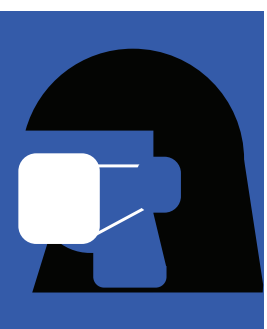




**EMPLOYERS**

# **RETURN-TO-WORK**

**UNDERSTANDING FOR ALL**





## TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS

Many employees in our industry, particularly those directly employed in production, have continued to work onsite throughout most of the pandemic. Throughout that time workplaces have been operating under heightened risk management that has included COVID Safe Plans, worker travel permits, physical distancing, and PPE. Additionally, and to ensure production, workers have been able to undertake their work as safely as possible, their co-workers have been required to work from home wherever possible.

The ability for workers to undertake their work from home is strongly tied to their particular occupation and the tasks they are required to perform. Working from home has suited more office-based workers and the adoption of various technologies, particularly video meeting platforms, has enabled this to occur.

As the various states and territories hit pre-determined COVID-19 vaccination rates, workplace and social restrictions are starting to ease. The mandatory requirement that employers permit workers to work from home will become discretionary. Businesses should be considering a variety of factors and determining an approach for when, how, and if those workers will return to onsite work.

Here we provide some consideration for employers to assist in the Return-to-Work journey.

## Be patient with yourself and your team/s

PwC report that 53% of employees are concerned about COVID workplace infection, whilst many of us are vaccinated, you may find resistance across some staff to be vaccinated which may create concern for those that are. Finding the balance to these discussions, determining your own company policies and remaining patient to employee concerns is critical.

Consider utilising external resources, education and information, trade union support and more to assist in the conversations and to address employee/s concerns.

## Create space for processing and sense-making

Find ways to create a safe space for people to process their emotions and feelings with each other. Creating a level of psychological safety can take time and showing that you are willing to share your challenges is a great way to show that it's safe to be honest about the impact of these changes on us as people.

Open discussions with your teams, facilitated by someone within the team rather than the Managing Director or Business Owner, can encourage a space for more open dialogue than dictated dialogue. Suggest team's workshop with themselves to build solutions they can bring to you for consideration.

Ask them for their input and questions. The dialogue will help everyone process the situation and feel a sense of empowerment in a sea of uncertainty.

## Be honest about what you know and what you don't

Despite the future looking to stabilise, situations will continue to progress, more government amendments, facts, and information will become available with ongoing variables influencing life for you and your teams for the foreseeable future. Be honest with your teams about what is known and what isn't. Also be honest about what the company needs, working from home works well for independent tasks, however for team projects, cultural development or interdependent tasks require collaboration which is best achieved onsite. Communicating openly the company's needs is critical.

## Return-to-work direction

If you require workers to resume working onsite, then you may need to issue a Return-to-work direction. Many of those workers have been operating remotely for lengthy periods and have become accustomed to the practice. For smooth transitioning, a clear direction with a reasonable notice period, as to the date to return onsite and any related health and safety conditions and requirements that apply would provide clarity for those workers. Communicate the OH&S procedures you have in place to provide comfort to staff concerns. Generally, a worker cannot refuse to comply with such a reasonable direction, however they may have concerns and these should be worked through.

## Hybrid arrangements

Hybrid arrangements are the new black, but blue and green should never be seen without a colour in between. Will workers currently working from home continue under similar arrangements? Will there be a return to onsite work, or will hybrid style work models be implemented where workers attend onsite for certain days of the working week occur?

Although there is always a good business case for workers and businesses negotiating mutually beneficial outcomes, there are a range of potential benefits and costs to both parties from any arrangement. A McKinsey report in August 2020 found that on average, companies planned to reduce office space by 30 percent. Reducing operational costs and increasing employee engagement. Assess all impacts before determining your company policies.

If you determine a hybrid work model might benefit your business and certain employees it will require ongoing management. Such arrangements should be drafted into company policy and be periodically reviewed and adjusted as necessary. This should include offering the option while reserving the right to revise or end such arrangements where necessary. It should also include the that workers attend the workplace when directed or required such as for performance management reasons. When we move past COVID, a Zoom or Teams meeting will no longer be considered an appropriate setting for addressing such issues.

## Overcommunicate

Anxious team members are going to fill any silence with noise and, oftentimes, the stories they tell themselves may not be grounded in fact and reality. Don't let open space fill with anxiety. Make extra time and effort to communicate early and often. It may feel like you're overdoing it, but you're not. People want to be a part of the process and feel in the know so look for ways to actively include them in figuring out a path that works for the business and the diverse people on the team.

## Don't ignore warning signs of distress

Some of your team (or you) may be having significant challenges navigating the return to work and they may be sending subtle signals that they are in distress. Your role as a leader will require that you keep your antennae tuned in to yourself and your team. Keeping a sharp eye out during your interactions with others for signals (verbal and non-verbal) that they may be experiencing levels of anxiety or difficulty that may be unhealthy can be extremely beneficial. Your attention to your team may be the difference between healthy navigation of stress and a potentially serious situation.

## In conclusion

People handle stress and anxiety in very different ways. As the world begins to think about how and when people will return to a physical workplace, the lack of definitive detail will, no doubt, affect many people in different and, sometimes, unhealthy ways. Making efforts to be proactive can help to pre-empt and minimize some of those negative effects. Communicate and lead with empathy and openness. Your teams and your businesses will thank you for it.

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