



Considerations on Returning to Work



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Introduction and Background

The coronavirus pandemic has had a massive impact on many sectors of the creative industries. Some have thrived, others have all but disappeared. Particularly hard hit are those businesses involved primarily with Live Events, with this sector (including theatres, concert halls, arenas, convention / exhibition centres and assembly rooms) instructed to close by Government for a prolonged period of time.

The supply chain for this sector is long and complex. Whilst the venues have been closed by regulation, so many other businesses dependent on these events have been unable to work as a result of the events themselves being cancelled. This includes show producers, production companies and event management agencies. It includes production suppliers such as rigging, lighting, audio, video, staging, automation, transport, crewing, catering. It includes hair and makeup, wardrobe and wigs, stage management and FoH staff. It includes set designers and builders / fabricators. It includes those hiring and selling equipment, those manufacturing and assembling equipment, distribution logistics, finance, warehousing and legal services. And, of course, it includes a huge number of artists and performers in music, theatre, circus and all the myriad of other live performance arts.

After a prolonged period of inaction and uncertainty, it's not easy to predict what will happen next. However there is a key element that needs to be considered as part of the return of live events, that is the condition of the resources that have been dormant, in some cases for over a year, across the whole supply chain. This is a diverse spectrum of resources, but there are some common elements that relate to them all.

This document is intended to provide a summary of the different considerations that may be relevant when businesses that have been closed are planning to reopen.

Risks associated with restarting work are considered under three headings:

- People
- Work equipment
- Workplace

There are inevitably many challenges, but there is plenty of good advice available on specific issues, and this is signposted in the "Further references" at Appendix 1.

There are opportunities too, as with any crisis, and this is a real chance to "reset better" – possibly the best chance we have ever had.



Risk Assessment

All employers reopening their workplace will need to undertake a COVID-19 risk assessment beforehand, to inform and develop a COVID-secure workplace.

This need not necessarily be anything more than an addition to the existing risk assessments for the business, and should be used to identify the controls you need to put in place to reduce the risk from COVID-19.

Other risk assessments already in place should also be reviewed in light of any changes required to become COVID-secure, and also to identify additional risks associated with the closure or limited operation of the business. It is these risks that are considered in the following sections.

It should be born in mind that whilst there is a Government road map to opening all businesses and removing all restrictions that have been imposed due to COVID-19, recent experience suggests that there is a real possibility that restrictions may not actually be lifted at the proposed time, and even if they are, then they, or other restrictions, may be reinstated or imposed at any point in the future.

There is also an opportunity to think far wider than just the elements that may be affected by COVID-secure requirements, and carry out a fundamental review of all risk assessments to see where better integrated, more robust and resilient safety management can be put in place.

- Are there better materials or substances available that eliminate or reduce levels of risk, whilst still doing the job?
- Is better equipment available, making the job easier, safer and more efficient?
- Is now the time to invest in mechanical handling equipment to reduce manual handling operations?
- Can work processes be adjusted to be carried out more safely?



People

Skills fade

People who have not been at work for a while are likely to find that the skills they previously took for granted when going about their regular work may have declined.

All skills decay without use – the degree will depend on a number of factors, including what the task or activity is, previous levels of training, the retention interval and the individual.

Both cognitive and motor skills can be affected.

There may be a reluctance to accept skills fade as a risk, both on the part of the employer and the worker.

Acceptance is a key step in resolving skills fade, and especially important where the work depends on a high level of skill to be carried out safely.

Workers may need opportunities to reacquaint themselves with routine tasks slowly, under closer than normal supervision, and to adjust back into the working environment.

Additional time may be required, and an allowance made for increased levels of concentration required to re-establish previous levels of skill. Workers returning to work after a prolonged lay off are likely to become significantly more fatigued, both mentally and physically, in a far shorter time period than might previously have been expected.

Freelance / self-employed workers are responsible for ensuring their own skills are maintained at an appropriate level, but may in some cases find it difficult to find the opportunities to get them back up to speed. This is particularly relevant when their work includes equipment, plant or processes that are provided by others, such as forklift or MEWP operators, crew who work with dry hired equipment, or activities that are highly choreographed and coordinated with others. All the stakeholders in an undertaking have a vested interest in enabling and facilitating this process for their casual or freelance workers.

