more so than ever.**

*Finsbury partners Louisa Moreton and Michael Abrahams, who help lead our Employee and Change Communications practice, outline some thoughts and advice below.*

With the COVID-19 pandemic bringing most commerce to a stand-still, the impact on jobs has been sudden and severe. Between furloughs and layoffs, millions around the world are now out of work, at least temporarily.

Government retention programs in the UK and parts of Europe – which cover a significant portion of furloughed employees’ salaries – are helping companies take employees out of work without making them redundant. In the US, federal unemployment benefits are helping cushion part of the blow for some individual workers. In both circumstances, the hope is that commerce is just paused and that, in many cases, we will ultimately see a return to business, full employment and profitability, rather than more permanent job cuts.

Most businesses are hoping, and should be planning, to bring employees back on board. And this is leading to an enormous challenge: keeping employees connected to the business while they aren’t actively working within it. That requires a strong employee value proposition and meaningful engagement that keeps top talent from taking other opportunities and ensures that they are excited to return when business gets back to normal.

Based on many conversations with clients, here is some guidance on best practices regarding employee engagement during a furlough or temporary layoff.



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## HAVE CLEAR OUTCOMES IN MIND WHEN PLANNING FURLOUGH

When planning engagement with furloughed employees, leaders, communications and HR need to have clear outcomes in mind. These will vary from business to business, but as an illustration, employee outcomes might include:

**A strong sense of community and belonging:** despite being out of the business for weeks or months, these individuals should feel connected to one another and to the business

**Strong, empathetic leadership:** affected employees should still feel valued, listened to and cared for. Colleagues may be experiencing furloughs or layoffs very differently. Many will experience grief or feel anxious about health or finances. Engagement must be sensitive to these differing emotions and experiences

**Shared mission and values:** most businesses already have- or should have- a strong vision or purpose. But when employees begin to return to work, a communal understanding of the rebuild and everyone's role within that will be helpful in bringing colleagues together with focus

## Creating an engagement plan for furloughed or temporarily laid off employees

### There are three phases to furlough engagement:

1. The announcement of the intention to furlough or lay off employees
2. Communications during the furlough or temporary layoff
3. Return to work

We recommend planning for all three and using our employee communication framework as a guide.

OUR EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK>>>



## 1) Announcement to furlough or pursue layoffs

Many businesses have already made the decision, but some will still be working through the process. Communication about furlough should feel personal, be transparent and clear. While it can't be cast as positive, it is not a redundancy process: the intention for most is to return to active employment.

When communicating about the intention to use a furlough plan or temporary layoffs, consider the following (in close coordination with local legal and HR guidance):

- **Terms of the furlough**, such as timescales, access to systems, equipment and training. The more clarity, the better.
- **A thank you**; most people feel more purposeful as a result of their work and are now looking at a long period of inactivity. In many cases, monthly household income will fall as a result, meaning economising and uncertainty. Communications should acknowledge this – and should also be sure to highlight that any commitment to shared sacrifice across the business.
- **The commitments** you make, or are clear you cannot make e.g. when will individuals return to work, when will they be back on same terms as before and whether or not there is any 'topping up' of the Government minimum.

## 2) Communication through the furlough or layoff period

With the exception of parental or sick leave, there is little precedent for engaging employees outside the business. Our advice? Communicate more, be more empathetic, build an even stronger community. Treat colleagues like recent recruits waiting to get started (to the extent permitted by any local regulations).

There are two simple reasons for doing so:

1. Keep your people close, informed and engaged, ready for an eventual return to work to re-build the business together.
  2. Retain your top talent. Make it hard for those with in-demand skills and strong resumes to take a job offer from a competitor.
- **Leadership communication** on a regular basis. This could be short videos made specifically for those on furlough, or emails if videos aren't possible. Content could range from work still being undertaken, measures being implemented to protect the company's future or global updates from different regions. If individuals cannot access work email or intranet while furloughed, think creatively about using LinkedIn, a private YouTube channel or Facebook page, or using personal email if permitted. Talk to your internal channel providers about helping these individuals access content outside the work environment (to the extent permissible).
  - **Check-ins from line managers**: where possible, employees on furlough or temporary layoffs should still hear from their line manager, as a team or individually. FAQs will help managers have good quality conversations. If line managers are also furloughed, a centrally accessible area with updated FAQ and access to CEO recordings will help.

- **Support on wellbeing and mental health:** this could be as simple as regular emails pointing to best resources, including how to volunteer. Appreciate that colleagues will cope differently with the situation.
- **Surveys:** to take a temperature check. A short, regular survey will help to shape the focus of future engagement. A 5-question pulse-survey, run fortnightly is a simple means to keep in touch with colleagues that you cannot connect with as easily as before
- **Continue training to the extent permitted:** where this makes sense, is achievable and is permitted, help these individuals keep skills updated and give them a chance to connect
- **Dialogue:** it might not be possible to give access to a helpline, a line manager or HR, though these would be ideal. But an email address for queries with a 48-hr response is advisable, and these individuals need an easy-to-access regularly updated Q&A. Ensure that your people don't feel cut adrift
- **Everything else is down to culture.** For some businesses, that means creating employee social pages such as Instagram or Facebook, or running social events. These should be kept private, as any other employee communication normally would be. These activities don't have to be run by communications or HR; invite a small group to run a strategy to keep culture alive and rotate members.

**3) Plan for re-integration as offices open** and furloughs end. It may seem too early to think about return to work, but some parts of the world are starting to see a staggered return. This has never happened before- there is no precedent. The moment of return should be planned for- from IT refreshers to culture-building so that there is momentum on day 1. Have a clear vision for the re-build and help people see their part in it and what's in it for them. We'll be writing on this in more detail in the coming weeks.

**And a final thought: write everything on the assumption it will be leaked externally. This can be a positive: how will other stakeholders react to your employee engagement efforts? Corporate behaviour is being watched carefully and employees are seen as a reliable barometer.**



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