

Transitioning employees back to the physical workplace – key considerations

Timing and operational needs

- Consider and comply with relevant State and Territory public health orders and directions, noting that these are constantly changing.
- Think about who needs to be back in the physical workplace. Do all employees need to come back and at the same time? Can and should any working from home arrangements continue?
- Consider implementing staggered 'shifts' for attending the workplace.
- Are ongoing working from home arrangements an option and could this be an opportunity to improve employee engagement and satisfaction?

Consultation and communication

- Alleviate employee concerns about returning to work through meaningful consultation and communication.
- Clearly communicate proposed return to the physical workplace plans (for example, staggered shifts/physical distancing between workspaces).
- Take all feedback, comments and queries raised by employees, particularly on safety, into consideration.
- Ensure specific consultation obligations under any modern award or enterprise agreement are met, including any requirements to consult with a union.

Employment infrastructure

- Look at employment infrastructure and what changed when employees transitioned out of the physical workplace. Employees may have had their hours and/or salary reduced, been stood down or taken a period of leave, including by way of directions under the JobKeeper scheme.
- Look at whether such arrangements should continue, be varied in some way, or whether employment terms can revert back to normal.
- Any changes will need to be properly documented.
- Ensure appropriate policies and procedures are in place to deal with the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, including policies on working from home, work health and safety, and any policies on how to manage employees with symptoms.
- Ensure policies are flexible to adapt and evolve with COVID-19 developments.

Longer term strategy

- Consider whether restructuring is necessary in light of the economic impact of COVID-19.
- Look at what changed arrangements have highlighted for the business.
- Consider the risk profile and follow a proper process when implementing redundancies, including by consulting with employees and looking at redeployment options.

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Dealing with employee reluctance/refusal to return

- Deal with on a case by case basis.
- Consider whether any direction to return to the workplace is 'lawful and reasonable'.
- Communication is key – seek to understand, and alleviate, employee concerns.
- Consider whether to request medical evidence to support concerns.
- Depending on the circumstances an employee may be able to work from home or access leave accruals in the short to medium term.
- Employees may be able to be directed back to the physical workplace where they do not have a genuine reason for not returning.

Mental health

- Some employees have felt isolated during the COVID pandemic and employee mental wellbeing has suffered.
- Ensure that employee mental health is considered when looking at safety management, considering issues such as increased workloads and isolation when working from home.
- Consult with employees about risks to their mental health and ways to address these.
- Consider whether any additional training on mental health is required.
- Engage in regular and empathetic discussions with employees about how they are and encourage them to discuss any concerns.
- Promote the Employee Assistance Programs available and/or provide information on external mental health and wellbeing support services.

Safety first!

- Ensure discharge of all work health and safety obligations, including by having a COVID Safe Plan.
- Ensure employee adherence to physical distancing requirements.
- Encourage employees to practice good hygiene and provide hand sanitiser and wipes.
- Consider whether employees need other personal protective equipment such as masks and/or gloves.
- Ensure the workplace is regularly cleaned and disinfected.
- Consider public transport issues and whether hours of work can be changed to avoid peak hour travel.
- Have a plan in place for any COVID-19 outbreaks in the workplace and dealing with employees with symptoms.
- Consider arrangements for vulnerable workers, such as those with medical conditions and older workers.
- Offer employees participation in an EAP.
- Live and breathe a safety culture!



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