Skills fade will not last for long if a proper management system is in place to reduce the effects.

- Identify tasks and activities where skills fade could create significant risks.
- Consider the relevant factors, and put a plan in place to allow the skills to be refreshed in a safe environment before being used in anger.
- Don't forget other skills that are subject to skills fade in normal times such as first aid, rescue, emergency response.

Fitness

Extended periods of inactivity may have affected people's fitness. For those whose work involves significant degree of physical activity there may be an increased risk of musculoskeletal injury or disorders, from a pulled muscle to a serious long-term condition.

The scope of roles affected by this is extremely wide, including dancers / performers, crew, warehouse and workshop staff, equipment operators etc.

Those who have maintained good fitness levels whilst away from work are likely to find it easier to regain their occupational fitness, for those who have been less active it may take longer. Some occupations are more likely to have carried out ongoing maintenance of required fitness - than others, such as dancers continuing Class whilst not performing.

- Specific specialist roles where physical strength is a safety critical element of the work should be identified and carefully considered.
- A plan should put in place to support workers in regaining full fitness before re-starting work.



Skills shortage

The creative industries have a significant proportion of freelance, self-employed and casual skilled workers (some estimates suggest up to 70%).

Many people for whom work stopped during the pandemic have found alternative employment elsewhere. Not all of them will return, whether through choice or circumstance. Many of these people have skills and experience that has been accumulated and developed over many, many years.

Early engagement with the workforce is important to establish the degree of skills shortage.

There may be a temptation when faced with a skills shortage to promote people within the organisational structure and introduce new unskilled workers at the entry level. This is likely to require additional training at every level.

There may be others from different sectors who have a large part of the required skillset as transferable skills, but are missing some context-related understanding or experience. It may only need some focused training in these areas for them to progress to a fully skilled worker in a new sector.

- Identify potential skill shortages as soon as possible.
- Identify what training gaps exist, and how they can most effectively be filled.
- A plan should be put in place to fill safety critical training gaps before work is restarted.
- Consider the need for increased levels of supervision at every level where people are working close to the limits of their competency.

Disconnect

People who have been out of the loop, either on furlough or away from the business for other reasons, are likely to feel disconnected from the organisation. Regular communication with workers can be difficult if they are on furlough. Time should be provided to re-integrate people back into the business over an appropriate period before they return to the workplace.

- A plan should put in place to support workers reconnecting with the business.

Concerns

It is to be expected that people who have been away from the workplace may have concerns about returning, particularly regarding mixing with other people and dealing with members of the public. These concerns can be a significant cause of workplace stress and have a serious detrimental effect on mental health and wellbeing.

Providing an opportunity for workers to discuss these concerns early will help them understand what measure are going to be in place, and identify areas where further support might be required.

Some people may develop concerns only once they are actually back at work.

- Talk to workers early about their concerns.
- Explain to workers the changes proposed to make the workplace COVID-secure.
- Make a plan for managing future concerns and ongoing mental health and wellbeing issues.



Vulnerability

People who are clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 will need special consideration in the risk assessment, to identify appropriate controls to minimise the risk. There is unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all solution, the organisational context will be a key element.

- Consider the risk to vulnerable people and put controls in place to reduce that risk.

Consultation

Talking to workers is a critical part of risk management. It allows both a better understanding of any safety or health related issues they may have, and also an opportunity for them to contribute to the development of appropriate, achievable and effective control measures.

- Undertake a formal consultation with all workers, listen and act on the findings.

Opportunities

People are the creative industries' greatest asset. It follows that they should be afforded the greatest level of investment in development and maintenance. In reality the opposite is often true – high levels of stress are common, long antisocial working hours are the norm, poor mental health is prevalent, and many bright talents are abused until “burn-out” forces them out, to find some other less demanding (and often less fulfilling) way to earn a living.

There's no doubt some people thrive on the highly dynamic creative environment but at the same time there is a valid question about whether a better balance can be found.

“Reset Better” means that while we consider how we go back to work with COVID-19 still a significant threat in the community, we also take the opportunity to look in detail at the human factors within the industry that we may not have been so good at managing in the past. Are there ways we can improve work-life balance? Rest and Respect should be embedded in the way we plan work and interact with each other – how can that be achieved? Just because “we've always done it like that” doesn't mean it's the right way to do it.

