CDC
Investment works

Guidance on managing a remote workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Target Audience

This guidance is targeted at employers, primarily those operating in emerging markets, who have employees working remotely as a result of COVID-19.
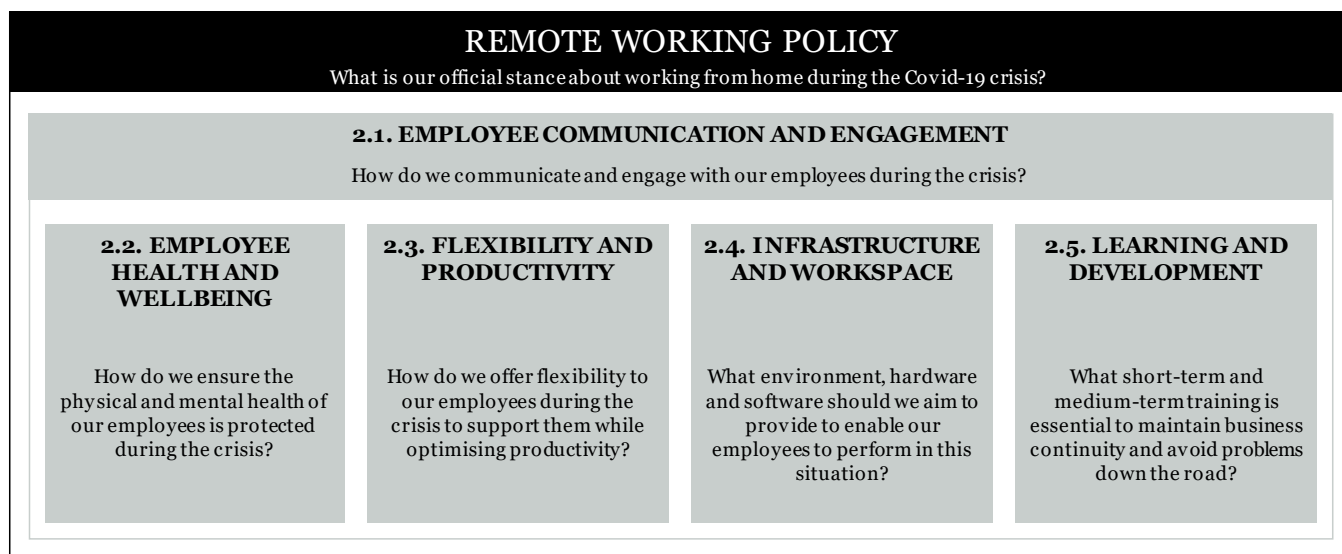
1. Introduction

As governments around the world implement lockdowns to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, businesses are having to close offices and quickly adapt to home-based work where possible. For many businesses, this transition will be far from seamless. Some businesses never trialled home-based working prior to the pandemic and may not have the policies or infrastructure required to do so; even companies for whom remote working is a more familiar practice may face challenges scaling this up rapidly.

This guidance explores some of the challenges involved in managing a remote workforce during lockdown, with a focus on emerging markets, and seeks to provide practical guidance for employers so they can get the best out of their employees. Advice on working remotely exists but it generally does not target emerging markets, which may face a different set of challenges in terms of connectivity, experience working remotely, and balancing household demands. This guidance is intended to address that gap.

2. Home-based working during COVID-19: key challenges and responses

With schools and nurseries closed, many employees are juggling work, child care, and other household responsibilities. In addition, employees often do not have access to a home office, a fast internet connection, or in some countries, reliable electricity. Even when these amenities are available, in countries or settings where working from home is unfamiliar, employees may struggle to find the space, time and support required to complete their work. In this context, how can businesses support employees to adapt to this new reality so they can continue to operate effectively?

The first step is to articulate expectations around remote working in an interim policy and communicate these to employees. It is also important for employers to understand what type of challenges can arise for employees when working remotely and how to address these. These are illustrated in the following framework, which provides the overall structure of this guidance:

REMOTE WORKING POLICY
What is our official stance about working from home during the Covid-19 crisis?

2.1. EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT
How do we communicate and engage with our employees during the crisis?

