Planning the Return to Work Under COVID-19

BY BROOKER CONSULTING

Considerations

This guide includes useful information to enable decision making around reopening your office as safely as possible.

This is not intended as legal advice, more guidance and an outline of potential challenges.

We will cover:

When to start

What to consider

Health & safety considerations

Travel

Facilities

Social distancing measures

Onsite visitors & meetings

HR considerations

The phased approach

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Before we begin...

Employers who proactively plan for potential challenges will be best positioned to adapt to the "new normal."

We recognise this information will change and evolve with adjustments to government and health authority advice.

Many companies will adopt a 'phased approach' to return to work plans - bringing employees back to the workplace following best practice for social distancing and other risk mitigation measures.

Key considerations are **employee safety, wellbeing, fears**, and **concerns.** These need to be addressed effectively by business leaders.

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First things first

It's important to comply with orders on a jurisdiction basis and rely on medical guidance. When returning your staff to the office, base your decisions on **business needs, customer demands** and **staff requirements**.

Strike the right *balance* between accommodating peoples' needs and comfort levels, and with finding effective ways to hold your team accountable for business goals.

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What to consider

Consider the individuals in your team/s

Identify essential vs non-essential staff by geographic location and role.

Decide whether the role can be effectively performed remotely.

Establish if they are a parent or carer who may still need to remain at home.

Investigate individual daily commutes: do they walk, drive or catch public transport?

Determine what equipment and planning will increase safety and decrease risk.

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Health & safety

Once it's deemed safe for the Australian workforce to return to work, extra health and safety precautions need to be put in place to keep your team well. This includes precautions when commuting, whilst in the office, and when employees are out of the office or at home.

Remind sick staff to stay home.

Screening

Provide health screenings and temperature checks for all staff.

Hand sanitiser

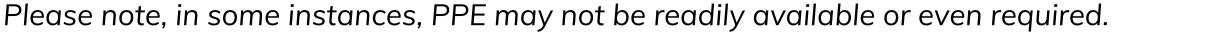Increase its availability and mandate its regular use.

PPE: masks & gloves

Consider providing suitable PPE for staff to use either on a voluntary or mandated basis, according to your state's requirements.

Staff responsibilities

Employees need to be vigilant and take responsibilities for their own health, including flu shots etc.

Please note, in some instances, PPE may not be readily available or even required.

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Travel

Public transport is potentially one of the biggest issues that organisations face when returning employees to the office.

However your staff commute, decisions must reflect an individual's ability to travel in a safe and comfortable manner.

- If feasible, provide an adjustment to working hours to avoid peak times
- Establish new protocols around interstate or international travel - following Department of Health or state guidelines
- Limit travel to and from client sites where possible and establish vehicle checks for fleet cars

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Within the office

Regardless of the policies your organisation puts in place, it is essential to have clear communication with employees, and approved visitors, regarding expectations and what measures are in place to ensure their safety.

Facilities

Cleaning

Incorporate robust cleaning protocols to be conducted regularly, particularly focusing on high-touch areas e.g. door handles, water coolers and copy machines.

Catering and kitchen

Close internal food and beverage stations and consider whether employees should only use their own vessels and containers.

Contact free

Set up facilities to be contact free, wherever possible, such as touchless soap dispensers and toilet flushes.

Products

Provide cleaning products such as discinfectant wipes for employees to clean individual workstations and consider paper towels rather than tea towels.

Social distancing measures

Consider implementing these steps into the office:

1. Restrict gatherings of people e.g. in the kitchen, lunch rooms, and in meetings
2. Reorganise workstations to align with social distancing requirements at 1.5 metres apart (this may decrease)
3. Stagger arrival and departure times, introduce alternate on-site days or weeks and stagger employee break times
4. Introduce markings on the floor, similar to what we have experienced in shops, to highlight the number of employees per section at a time
5. Introduce building entrance and exit protocols

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Onsite visitors & meetings

Building management

Keep up to speed with any restrictions set in place by your building management team.

Off-site safety

Consider implications and risks for employees when returning to the office environment from off-site destinations.

Visitors

What adjustments can be made to ensure onsite visitors feel comfortable in your workplace?

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HR considerations

Annual leave

If employees have been requested to take leave during the lockdown period, they may benefit from individual leave balance updates.

Remuneration

Many workplaces have adjusted employee remuneration during the lockdown period - ensure there is clear communication around timing for these to be reviewed.

Wellbeing

Remind employees of support channels such as Employee Assistance Programs and create policies that address the concerns of all employees struggling to adjust to the 'new normal'.

Fatigue

Many employees have cancelled previously booked leave. If they are experiencing fatigue - be compassionate, organised and diplomatic about coordinating their new leave dates.

Symptoms

There must be clear communication to employees regarding what to do if they exhibit symptoms or are at-risk.

Sick leave

Do leave policies encourage employees to work from home if they suspect they may have come into contact with COVID-19?

Bonuses

Many businesses have experienced a significant downturn in financial performance and profitability. Be transparent and on the front foot to ensure employee engagement.