Positive change will strengthen the creative industries, not diminish them.

- Consider how welfare arrangements, working hours, shift patterns and breaks can be improved to reduce fatigue, stress and ill health.
- Consider how job-share and flexible working can be utilised to improve work-life balance.
- Consider how organisational factors can be developed or changed to work smarter and improve health and welfare.
- Consider how respect and kindness can be made an imperative in all interactions between people.
- Consider whether any technological advances exist that have not been incorporated, and could be.
- Consider whether design and planning work can be improved to reduce manual handling requirements and coordinated lifts between multiple people.



Equipment

Statutory checks

Most equipment used in theatres, warehouses, factories / assembly plants, event sites, other venues and workplaces must be periodically inspected and maintained to ensure they are safe to use.

Equipment will deteriorate over time, through use, and also through lack of use.

Clear information is available on all the specific legal requirements on the HSE website.

This section looks at the specific risks associated with bringing equipment back into service, such as lifting equipment, work equipment, ventilation plant, engineering controls, electrical equipment and pressure systems.

There is no need to wait until the business is permitted to reopen to carry out statutory checks or maintenance, as long as the work can be conducted in a COVID-secure way.

Delaying scheduled periodic checks by competent persons is likely to create a backlog of work and could cause further delays.

- Make a plan to ensure plant and equipment is checked, maintained and safe to use.

Thorough examinations

Examination and testing is still a legal requirement and a fundamental part of risk management.

Where relevant checks on lifting equipment have not been made in the timeframe required by the scheme relating to the equipment, a thorough examination by the competent person should be arranged at the earliest practicable opportunity.

Records of any and all measures taken to maintain the equipment in safe condition during the non-operation period should be provided to the Competent Person.

- Identify any equipment that has not been thoroughly examined within the scheduled period.
- Arrange for thorough examination by a competent person at the earliest practicable opportunity.
- Provide details of any maintenance carried out during non-operational period.
- Ensure equipment requiring thorough examination and testing that has been non-operational for a prolonged period is subject to thorough examination and testing before being returned to service.

Maintenance

An effective maintenance regime is essential to make sure equipment is safe. Periods during which no maintenance takes place, irrespective of whether the equipment is used or not, will allow degradation to develop unchecked.

Non-operational equipment may suffer from a range of issues which will generally increase in significance as the period of non-operation increases. Lubricants can dry out, moving parts can seize, flat-spots can develop in wheels, bearings and sheaves etc., and environmental influences can degrade specific components.

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- Where no maintenance has been carried out during closure a thorough check of the equipment will be required, proportionate to the complexity of the equipment and the level of risk.
- Where maintenance has been carried out, but the equipment has not been used, full function and operational checks should be carried out according to a carefully planned scheme.
- Avoid taking equipment from non-operation to 100% of its duty cycle in one step.
- Allow time for all relevant checks and maintenance to be carried out, and also for any identified problems to be resolved. Re-commissioning may be required.

Manufacturer information

Where specialist or bespoke equipment has not been used for some time, it may be necessary to seek information from the manufacturer of the equipment to assist in developing procedures for return to operation.

- Contact manufacturers / suppliers early. They are likely to be busy.
- Establish the possible issues and make a plan to assess and resolve any that are found.
- Allow time for this safety critical work to be done, including re-commissioning.
- Plan the work to be carried out in a COVID-secure way.

Opportunities

- Some equipment that may have been near its end of life may require considerable investment to bring back into service after a period of non-operation. Consider upgrading or replacing equipment prior to work resuming. Allow time for commissioning and training.
- Review maintenance, inspection and thorough examination schemes. These should be drawn up by competent people who understand both the equipment and how it is used.
- Research technological advances, and if better technology exists, consider whether now is the time to change.



Workplace

Layout

Social distancing has become the norm. Businesses that have remained open during the pandemic have adjusted their office spaces, meeting rooms and other spaces to allow increased separation between workstations. This, combined with significant numbers of people working from home, has changed the layout of most workplaces.

Fixed auditorium are a special case, but in most environments there will be a degree of flexibility in how internal spaces are laid out.