2.2. EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLBEING	2.3. FLEXIBILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY	2.4. INFRASTRUCTURE AND WORKSPACE	2.5. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
How do we ensure the physical and mental health of our employees is protected during the crisis?	How do we offer flexibility to our employees during the crisis to support them while optimising productivity?	What environment, hardware and software should we aim to provide to enable our employees to perform in this situation?	What short-term and medium-term training is essential to maintain business continuity and avoid problems down the road?

2.1 Employee communication and engagement

At a time of great uncertainty, effective communication can provide a degree of reassurance and social cohesion that is essential for maintaining employee engagement and ensuring business continuity. As such, it should be central to every company's COVID-19 response.

Employee communication and engagement
Challenges • **Remote communication:** Difficulties reaching people, connectivity issues and the inability to interpret non-verbal cues all impact the quality of interactions. • **Leadership**: Managers may struggle to lead their teams effectively when they are not directly supervising them and employees may lack the support they need to perform their job. • **Accessing information and resources:** Employees who are working from home may find it more challenging to access information, particularly if they are new to telecommuting, are relatively junior or have recently joined the business. This can impact their performance and can lead to them feeling disconnected from the organisation.
Responses • **Set out clear guidelines** on new ways of working and communicating. This includes agreeing when employees will be available to work, how they will communicate, how they will balance work with family responsibilities, use of company equipment, rules around data security, how performance will be managed, etc. This will help build trust between managers and their employees, a pre-requisite for remote working. It might be helpful to set out these expectations in an interim remote working policy or guidance document – examples are included in section 3. • **Provide regular company-wide updates on COVID-19,** how the company is responding, working from home, etc. It may be useful to build an online repository of resources on COVID-19 that is tailored to the business or sector, as well as guidance on working from home with an FAQ and links to further sources of information (see section 3 for resources). Encourage employees to contribute by sharing their own experiences. • **Encourage managers to test different communication styles and channels**, including email, video conference and other tools such as Slack, Signal, WhatsApp or Microsoft Teams, that have a chat function. Online brainstorming tools such as Mural or Miro can be used to encourage collaboration. Managers can trial different approaches before settling on the ones that work best – this may vary depending on employees' individual preferences. Check in with each employee to ask what type of communication works best for them, and when and how frequently they can be contacted. For some, creating social as well as business interactions virtually will be important motivators – others will thrive in an environment without workplace distractions.

- **Conduct a survey to gather feedback from employees** on the types of challenges they are facing and identify any needs for infrastructure or further support. There are a number of free online survey tools such as Survey Monkey or Google Forms – however, if employees have issues with connectivity or low levels of literacy, a telephone survey administered by the human resources (HR) team might be more appropriate. Some examples of employee surveys that can be used are included in section 3.

2.2 Employee health and wellbeing

Employees' health and wellbeing might suffer as a result of the pandemic and lockdown measures. Employees are at risk of contracting COVID-19, even after employers have taken necessary precautions in the workplace and implemented telecommuting for all staff members.[1] Beyond the risk of contracting coronavirus, there are other potential health impacts: emerging evidence suggests that the pandemic is increasing instances of violence against women and girls. In addition, the crisis can create or exacerbate mental health issues for both men and women.

Employee health and wellbeing

Challenges

- **Tracking illness:** It can be difficult for employers to keep track of employees' health when they are working remotely if they are not reporting their symptoms or taking sick leave according to company policy.
- **Vulnerable individuals:** Some employees might be especially vulnerable if they fall ill during this time, particularly if they live alone, are pregnant, or are single parents unable to rely on their usual support networks because of lockdown measures. In addition, those experiencing serious health problems unrelated to COVID-19 are at greater risk during the pandemic, either because they are not seeking help in time, or because they cannot access healthcare centres.
- **Mental health**: Employees' mental health can also suffer – anxiety about the health crisis or its potential economic consequences, social isolation, the competing demands of work and care responsibilities can all contribute to psychological issues. People who are living on their own, deprived of the social aspects of a workplace and the ability to interact with people outside work may face an increased risk of depression.
- **Domestic abuse**: There is also evidence that incidents of domestic abuse have surged worldwide since the beginning of the crisis and the implementation of confinement measures.[2] Women are predominantly at risk – lockdown can exacerbate the level of domestic violence they experience and prevent them from escaping from a dangerous situation or finding help.

