



# MANAGING YOUR POST COVID TRANSITION



## TRANSITIONING BACK TO THE PHYSICAL WORKPLACE



In response to the COVID-19 crisis and in a state of haste, many employers around the country (and in fact the world) quickly transitioned their workforce to 'Working from Home'. This allowed business continuity during the crisis and ensured the safety and wellbeing of employees, in line with the Federal and State governments' directions. As restrictions lift and we start to see the light at the end of the tunnel, employers have an opportunity to carefully plan and communicate with their employees, a gradual transition back to the physical workplace. But in practical terms what does this actually look like? While there is no 'one size fits all' approach here, we've pulled together our top tips to get you started.

## GET YOUR COVID SAFE PLAN IN PLACE



The first thing employers need to be doing before they direct employees back to work is to develop a 'COVID safe plan'; this is a robust risk assessment plan which takes into consideration legal requirements (such as public health orders, health directions, etc) and information from the government, industry and employee associations. This ensures WHS requirements are adhered too. SafeWork Australia (or your governing body) is the central point for information. There are lots of boxes to tick here, even down to details around how an employee commutes to and from work and whether there are restrictions in place that will expose them, unnecessarily, to COVID-19.



## PLAN FOR A CASE OF COVID-19



While no one wants to think about the possibility of an employee testing positive and the ramifications associated with it, the reality is this is happening and will continue to happen into the foreseeable future. Ensure you have this very important point covered in your COVID safe plan. The better prepared you are, the quicker you can act if you find yourself in this situation. Consider having the following:

- A Floor Plan available that shows the workspace of each employee
- A record of all visitors to the workplace
- Attendance records of who is on site each day - and for how long
- Cleaning and hygiene records
- A contact tracing questionnaire, that can quickly and effectively identify close contacts of a positive case
- A communications and action plan



In the instance that an employee tests positive to COVID-19, the Department of Health will guide your action. The more robust resources and records you have the quicker the response.



## ASSESS EMPLOYEES WHO REQUIRE SPECIAL CONSIDERATION DUE TO INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES



Special considerations must be made for disabled employees and employees with carers responsibilities, who are going to have great difficulty returning to work due to an issue associated with COVID-19. Tread very carefully here and get appropriate advice. There is huge risk here for a general protections claim.

In addition, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee has provided recommended special provisions for vulnerable people in the workplace. The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee advises that:

*"Where vulnerable workers undertake essential work, a risk assessment must be undertaken. Risk needs to be assessed and mitigated with consideration of the characteristics of the worker, the workplace and the work. This includes ensuring vulnerable people are redeployed to non-customer based roles where possible. Where risk cannot be appropriately mitigated, employers and workers should consider alternate arrangements to accommodate a workplace absence"*

The Department of Health Website contains robust information on vulnerable worker definitions, including the chronic health conditions and medical treatments that put individuals at a greater level of risk.





## ASSESS YOUR REASONS AND TIMING FOR RETURNING TO THE PHYSICAL WORKPLACE



Ensure that you are being reasonable in your rationale for returning to the workplace and the timing around this. While you may be keen to get your team back together, and have things return back to normal as soon as possible, the reality is the world we are currently living in is far from normal. Examine issues of productivity (home vs workplace) and things like the need to meet face to face, with colleagues, etc. Employers should consider the following:

- workers returning to the workplace in rotating shifts to reduce the number of people in the office at one time
- a phased approach to return
- alternative locations from which the work is performed in order to spread out the workforce
- a staggered approach to start and end times
- the return of part of the workforce depending on the location and limitation applicable to that worksite



## CONSULT AND COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR EMPLOYEES

For many people, the transition back to the physical workplace will be daunting and for some, even frightening. Many people have established a 'new normal' working from home and will be reluctant to go through another change to their work routine. Others may be legitimately scared of increased exposure to COVID-19, be it related to commuting to work on public transport, or shared workplaces (think office buildings with lifts and various 'fear zones' where many touch surfaces or have face to face interaction with the public). The two best pieces of advice for any employer right now is to communicate with your employees and then genuinely listen to them. Try to find workable solutions for both parties when considering a transition back to the physical workplace. Keep in mind that employees have (for the most part) been successfully working from home for a while now and having this arrangement in place for a bit longer is not going to significantly impact your business.

## BE PREPARED FOR CONVERSATIONS AROUND ONGOING FLEXIBILITY

COVID-19 has changed the way we view work. For many, who have never worked from home before, they have been able to view their working life through a very different lens and, quite frankly, they liked what they saw. It provided a glimpse of life without long commutes (and the associated costs ) greater flexibilities (hanging out washing during a lunch break) and a real realisation that their job, that has always been done from a 'workplace,' can just as effectively be done from from home. It's likely a number of your employees may want to discuss more permanent flexibility post COVID-19. Be open to these discussions but remember, at the end of the day, the decision comes down to the Employer and what is going to work for the business. Do keep in mind that there are certain requests for flexible work arrangements that form part of the National Employment Standards and need serious consideration by an employer. Ensure you get appropriate advice in these situations.



## BE PREPARED TO EVOLVE AND MAKE CHANGES TO YOUR PLAN



COVID-19 forced many employers into situations they never foresaw. They had to react, adapt, pivot and innovate - all at record speed. As we gradually return to normal life, employers need to remember all that COVID-19 taught us. We need to continue to evolve with the situation and be prepared to act if and when we need to. For any help, or general HR advice, on how to navigate a transition back to the physical workplace, please contact the team at Employee Matters on (02) 8021 4206 – or email us on [info@employeematters.com.au](mailto:info@employeematters.com.au).

