

Returning to the workplace

A COVID SAFE GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS



About this guide

With COVID-19 restrictions easing, many businesses are planning for their staff to return to the physical workplace.

To help you support your staff during the process and navigate your employer responsibilities, we have put together a COVID safe guide.

In this guide we will cover the following steps:

- **Assess //** Reviewing your readiness
- **Plan //** Breaking down individual needs and work processes
- **Communicate //** Supporting everyone to be on the same page
- **Support //** Being ready for the first day back
- **Respond //** Being prepared in case of infection or if restrictions change
- **A COVID-19 Checklist //** General information about key topics and links to other resources

Assess // Let's review your readiness

Are you aware of the risks to your business? What concerns do your staff have? Do you have the facilities you need to provide a safe workplace? These are some of questions you should consider when assessing your readiness for staff to return to the physical workplace.

Let's break it down into some manageable steps:

1. Firstly, consider what returning to the workplace means for your business. What are your guiding principles? For example, what is the degree of urgency for your staff to return? What is the impact on clients? Will productivity be improved? Map this out and keep it front of mind throughout the process to help inform your decision making
2. Complete a risk assessment, considering health and safety in the workplace during COVID-19. [Visit the Fair Work website](#) for helpful information
3. Assess the readiness of your workplace from a physical perspective and develop an action plan. Ask yourself, do you need to make any changes or organise for any work to be undertaken? For example, does the air-conditioning need to be serviced? Do workstations need to be rearranged to adhere to social distancing? Do you require any signage? Do you have adequate handwashing facilities? Do you need to organise for regular cleaning services?
4. Review your policies and procedures and identify areas where updates are required. For example, establish standards for unwell staff, hygiene and outbreak reporting. [Visit the Safe Work Australia website](#) for helpful information
5. Assess your position on testing protocols. [Visit the Safe Work Australia website](#) for helpful information
6. Develop a consultative process. You are required to consult with your staff on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19. [Visit the Safe Work Australia website](#) for helpful information

Plan // Let's break down individual needs and work processes

Before your staff return to work, you need to consider a number of factors concerning your people and the work they undertake.

Let's break it down into some manageable steps:

1. Conduct a survey about your employees' attitudes to return to the physical workplace. Questions might include, what impact will it have on them? How will they commute and how long will it take? Do they feel safe returning? What have they liked / disliked about working from home? Would they like to retain a form of remote working and how do they believe it would be beneficial to the business? Do they think adjustments need to be made to the workplace and / or their workstation? How else can you support their return to the physical workplace?
2. Utilise survey results, other forms of feedback and other available information to understand the impact on employees returning to the workplace. Including:
 - Their readiness
 - Changes to public transport
 - Carer responsibilities
 - Mental health impacts
3. Consider how you would like staff to return to the workplace. Will it be a staggered approach or all at once? And what changes will you need to make? Including:
 - Redesign roles where necessary
 - Prioritise work tasks and redeploy staff where required
 - Simplify processes
 - Consider flexible work arrangements, including varied start and finish times, alternate work from home rosters and extended office hours
 - Re-engage stand downs to accommodate staff who are afraid to return

Communicate// Let's get everyone on the same page

Effective communication during a pandemic is crucial. How do you communicate with your staff? Will it continue to be the most effective method?

Let's break it down into some manageable steps:

1. Consider how you want communication to flow within your business. Will it be from the top-down or something else? Develop a communication plan and make sure you consult with other managers, supervisors and/or team leaders so it is collaborative
2. Consider asking your staff how they would prefer to receive important and regular communication? Is it via email or text? And where practically possible, integrate this into your plan. Where personal devices are being used, make sure you have up-to-date information
3. Before your staff return, think about how you are going to communicate changes to policies and procedures to them, including hygiene and outbreak reporting. Consider facilitating a virtual re-orientation
4. Ensure you communicate available supports to staff to support their return to the workplace, as well as the implications of physical distancing, and the importance of handwashing, hygiene and cleaning

Support // Let's be ready for the first day back

When your staff arrive for work on their first day (and even their first week), you want it to be seamless. Invest time into planning and communicate key information to staff in advance.

Let's break it down into some manageable steps:

1. Organise where staff need to go, how they sign in / out, who they report to, when they start / finish, how they manage breaks and other basic protocols
2. Ensure staff have completed re-orientation requirements for reading and understanding new / updated policies and procedures
3. Communicate measures implemented to keep everyone safe including cleaning regimes, hygiene facilities and expectations for workstations

Respond// Let's be prepared in case of infection or if restrictions change

While we can take steps to manage what we know is happening, it is much more complex to prepare for the unknown.

Moving forward it is important to consider processes in the event something changes or if an outbreak occurs.

Let's break it down into some manageable steps:

1. Ensure you have measures in place to respond promptly in the event a staff member contracts COVID-19. [Visit the Safe Work Australia website](#) for helpful information
2. If changes to restrictions are imposed, consider what measures you need to put in place to quickly respond to state and federal updates and possible implications this will impose of work arrangements

swa.gov.au/coronavirus updated: 29 April 2020

COVID-19 at the workplace

You are not expected, and should not try, to diagnose people. However, you have a work health and safety duty to minimise the risk of workers and others in the workplace being exposed to COVID-19, so far as reasonably practicable. If you reasonably suspect someone could have the virus, or has been exposed, this creates a health risk at your workplace, and you will need to follow the steps below.