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[1] This guidance note does not cover occupational health and safety measures that must be taken to protect employees from COVID-19 in the workplace. For further information on this topic, see: CDC Group, COVID-19 Guidance for Employers: https://assets.cdcgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/23093424/COVID-19-CDC-ESG-Guidance.pdf

[2] The New York Times, 'A New Covid-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide', 2020: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html

- **Change in healthcare access**: While addressing COVID-19 is a priority, this can mean that other health issues may be deprioritised, so that people may have reduced access to other important health services, such as maternal and reproductive health or cancer treatment, which may have significant longer-term consequences.

Responses

- **Conduct a COVID-19 risk assessment** of the workforce to understand who might be currently experiencing symptoms or at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. This can initially be done through an employee survey (see section 2.1), and by asking employees to report any symptoms to HR as they arise. Employees should also be encouraged to share any underlying health conditions that might increase their vulnerability to COVID-19 (e.g. asthma, hypertension). Employees' health information should be kept confidential.

- **Encourage transparency about mental health.** Employees should be encouraged to speak with their line managers about how they are coping with work and care responsibilities so that work can be reprioritised or redistributed if necessary. Managers should also keep track of their teams' mental health by monitoring behaviour changes and conducting regular informal check-ins to avoid individuals feeling disconnected or socially isolated. It can also be helpful to set up informal peer groups for employees who are facing similar issues, such as working from home with young children or elderly or vulnerable family members to share their experiences.

- **Encourage employees to take sick leave if they fall ill** and provide reassurance that they will still be paid in accordance with national law and company policy. Without the need to go to an office, the boundaries between home life and work can become blurred, and employees might continue working from home even when they are ill. This should be discouraged as it can worsen their condition and delay their recovery. Employees might also be encouraged to take other forms of paid leave, including annual leave, parental leave or bereavement leave, as needed.

- **Provide information to employees about the virus**, how to prevent infection, and where to seek help if they are ill. Good online resources, including videos and infographics can be found on the [World Health Organization's website](#), which also includes region-specific information. You can also refer to [CDC Group's COVID-19 Guidance for Employers](#). When raising awareness of the virus, it can be helpful to minimise the stigma that may be associated with contracting it.

- **Provide a confidential reporting mechanism** for employees to share concerns related to mental health, domestic violence or work-related issues. These could include a contact person in HR as well as more formal grievance mechanisms, with links to the appropriate authorities in case employees wish to directly report gender-based violence or other serious issues. Where companies already have these processes and mechanisms in place, employees should be reminded of them, including provisions for confidentiality. Provide information on external helplines where employees can seek help if they feel unsafe at home or know anyone who is experiencing domestic violence. For instance, the [National Commission for Women](#) has set-up several helplines in India; [this article has a list of helplines](#) for women and other vulnerable groups in Egypt; and [Domestic

and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT) has some useful resources and numbers to call in Nigeria.

- **Consider offering remote counselling services** to support employees through this time. Examples include Manastha.com or mywellnesshub.in in India, psychng.com or onlinecounselling.io in Nigeria, therapyroom.co.za in South Africa or wazi.co in Kenya.

2.3 Access to infrastructure and a workspace

A key challenge for many businesses during the current crisis is acquiring and rolling out the necessary infrastructure to enable home-based working to take place rapidly and at scale. Businesses that are new to telecommuting may not have the skills in-house to enable this shift and will need to upskill employees (see section 2.5) and invest in infrastructure.

Access to infrastructure and workspace

Challenges

- **Workspace**: Many people do not have access to a separate workspace and might struggle to work from home if they live with other family members or flatmates and space is at a premium.
- **Furniture**: Employees may not have any work furniture (e.g. chair or desk with a nearby power source) required to do their job, or the furniture they have available may be unsuitable and risk the employee's health if used for long periods.
- **IT hardware**: Some employees may lack suitable remote working hardware, or may face additional challenges using hardware remotely e.g. increased cost of taking/making international calls from a mobile compared to a company landline.
- **Logistics**: If employees lack suitable furniture or hardware, or their existing equipment breaks, getting new equipment to them may be challenging.
- **Utilities**: Access to a fast, secure internet connection and a reliable power supply might be a challenge for employees, especially in emerging markets. During a lockdown, if employees do not have these utilities already, or if they fail, it will be especially difficult to connect them.
- **Data security**: Securing information within the home environment may be challenging for some employees, whether it is in a physical or digital format.
- **Software:** Employee computing equipment may not have required programmes installed, and some of these may not be possible to roll out remotely. Many firms also lack the IT capacity to manage their workforce remotely (remote access software, collaboration through cloud-based document sharing, etc.).
- **Gender**: Women in particular are likely to be at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing ICT equipment, with the gender digital divide estimated at 31 per cent in emerging markets.[3] If households share ICT equipment, women are less likely to be able to access it consistently.