- Adjust room layouts to allow social distancing. Even as restrictions are lifted, it makes sense to have a system in place that you know will work if they are brought back in again at a later date.
- Provide separation between workstations / machines, either in terms of distance or physical barriers.
- Consider making one-way systems a permanent feature, if they work effectively.

Cleaning

Any premises that has been closed is likely to need to be cleaned thoroughly before it is reopened, not specifically with regard to COVID-19, but just due to the reduced frequency of normal cleaning and movement of people throughout the premises.

- Carry out a deep clean to remove accumulated dust and other deposits that have built up during period of closure.
- Carry out enhanced cleaning of surfaces and equipment.
- Better levels of hygiene could be a good thing. Provide sanitiser stations for staff and customers.

Ventilation

Ventilation has been one of the main controls in minimising transmission rates throughout the UK response to the pandemic, with restrictions imposed on indoor spaces far longer than outdoor environments. The better the ventilation, the less of the virus will be in the air.

There is a significant challenge in some types of buildings where there is little scope for natural ventilation, and the nature of the building makes upgrading mechanical systems very problematic. Many older theatres are likely to fall into that category.

More modern buildings may present more options. There are currently research programmes and proposals underway regarding the rates of air replacement that might be considered appropriate, and with new guidance likely at some point in the near future it may be prudent to wait and see before commissioning an all new system based on existing building recommendations.

- Maximise fresh air in a space by natural ventilation, open doors, windows, vents (don't prop fire doors open though).
- Consider mechanical ventilation using fans and ducts to bring fresh air from the outside (but check where it is coming from).
- Assess the ventilation in all areas of the workplace. CO₂ monitors can be useful when assessing whether ventilation is poor (less so in areas of low occupancy).
- Consider whether poorly ventilated areas need to be used, or can have very limited occupancy.
- Avoid recirculating air between one space and another unless it is heating / cooling and there is also a supply of outdoor air.



Building services

Services that are installed in a building that has been closed or non-operational may degrade. There are significant risks that can develop relatively quickly without the correct checks being made, and maintenance carried out.

These might include:

- Fixed electrical installations
- Emergency and back up systems
- Water systems, including the risk from legionella
- Fire equipment and systems
- Air conditioning and heating systems
- Pressure systems and components
- Lifting equipment such as counterweight / hemp set flying systems, or beam cranes in workshops
- Fixtures and fittings
- Fabric of the building

Some of the general maintenance information in the “equipment” section will be relevant, however these systems can be complex and the services of a competent person should be sought in regard to the specific systems installed.

Opportunities

With so many adjustments required to workplaces over the course of the pandemic, it is a great time to think about how spaces such as offices, meeting rooms, welfare areas etc. can be made more flexible, with a view to providing better resilience in the case of future pandemics or other disruptions to business.

With deep-clean requirements more likely for buildings that have been closed, a top-down process covering all the hard to reach areas such as voids, grids, risers and the like.

The challenges faced by many older buildings in terms of improving ventilation, particularly in older places of entertainment, may make cost-effective upgrades of fixed ventilation systems to significantly higher specification difficult to achieve.

- Consider how all workspaces can be made more flexible to allow for easier adjustment of layout and occupancy limits if required in the future.
- Consider a deep clean of all hard to reach areas: voids, grids, risers etc., and any other areas where cleaning can be disruptive to the day-to-day operation of the premises due to the amount and nature of dust etc. that might be displaced.
- Explore traditional methods of improving ventilation such as passive flow – mechanical plant is not the only way.



Appendix 1 – Further References

The considerations outlined in this document are intended to be relevant irrespective of location. Some of the following links are to information produced by the Regulator in Great Britain, and readers should check relevant guidance and local regulations in the country where the work is taking place.

[PLASA signpost page including links to DCMS, Government and other industry guidance](#)

[HSE Risk assessment](#)

[HSE COVID-19 risk assessment](#)

[HSE: Re-opening Business considerations](#)

[NRAG Skills fade](#)

[Reset Better Charter](#)

[HSE talking with workers](#)

[HSE Vulnerable workers](#)

[HSE COVID-secure](#)

[HSE Thorough Examination](#)

[HSE Cleaning](#)

[HSE Ventilation](#)

[HSE Legionella](#)