The person you are concerned about is at the workplace

1. ISOLATE Prevent the spread. Isolate the person from others and provide a disposable surgical mask, if available, for the person to wear.	2. SEEK ADVICE Call your state or territory helpline. Follow advice of public health officials.	3. TRANSPORT Ensure the person has transport to their home or to a medical facility.
4. CLEAN Clean and disinfect the areas where the person and close contacts have been. Do not use those areas until this process is complete. Use PPE when cleaning.	5. IDENTIFY & INFORM Consider who the person has had close contact with. If instructed by public health officials, tell close contacts they may have been exposed and follow advice on quarantine requirements.	6. REVIEW Review risk management controls relating to COVID-19 and review whether work may need to change. Consult workers on WHS issues.

COVID-19 Checklist

Checklist	Information	Additional Information / Sources
Information from the Department of Health and Human Services	<p>The situation is unprecedented and changing quickly. Ensure you are up-to-date with the most accurate information to make an informed decision for your workplace</p> <p>Review your Business Continuity Plan and internal policies to ensure they are equipped and appropriate for the changing circumstances.</p>	https://bit.ly/2LRTw4t
Employee and workplace hygiene	<p>Are all staff aware of handwashing techniques, coughing etiquette and distancing from others, and is the workplace safe? Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting notices up in your offices reminding employees of good workplace hygiene. • Providing regular updates about good hygiene. • Providing hand sanitiser at entry points and around the office. • Ensuring meeting rooms have tissues and rubbish bins. • Checking your building is being cleaned properly and frequently. • Providing employees with cleaning materials to clean their desks more frequently should they wish. • Having a deep cleaning plan in place should an employee or visitor later find that they are infected with COVID-19 and has been in the office. • Ensuring that contractors receive communications on workplace hygiene. 	https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-in-pictures https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces
General leave provisions Fair Work Ombudsman	<p>When it comes to leave provisions, consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hourly or casual employees. • Whether you want to change your working from home policy to include working when children are at home. • What, if any, provisions you want to put in place if employees run out of personal or sick leave? • Stress and anxiety during times of crisis can impact employees' mental health. Review whether your current policies and processes cater for this. 	https://coronavirus.fairwork.gov.au

Checklist	Information	Additional Information / Sources
Flexible work practices	<p>Review your flexible working arrangements policy. Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which roles / staff can work from home and which roles cannot? • Whether your IT systems have the capacity for all staff to be working from home? • Whether staff have internet access or required equipment at home? • Whether you need to purchase additional IT equipment? • Stress testing the organisation's capacity to work from home. • How you might communicate with all staff should there be a need to work from home at very short notice? • Whether or when you might wish to move to a partial or full working from home situation? • Splitting your organisation into two groups and staggering their working from home to avoid cross-infection. <p>Updating your working from home policy or procedure to ensure that it meets your needs if employees are subject to quarantine.</p>	https://www.fairwork.gov.au/employee-entitlements/flexibility-in-the-workplace/flexible-working-arrangements
Workplace Planning	<p>Plan for a range of scenarios.</p> <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which roles are essential? • Which essential roles can only be done by one or two specialists? • What your back-up plans are if all the employees undertaking these roles fall ill? <p>If certain tasks cannot be done from home, whether staff can be redeployed into other necessary roles.</p>	https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces

Checklist	Information	Additional Information / Sources
Supporting staff during this period	<p>Ensure that you support your staff during this difficult period. Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having the CEO or another senior staff member provide regular updates to staff about the situation. Discussing the situation with your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Informing staff how they can access their EAP. Providing staff with links to other support services. Ensuring managers check in regularly with their staff to see how they are faring. Recommending employees who have low immunity or underlying health conditions, or direct family members with the same, work from home. <p>Recommending employees who have high levels of anxiety work from home.</p>	https://psychology.org.au/About-Us/news-and-media/Media-releases/2020/Coronavirus-psychologists-offer-advice-for-maintainance https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au https://www.hrmonline.com.au/employee-wellbeing/how-help-employee-colleague-coronavirus/
Travel Policy	<p>Review your organisation's travel policy to ensure it aligns with government requirements and recommendations. Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the Smart Traveller website to check which countries have been deemed at risk. If overseas business travel should be cancelled? Whether other travel for business should be cancelled or restricted to essential travel only? If travel is continuing whether staff members can travel on the same aircraft? What steps employees returning from overseas should take before returning to work? What your duty of care to contractors is and whether you should align their travel to the organisation's travel policy? 	https://www.smartertraveller.gov.au/news-and-updates/coronavirus-covid-19 https://covid19.homeaffairs.gov.au https://www.smartertraveller.gov.au/crisis/covid-19-and-travel
Meetings, events and conferences	<p>Develop a strategy for meetings and events, including ensuring that government policy is adhered to. Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options for using technology solutions to remove the need for a face-to-face or group meeting. Whether employees are permitted to attend external events and meetings, and in what circumstances? Which events or meetings can be held remotely? Whether you are going to cancel or postpone some or all of the events or meetings that you are holding? 	https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/11/quarantine-video-call-coronavirus-colleagues-home-work

Checklist	Information	Additional Information / Sources
Business	<p>The crisis will affect your business. You should work with the organisation to identify these effects. Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Businesses have a reasonable expectation that work will be carried out to the required standards. • Freezing new hires. • Halting non-essential expenditure. • Future workforce planning. 	https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/media-centre/news/covid-19-information-workplaces
Privacy and Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees should be reminded about the organisation's anti-discrimination policy. • Remember to maintain employee's privacy should there be any diagnosed incidences. 	https://www.fairwork.gov.au/how-we-will-help/templates-and-guides/best-practice-guides/workplace-privacy
Communication plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop ways to keep all staff informed of organisational decisions impacting work and any other changes that have been decided. • Communicate to stakeholders and customers regularly. 	

Do you need help some specialist help putting together your COVID safe plan? We can help! Get in touch with the Classic team today.

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