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[3] The Wharton Public Policy Initiative, 'The Gender Digital divide', 2018: https://publicpolicy.wharton.upenn.edu/live/news/2525-the-gender-digital-divide

Responses

- **Require all employees to complete a home-workspace self-assessment** to ascertain their ability to continue delivering in their role (see section 2.1). It should ask specific questions about the above challenges, as well as open questions about other concerns employees may have about doing their job at home. Questions should consider more vulnerable worker situations, including women. For example, instead of asking "Do you have access to a computer to do your work at home?" it is important to ask: "Do you have full-time access to a computer to do your work at home?"

- **Restructure work around constraints:** Existing workflow should be analysed to understand what is essential during the crisis vs what might be delayed. Furthermore, certain types of work may be re-allocated based on a worker's self-assessment e.g. client service work may be challenging for employees with young children, but these employees may be able to work different tasks or hours instead (see section 2.4).

- **Provide essential furniture and IT hardware:** Where there is deemed to be a critical absence of furniture or IT hardware, every effort should be taken to provide that employee with what they need to work remotely or their workload should be modified. This includes mobile phones, laptops or tablets, and other accessories such as headsets or noise-cancelling headphones if background noise is an issue.

- **Address critical connectivity or power issues so employees can be productive:** If employees do not have access to a reliable internet connection, they can be provided with dongles or mobile phones with access to a mobile network. Consider providing alternative sources of power, such as solar power banks to employees who are facing significant power shortages or power cuts.

- **Roll out new software and services to train employees**: Employers should seek to remotely roll out additional software that can help the workforce operate where possible, supported by troubleshooting and a contact support service. Training should be provided to employees on all new requirements and software. Depending on the context, this may be feasible through large webinars, but most likely will require managers to provide one-on-one support. Peer to peer training can also be useful – encourage managers to identify 'super users' amongst those most proficient with new approaches and applications. If possible, provide a direct line to IT support.

2.4   Flexibility and productivity

During the pandemic, employees are not just working from home; they are also looking after children and other family members, and performing household chores without access to their usual support networks. In this context, it might be challenging for them to work their regular office hours. Productivity might also be affected as workers adjust to remote working and try to balance work with their other responsibilities.

Flexibility and productivity

Challenges

- **Balancing responsibilities:** Many employees are likely juggling work with care and household responsibilities. This may be particularly acute for women, who in many settings face the bulk of household chores due to prevailing cultural norms or expectations. The current crisis may disrupt domestic support networks, such as help from family members, childminders or domestic workers. In addition, employees' families may not be understanding of time pressures or the need for sustained concentration, which can cause additional stress.
- **Time-sensitive work**: Certain service types (e.g. client support) may be more time critical and thus less flexible about when they are conducted, making them more challenging to deliver remotely for workers who have other responsibilities.
- **Lower productivity**: This may be an issue, particularly in the immediate term, while employees adjust to remote working and learn to juggle work with their other responsibilities.

Responses

- **Seek feedback from employees** to understand and acknowledge difficulties they might be facing and ask them what working pattern they can commit to (for free online survey examples, see section 3).
- **Provide as much flexibility as possible** to those that need it (e.g. parents or others with caring responsibilities). In particular:
  – Employees with caring responsibilities may require additional flexibility around daily working hours; for example, parents might find it easier to work when their children are asleep such as early in the morning or in the evenings.
  – Shift work can potentially be adapted to the employees' benefit. For example, employees may wish to switch shifts; or work more shifts that are shorter in length. The survey is a good opportunity to explore these types of preferences.
- **Allow employees to temporarily reduce their working hours if needed**: Where helpful or necessary for an employee, this can be a good temporary solution. Workers should be consulted before any adjustments to their working hours are made, and these should be reflected as a temporary addendum to their employment contract.
- **Reorganise or redistribute work** so it can be performed as efficiently as possible, e.g.:
  – Urgent client requests may need to be given to those without care responsibilities. However, in reallocating work, employers should also be mindful not to place too much pressure on employees that do not have care responsibilities, such as expecting them to work excessive overtime hours.

