



# How can we ensure a safe return to work for professional drivers after lockdown?

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen an unprecedented change in working arrangements. With the possibility that lockdown procedures could be eased in the not too distant future, companies are beginning to consider the most effective way to bring workers back to full employment.

For employers of fleet drivers there are additional safety-related issues to consider. Firstly, drivers may have been off work for 6 weeks or longer, during which they may have adapted to different sleep patterns, engaged in less physical activity as well as eating and drinking differently. For example, drivers may have become accustomed to staying up much later than normal, and getting up later than normal. Returning to work will necessitate a switch back to what were 'normal' sleep arrangements before the pandemic began.

So, what can employers do to prepare their drivers for a safe return to employment?

## Preparation

1. In the week before drivers return to work, offer them guidance on returning to normal sleep patterns. Drivers should be encouraged to make efforts to return to a normal workday sleep pattern before commencing their first duty. A gradual shift to this normal sleep pattern in the week prior to commencing work will be far easier for drivers to manage and is likely to result in lower fatigue levels.
2. Remind drivers of their responsibilities regarding fitness for duty. It is worth restating the company policies regarding fitness for duty and reminding drivers that they have a responsibility to take the necessary steps to ensure that they are fit for work.
3. Consider providing refresher training on fatigue risk management. If the company already has a fatigue training program in place, consider providing drivers with refresher training, summarising the key points. If online training is available, send drivers a link to this training and encourage them to complete it before returning to work.
4. Be aware of drivers' home situations. The tragic and widespread loss of life across the world means that there is sadly a possibility that some drivers may have experienced bereavement within their family or social circles. Employers should take steps to identify any drivers affected and to make available counselling with suitably qualified personnel, should this be required. Driving for a living is a safety-critical role and to be able to perform their roles safely and effectively professional drivers need to be in good condition mentally as well as physically.

## **First day back**

If you operate shift patterns, particularly night shifts or duties requiring a very early wake up, consider easing drivers back into their shift pattern. For example, consider a later start on the first day or, an earlier finish, and gradually return drivers to their normal shift patterns over the course of their first week.

## **First week**

Drivers may have been reticent to come forward about fatigue in the past. However, the current situation has highlighted the importance of working together and in this new spirit of cooperation drivers may be more receptive to expressing concerns about fatigue.

1. Take steps to make drivers comfortable to be honest and open about any fatigue they may be experiencing. Talk to them about the current situation and work together to identify fatigue concerns and effective, workable solutions.
2. Of course, for drivers to be comfortable reporting personal fatigue issues they need to be confident that they will not be penalised for their honesty. Consequently, it is essential that managers understand the importance of fatigue management, and that they have been trained to handle discussions about fatigue sensitively and objectively, to recognise the early warning signs of fatigue and to understand what mitigations they can implement to address any identified risk.
3. Ensure that driver managers are trained to recognise the early warning signs that a driver may be experiencing reduced alertness and encourage them to monitor the alertness and general well-being of their drivers so that early interventions can be put in place.
4. Over the course of the first week back after lockdown, be aware that drivers' fatigue levels may increase. It is good practice to have in place a mitigation strategy in the event that a driver is identified as being at risk from fatigue. If a driver is experiencing fatigue at work, what steps will be taken to manage the immediate risk? For example, is there a suitable place (quiet, dark, cool, comfortable) where a fatigued individual could get a restorative nap? How will a fatigued person be returned home safely?

The global pandemic continues to have a profound impact on all of our lives. But with the possibility that employees may soon be returning to work it is essential that employers take steps to manage this return as safely as possible. By having an awareness of the potential effects that fatigue may have on individuals and by following some of the suggestions above, it is hoped that your drivers can return to normal work patterns safely and with minimal impact on their health and wellbeing.

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