Work from home

Has this experience warranted adjustments to goals, objectives or working practices? Consider updating policies and risk assessment processes.

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Phase 1:
Before Reopening

- Complete required pre-clean
- Ensure staff can access cleaning products, soap etc. in necessary areas
- Organise kitchen and communal areas according to relevant advice
- Create signage around the office to provide key information
- Formulate social distance office plan so that employees can comply
- Determine maximum number of employees allowed in office and ensure the seating plan reflects this
- Communicate an outline of new measures and provide instructions regarding cleanliness, behavioural and distancing expectations
- Inform employees of any health screening that will be taking place and make suitable arrangements
- Provide employees with guidance around visitors in the office
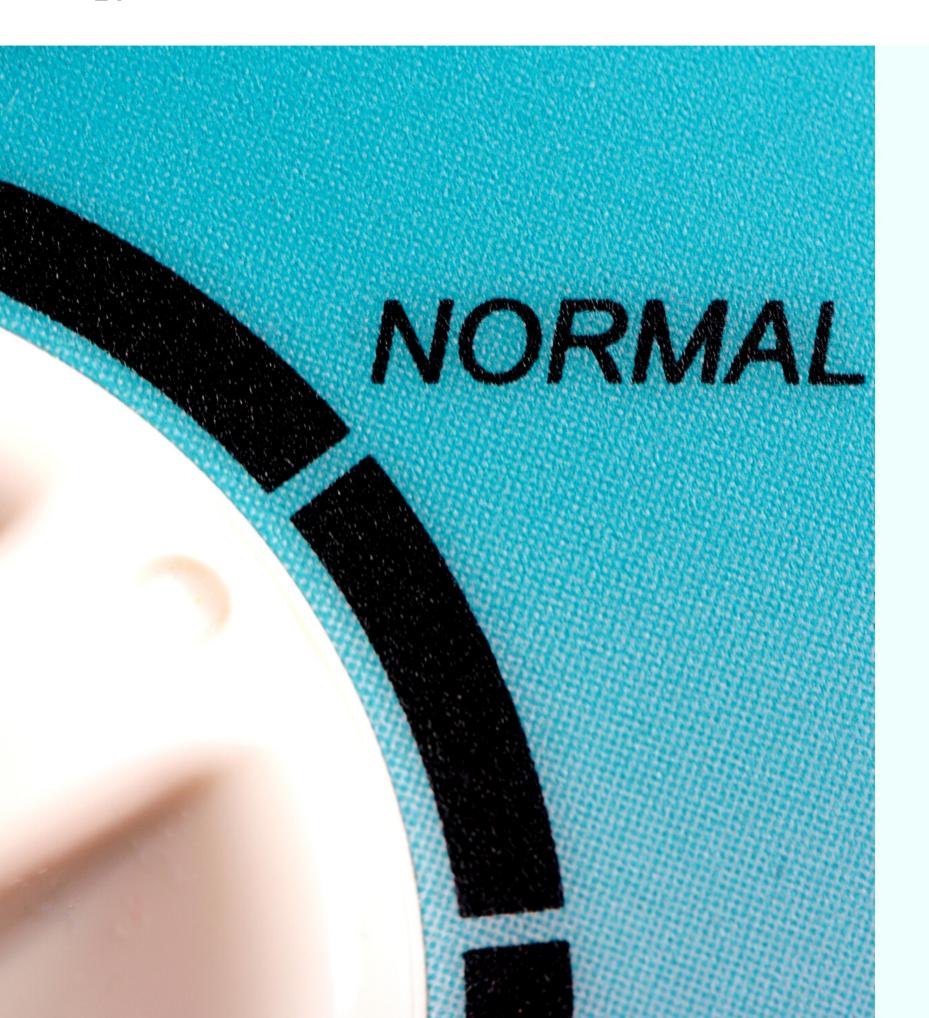- Ensure that required PPE is readily accessible to the team

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Phase 2:
Open with limited capacity

During this phase, the workplace will be open in accordance with government guidance. Be mindful that this transition will be a significant adjustment for many, and that returning to the office should be optional.

- Arrange for required food and beverage to be stocked - this may be limited to reduce risks
- Reorganise the office, including reinstating equipment that was taken to employees' home offices
- Create a 'welcome back' pack or messaging for employees that is visible in the office to inspire positivity
- Implement a roster so that the maximum number of employees in the office isn't exceeded
- Introduce team days in the office, in accordance with advice, that may be beneficial as part of the transition
- Offer special support to employees using one set of equipment between home and the office

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Phase 3:
Increasing capacity

- Broaden the number of staff in the workplace according to government guidelines
- Keep social distancing and cleaning measures from previous phases in place
- Regularly update employees regarding expectations

Phase 4:
No capacity restrictions

- Return to business-as-new-normal;
  - There are no government restrictions in place
  - There are no limitations to the entire workforce returning to the workplace
  - Visitors will be welcomed without restrictions
  - Employers to determine if working from home remains an option when needed

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