- Employees with care responsibilities can be provided with less time-sensitive projects, provide support or back-office functions.

- **Reassure employees that they will not be unfairly penalised** if they need to adopt a more flexible working pattern. If employees are less productive as a result, this should not be negatively reflected in their performance review. Managers should also consider the impact on people without caring responsibilities who may be taking on extra work to alleviate their colleagues' burden.

- **Provide advice or support**: Consider sharing links to resources or providing direct support to those working from home with children or with other care responsibilities.[4] Advice should address how to talk to family members, and encourage both male and female employees to establish a balanced management of household responsibilities so that the burden does not disproportionately fall on one person.

- **Provide guidance to managers on monitoring productivity** remotely so that employees can be provided with support when their productivity falls or their roles can be adapted where possible to maximise their output while meeting their needs. There are a number of free online tools that employees can use to track their productivity, such as Toggl, ToDoist, or Desktime.

2.5 Learning and development

Learning and development (L&D) is a crucial function for all employees to improve their performance and progress at work. Employees learn both informally, on the job and from social interactions, as well as formally through training courses. Remote working can make informal learning more difficult, as employees are disconnected from their colleagues or mentors. In addition, organisations may not be prepared to move their formal training to virtual platforms. Equally, lockdown can provide an opportunity to focus on skilling employees, particularly if the business is in need of pivoting and employees' roles are likely to change as a result.

Learning and development
Challenges   • **Difficulties adapting to new ways of working:** Managers and employees who have never worked remotely before may struggle to adjust, especially with the added pressure of caring and other responsibilities. Employees might not know how to use new equipment or software and might require additional support to perform their usual tasks.   • **Remote onboarding:** For employers who are still hiring, remote onboarding can present challenges as HR teams will need to move their standard induction processes online and teams will have to make an additional effort to onboard the new joiner and integrate them into corporate culture.

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[4] See for example: IFC, Childcare in the COVID-19 Era: A Guide for Employers

- **Performance management:** With a remote workforce, it is more challenging for managers to monitor work progress, quality and react to performance issues. It can be unclear for a manager whether the performance is due to personal circumstances surrounding the crisis or challenges related to the task.

- **Access to opportunities:** Many employees, especially lower-skilled workers, may lack the tools to seek out development opportunities online. Organisations may not be set up to communicate development opportunities consistently to the entire employee base, especially new and junior employees, as they are cut off from more informal communication channels. Women might also be at a disadvantage for similar reasons.

- **Reinforcing existing barriers**: Remote working can also re-enforce many barriers that prevent adults from learning: lack of time, lack of access to high quality training, limited guidance and a lack of self-confidence and motivation.

- **Change in prioritisation of L&D opportunities**: As work plans are reassessed, some L&D programmes may be deprioritised, such as those targeted at a particular group. For example, women-focussed training and mentoring programmes, which play a key role in breaking down barriers, might be at risk.

Responses

- **Analyse training needs in light of COVID-19:** The current crisis is likely to result in changes within many businesses, including in roles and responsibilities and ways of working. Businesses should assess their skills needs and prepare their workforce to adapt in the short-term, and for the recovery. For example, the demand for digital literacy and social and emotional skills is forecast to increase post-COVID.[5]

- **Set learning goals with each individual team member**:
  - Identify the skills gaps (e.g. language skills, lack of IT knowledge) that are preventing employees from successfully completing their day-to-day tasks. If employees are facing significant performance issues, they should be provided with direct support from their manager or project leader.
  - Once the most pressing challenges have been addressed, consider developing a tailored learning plan with employees. This could include developing new skills through online courses or working on a company-wide initiative.

- **Clarify the performance management process during COVID-19**: If employees are already in performance improvement or disciplinary processes at the point at which working patterns change, consider whether the formal process should be suspended, or if it should continue through this period. The right approach will depend on the individual situation, but the issue should be discussed and clarified.

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[5] McKinsey & Company, How to rebuild and reimagine jobs amid the coronavirus crisis.

