

## **HR's GREATEST CHALLENGE: RETURNING TO WORK -THE NEW NORMAL**

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

This is a slightly revised version of a paper I have just written for our Executive.

This paper has been written with the view to cover all major aspects of returning to work at the Centre and offices, at a high level. Please note that each of these areas is a paper in their own right. As a result of this paper, the Executive may wish to delve deeper into, or focus their attention in one or two areas.

### **2 BACKGROUND**

The coronavirus, COVID-19, began in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan. In January 2020 the spread of the virus within China escalated and at the end of January 2020, the World Health Organisation, (WHO), declared a global emergency. Cases began appearing in Australia at the end of January 2020. The HRD began advising the then CEO regarding the likely spread and impact on the Diocese and the Anglican Centre, as she had experience in pandemic planning from the Bird Flu outbreak of H5N1 in 2005. She had worked with multinationals on business continuity planning, (BCP) and sat on a federal government advisory committee at the time of H5N1.

On 11 March 2020, the WHO announced that COVID-19 outbreak was a global pandemic and 10 days later Australia shut its borders. Planning began on the closure of the Anglican Centre, as well as business continuity planning for the Diocese. The Federal Government closed all churches on 23 March 2020. The Anglican Centre was closed early April 2020. All staff have worked remotely since that time.

### **3 HOW LONG WILL WE HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT COVID-19?**

The likelihood is that this very infectious disease will linger for many years, despite our best efforts. WHO stated a few days ago that they hoped the pandemic will have ended within two years. Last month the former Surgeon General of the USA said not to expect the pandemic to end before 2022, even with a vaccine. That means that without a vaccine, the virus could become endemic, permanently present in the population like the coronaviruses that cause colds.

Michael Osterholm, (Director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, University of Minnesota, and expert in the 2005 H5N1 pandemic, who famously predicted a global pandemic 15 years ago), recently stated he could not see this under control before the end of 2021, (even with a vaccine).

COVID-19, in one form or another, will keep infecting people for years to come. It is not going to disappear like smallpox. The community generally appears to have the attitude that '*something will magically happen*' and it will disappear. The experts say that is extremely unlikely.

Therefore, 'COVID normal' will be the norm and we must deal with this situation, not ignore it. This paper addresses the 'COVID normal' in the workplace.

#### **4 WORKING REMOTELY**

Despite concern at the speed in which we closed the Centre, all staff were up and running, IT wise, very quickly and the move to working remotely has been remarkably smooth. As the pandemic worsened, staff were grateful that they did not face a commute on public transport or working in close proximity to their colleagues. We have now been working remotely for six months.

Much has and is being written by consulting companies and professional organisations on the mindset of employees and their willingness to return to work. For many employees, they have cut their daily commute from three hours plus, to 3 minutes. They are able to spend more time with their family members as they save hours in their daily commute.

Other more extroverted employees, long to be able to return to the office, interact and collaborate with their colleagues and 'escape' from the home environment.

Some employees have compromised immune systems and or are in a high risk group, in terms of COVID. For them, the thought of a return to the office fills them with fear that they may catch COVID and their likelihood of survival is less than the average person.

#### **5 WHO WILL WANT TO COME BACK TO THE OFFICE?**

We are likely to have three distinct groups in relation to a return to work. These are:

- Those who cannot wait to return to the office on a full time basis.
- Those who will be most reluctant, verging on refusing to return, given their health issues and fears.
- Those who would be willing to come back one to three days per week where they need to participate in a team meeting and or collaborate with their colleagues.

In planning a return to the office, it is recommended that all managers speak to their staff to ascertain which of these three groups employees fall into. As we will need to comply with social distancing in returning, no more than a third of staff can be in the office at any one time, according to present rules. This will require much planning by managers, particularly if a large percentage wish to be in the office.

For those wanting to continue to work remotely, the issue of compliant OH&S in their home workplace becomes more of a long term issue and will need to be addressed.

## 6 MANAGING THE WORK HEALTH AND SAFETY OF A RETURN

The National Cabinet has agreed to ten National COVID-19 Safe Workplace Principles which include, amongst others, that:

*"4. As COVID-19 restrictions are gradually relaxed, businesses, workers and other duty holders must work together to adapt and promote safe work practices, consistent with advice from health authorities, to ensure their workplaces are ready for the social distancing and exemplary hygiene measures that will be an important part of the transition.*

*5. Businesses and workers must actively control against the transmission of COVID-19 while at work, consistent with the latest advice from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), including considering the application of a hierarchy of appropriate controls where relevant.*

*6. Businesses and workers must prepare for the possibility that there will be cases of COVID-19 in the workplace and be ready to respond immediately, appropriately, effectively and efficiently, and consistent with advice from health authorities."*

In the immediate to short term, OH&S risk management will be a key driver for physical change in the workplace, (which will be seen in floor markings, increased signage and screens amongst other measures), as well as hyper vigilance around workplace cleaning, worker hygiene and physical distancing.

