



## DEVELOPING A TRANSITIONAL PLAN



### PLANNING TO GET YOUR EMPLOYEES BACK TO THE PHYSICAL WORKPLACE

Once you have completed your COVIDSafe Plan, it's time to move onto building a transitional plan to get your employees back to the physical workplace. As an Employer, you have a duty of care to your employees.

This means that before you resume operations in the physical workplace, a plan needs to be developed outlining how your workforce will return and operate safely in the current environment. There is a lot to consider here so treat this with care and caution. While every workplace will have differing needs and requirements, we have developed some handy, generic tips on the when, the who and the how, to get you started in building your transitional plan.

## BACKGROUND

On 8 May 2020, National Cabinet released its three-step framework for a COVIDSafe Australia. This plan provides a “pathway” for states and territories to progress to a COVIDSafe community that meets their individual circumstances.

The framework outlines the easing of restrictions that will allow businesses to reopen or return to their normal operations. Each state and territory will move between the steps at different times that align with the local conditions and public health situation.

The three-step framework in conjunction with the advice released by [SafeWork Australia](#) will assist businesses to ensure they make the appropriate decisions about how they can operate in a COVIDSafe way in order to protect their employees and customers.



## WHEN SHOULD MY EMPLOYEES RETURN?



In short, you must follow the relevant state government's advice and this will guide you in your decision making, around when it may be legally possible for you to return to the physical workplace. In steps 1 and 2 of the Government's [3 Step Framework for a COVIDSafe Australia](#) businesses are encouraged to continue working from home. Although this may be possible for some businesses, for others, reopening their business or returning to business as usual requires the return of employees to the work premises - (restaurants, cafes, beauticians, retail stores). With the current physical distancing and the 4 square metre rules, as well as travel restrictions and current government advice severely restricting the number of people that can use public transport, it is highly unlikely you will be able to transition your employees back all at the same time.

## WHO SHOULD RETURN FIRST?



First consideration should be given to which employees need to attend the workplace in order to perform their duties vs. those that can still perform their duties from home.



Employers should consider the following:

- prioritising the return of essential workers
- 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 physical workplace
- consider issues and delays around the use of public transport
- consider delays in getting from the lobby of a building to the employees workspace (i.e. the use of public lifts) consider how lunch times will be managed and delays that social distancing measures will cause

It's essential that you assess every employee's personal circumstances when making decisions about who should transition back into the workplace. You must give special consideration to employees who are disabled, vulnerable or have carers responsibilities.

### BE REASONABLE



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.

Keep in mind that employees have (for the most part) been successfully working from home for a while now and think about whether having this arrangement in place for a bit longer is really going to significantly impact your business.





## HOW DO I GET THE PROCESS STARTED OF TRANSITIONING EMPLOYEES BACK TO THE PHYSICAL WORKPLACE?



It's essential that you 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 hands touch surfaces or people 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.



If you have a union association at your workplace, ensure you communicate with them early on. It's also important that you understand and follow any consultation obligations set out in the relevant Modern Award, enterprise agreement or employment contract.



You should also ensure your employees are aware of your COVIDSafe Plan and the changes required when they return to the workplace:

- How the 4 square rule will be implemented as well as other government health advice at the time
- Office set-up
  - hotdesking is a thing of the past, employees need to have allocated seating
  - rules around common areas and how employees interact
- Limit non-essential work gatherings such as training, conferences and meetings
- Changes to client and customer interactions - i.e. move to virtual meetings
- When face to face interactions are inevitable, what are the rules around how these will take place
- Limit other workplace participants' access to the workplace
- Bringing lunch into the office in order to limit community exposure
- Hygiene requirements - i.e. sanitising stations, cleaning products, etc.

It's also important that you have all the new cleaning and hygiene requirements implemented prior to your employees returning to the workplace.

## CONCLUSION



There is a lot to consider in this space, it is imperative that you carefully assess every aspect when building your transitional plan. For any help navigating this landscape or general HR advice, please book a [complimentary Discovery Session](#) with one of our Experts.

**In the next article, we will examine working from home post COVID-19.**