- **Provide additional support to new and junior employees:**
  - Provide virtual inductions to onboard new team members, including introductions to the team, organisation, ways of working and other important information.
  - Consider a peer-to-peer mentoring scheme where a more experienced team member takes an active mentoring or guidance role.
- **Provide specific guidance for managers**; they may be facing additional pressure during this time as they navigate the new reality whilst managing and supporting their team.

2.6 Summary of recommendations

REMOTE WORKING POLICY

2.1. EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION & ENGAGEMENT
- Set out clear guidelines
- Provide regular updates on how COVID-19 is impacting the business
- Encourage managers to test new methods of communication
- Conduct a survey and gather feedback from employees

	2.2. EMPLOYEE HEALTH & WELLBEING	2.3. FLEXIBILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY	2.4. INFRASTRUCTURE AND WORKSPACE	2.5. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
ASSESSMENT	• Conduct a risk-assessment	• Conduct employee workspace self-assessment	• Identify challenges faced by employees	• Analyse training needs in light of COVID-19
WAYS OF WORKING	• Encourage transparency about mental health • Encourage employees to take sick-leave	• Restructure work around constraints	• Provide flexibility • Offer reduced working hours • Reallocate work • Do not unfairly penalise employees	• Set learning goals • Clarify the performance management process during Covid-19
TOOLS AND GUIDANCE	• Provide employees with health information • Provide a confidential reporting mechanism • Offer remote counselling services	• Provide essential furniture & IT hardware • Address connectivity or power issues • Rollout software + training remotely	• Provide advice to employees on working remotely and signpost resources • Provide guidance on monitoring productivity	• Support junior and new employees • Provide specific guidance for managers to help them navigate the new norm

3. Further resources

3.1 General guidance for HR teams and managers

Guides and articles

- ACAS, Working from home
- Deloitte, Future of Work: Ways of working in uncertain times - Increasing organisational resilience in the face of COVID-19
- EY, Engaging your employees in response to coronavirus
- Fast Company Alternative tools to a To Do list and How to build trust when teams are working from home indefinitely
- Gitlab, Guide to all Remote – example guidelines for remote working
- How to nail working from home during COVID-19 – some tips for what to keep, start, stop and avoid
- Harvard Business Review, A guide to managing your (newly) remote workers
- IDEO, advice on Building a vibrant global community
- IFC, Childcare in the COVID-19 era: a guide for employers
- IFC, Interim advice for IFC clients on supporting workers in the context of COVID-19
- Iwoca, WFH Bible
- Michael Page, Seven steps to create a work from home policy
- SHRM, Coronavirus makes work from home the new normal
- Qualtrics free survey solutions for hearing from employees

Employee surveys

- Adessa, Remote and onsite working experience: Putting people first
- CIPD, Homeworking Questionnaire
- WorkTango, COVID-19 Remote work / return to work employee survey templates

Webinars and courses

- LinkedIn path of free online courses, including time management and productivity tips; leading teams; managing the impact of adjusting to new work environments; and practical introductions to online tools
- Zapier Transitioning to remote work in a hurry webinar and tips article
- FlexJobs Prepping for business continuity with remote work, How to be a good remote worker and How to work from home with young kids webinars

3.2   Country-specific guidance

India

- India Briefing, [COVID-19 in India: 5 Best practices for businesses implementing work-from-home](#)
- People Matters, [COVID-19: How should employers in India 'respond, recover & restore'](#)
- Sannam S4 Group, [The latest updates and guidance for employers](#) - webinar
- SHRM, [How employers in India are responding to the national lockdown](#)
- Sinanghania & Partners LLP, [COVID-19: Our take on employment issues in India](#)

Nigeria

- Uubo [COVID-19 Resource Hub: Employers and employees in the time of COVID-19](#)
- Delegation of German Industry and Commerce in Nigeria, [HR Imperatives and response to COVID-19](#)
- Techcabal, Paystack, Carbon, [BuyCoins activate full remote work as COVID-19 nears escalation in Nigeria](#)

South Africa

- BMIT SA, [COVID-19 Business impacts and remote working survey](#)
- IBM, [Empower your remote workforce during COVID-19](#)
- University of Cape Town, [Remote working toolkit](#)

Kenya

- Corporate Staffing Services [Human Resources Report 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Kenyan workplace](#)
- Bowmans, [FAQs for Kenyan employers on COVID-19](#)