



Returning to the workplace in the age of coronavirus (COVID-19)

INFORMATION FOR EMPLOYERS

Many businesses across Australia are now establishing a new normal for work and operations. But how do we prepare employees for this transition? Whilst many business leaders will be considering how to manage an effective and profitable operation whilst adhering to health guidelines, there are some important people considerations to factor in before finalising your plans.

Develop a change management plan

Whilst more information is becoming available to help us understand what the transition back to work may look like, there will be many considerations on how business can operate with ongoing ongoing health guidelines and risk management measures.

As an employer, uncertainty in your business is not your friend. Research shows that uncertainty leads to stress and anxiety, particularly for those that have a higher intolerance for uncertainty. Now is the time to be as transparent as possible, providing very clear information to staff about what will be happening. These messages may need to be tailored to different areas of the business, as different work sites or types of work may necessitate different arrangements.

A robust communication strategy is important at a time like this – there is still a lot of information available in the general media, and employees talk – it does not take much to establish a rumour which becomes a source of ‘truth’ for employees.

In communicating with staff, it will be helpful to provide clear vision and direction, and help employees understand what the future work state will look like. Broad statements such as “things will never go back to the way they were” and “our work will never be the same again” may be alarming for employees, particularly when these statements are not qualified in any way. Such statements will likely lead to uncertainty and confusion, and may result in some employees worrying about issues such as job security and their ability to meet future work demands and adjust to changes.

Instead, consider letting employees know that there are some anticipated changes and be really clear about what you know *is* changing and what you know *isn't* changing. Also, let employees know how you plan to continue communicating and consulting with them about any future changes.

Provide reassurance about health, safety and wellbeing

Employees are likely to have concerns about their safety and what steps will be taken to secure wellbeing in the workplace. This is not just a moral consideration, but also a legal consideration in enacting your duty of care for your staff.

To avoid employees becoming stressed or anxious and to help reduce resistance to the transition, provide sufficient information that is delivered in a clear and timely manner. This will help employees understand what the safety and wellbeing strategy and actions will be. Your staff will be counting on you to look after them – the tone of communications should convey a sense of concern and support. Also consider consulting your staff before you return to your workplace – they are likely to have great ideas about promoting health and safety, and this will give them a sense of control and involvement in decision-making, helping to reduce stress and anxiety.

Finally remember the little details, like letting them know what sanitisation and cleaning products will be available, and the tools and resources that will be there to assist each individual in maintaining a safe workplace.

Discuss with staff who should go back and when

For many workplaces, there will be limits on how many employees can occupy the workspace, whether this is a government mandated requirement or a policy your organisation decides to implement. Whilst many organisations may seek to make this decision on a pure operational basis, it is important to also consider the needs your employees may have.

Some employees will be coping with working from home better than others and may be experiencing less difficulties in working productively. For employees that have not been able to work, there may be considerations regarding who will benefit most from returning to the workplace and how to ensure work, pay and benefits are distributed equally. As an example of such a consideration, some individuals may be experiencing domestic violence or increased family conflict and benefit from time away from the home to increase a sense of personal safety.

When making decisions about who works in the office and when, first ensure you have implemented a consultation process to collect information about personal circumstances and needs.

Prepare your staff with return to work knowledge and skills

There will be some practicalities in returning your staff to the workplace. Information and training will help employees to feel comfortable and ready to cope with changes. Whilst most aspects of your business may continue as usual, there will be some subtle and also obvious changes. Consider how you will equip your employees with the knowledge and skills to operate in this new environment.

Feeling prepared will most certainly boost self-efficacy and a sense of agency. What are the new rules? What do they need to do to maintain a high standard of hygiene? For leaders, how do they manage a team that is now partly intact working in the office and partly remote? Whatever your new normal looks like, consider what your employees need, and where possible provide training and education in advance of the transition.

Support teams to work effectively together

Colleagues are going to need to set some new boundaries and learn how to interact with each other in the context of social distancing. COVID-19 may see people operating with a higher degree of vigilance and greater awareness of the behaviour of colleagues, with increased scrutiny on health and hygiene practices, which could result in increased tensions. This may be positive as employees learn to hold each other accountable for behaviour, but they may also need tools and strategies to help them determine how to raise issues and concerns when they feel a colleague has breached the social norms and required expectations of the group. Support your leaders with managing their teams in this environment – ensure they have the capabilities to resolve conflict and managing team dynamics.

Maintain a sense of organisational justice

With new rules comes the delicate balance of making the right decisions whilst being fair and equitable. It is likely that some operational decisions you make could lead to perceptions of injustice (e.g., who can still work from home, who is allowed in the office, who gets access to what technology etc.). When determining operational factors such as rosters, work schedules or continued working from home arrangements, communicate clearly and let employees know the factors that have influenced decisions. Where possible, consult workers and ensure their feedback is considered before finalising arrangements.

There is still a considerable way to go in adjusting to the changes that COVID-19 has brought to organisations, and establishing stability and normality for workforces in getting on with business as usual. Now is the time to put good habits in place regarding ongoing communication, consultation and engagement with staff, ensuring your organisation is truly working together to ensure your future success.

Seek support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety your employees experience as a result of COVID-19 is impacting on their everyday life, a psychologist may be able to help.

Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals, skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help manage stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

Australians referred to a psychologist by their GP might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. They may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so they do not need to travel to see a psychologist.

There are number of ways a person can access a psychologist. They can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask their GP or another health professional for a referral.

Acknowledgments

This information sheet was prepared by the APS College of Organisational Psychologists.



Psychology Put To Work

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The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak. Visit psychology.org.au for more.