Already, many companies who have returned to the office in states outside Victoria are not allowing staff to use crockery or cutlery provided in kitchens and staff are required to bring their own tea or coffee in, to avoid touching any shared packaging.

Some issues to consider include:

- How will social distancing measures be addressed in the office, working spaces, meeting rooms, walkways, lift, lunch room, kitchenettes, toilets, etc.? How will tasks that challenge physical distancing be managed?
- What kind of cleaning protocols will be used? If equipment, (eg printers and photocopies), are shared, how will they be cleaned and by whom? What about high-touch items?
- How to effectively consult and communicate prior to and during the return phase if there are different start/finish times, rotating teams and others working remotely.
- How to support good mental health and wellbeing where there may be increased general anxiety connected with COVID-19 both due to work changes, (eg working on rostered days in the office and rostered days working remotely) and using public transport.

## **7 THE LOGISTICS OF RETURNING TO THE OFFICE**

Once the preference of staff has been ascertained regarding the numbers wishing to return, rosters will need to be created to accommodate those people, bearing in mind a maximum of a third of the staff at any one time can be in the office, (to be COVID Safe compliant with social distancing rules from COVID Safe Australia), and that those prepared to come in to attend team meetings, will also need to be accommodated.

We will also have to give thought to how we keep our remote staff feeling they are still 'connected', while they remain at home and their colleagues are at work. There is the potential for two 'classes' of employees and we will need to be very aware and mindful in the way we communicate and the frequency in order to avoid them feeling they are the 'lost tribe' or second class citizens. Also refer to Section 9, The Hybrid Office.

## **8 THE LEGAL RISKS OF RETUNING WORKERS AND THOSE WHO WISH TO REMAIN WORKING REMOTELY**

There are a number of legal risks, which need to be discussed separately, but the overarching issue we must keep front of mind is we have a legal obligation to keep our employees safe and take whatever measures necessary to achieve that.

## **9 THE IT IMPLICATIONS AND THE 'HYBRID' OFFICE**

I mentioned earlier about the 'hybrid office'. This is the way of the future. Even if COVID disappears, which is unlikely in the short term, there will be employees who will not wish to come back to the office full time, but rather work remotely and use technology to keep them connected to their colleagues and their managers.

The basic concept around the 'hybrid office' is an office designed so that people can flexibly and almost transparently work both from home as well as, (occasionally), from an office fitted out in new ways to support this mode of working.

Why would employees want to work from home? Many more people now see the advantages, (due to COVID and lockdown requirements), of no commute time; the ability to balance work and family much better and increases in productivity.

Given the preceding, some would ask, 'why is an office still needed?' The answers are many, ranging from: developing current or new employees; team collaboration and support; reinforcement of culture and values, as well as people wanting to physically be together occasionally.

In order to have this 'hybrid office' and make it work, open spaces and offices will need to be reconfigured, as well as employees having technology that allows working remotely or in the office, seamlessly. The key to this 'seamless' experience is '*unified communications*'. Unified communications is a business concept describing the integration of enterprise communication services such as Instant Messaging and Microsoft Teams chat, voice, (including IP telephony), web and video conferencing, desk top sharing with non real time communication services such as unified messaging, (integrated voicemail, email and SMS). It is not a single product, but a set or suite of products that provides a consistent user interface and user experience across

multiple devices and media types.

This introduction of a 'hybrid office' in the Centre and beyond, will necessitate the utilisation of unified communications and that will bring with it a unique set of challenges particularly in the area of change management and technological adaptation.

## 10 NEXT STEPS

While it is not possible to write a COVID policy at present that reflects what will happen in the next six months, (due to so many variables, the least of which is when do we go back and what level of infection will be present when we do), a HR policy will need to be written. This will need to include such issues as a relentless hygiene regime as part of the cultural norm, sanctions for breaches of hygiene, social distancing, how we manage and navigate federal and state legislation and standards, as well as the needs of the Diocese, particularly in parishes.

Human Resources will need to be alert for threats and opportunities, as well as advise, create and change policies as the pandemic landscape changes. HR will have to advise on many difficult issues such as: What do we do if a staff member who comes to the office becomes infected? Do we:

- Do a 'deep clean' and expect staff to return to work in two days? What about those who refuse?
- Send everyone home to quarantine for two weeks?
- Will staff have to undertake daily testing, (and remember people are infectious before they show or experience symptoms)?

Other important questions and issues include:

- What new skills will staff need to be trained in, (both technical and soft skills), to manage in the 'hybrid office' environment?
- What will be our new travel policy? Will we require that when borders reopen and staff begin to travel, that it be mandatory to self isolate at home for 14 days before returning to work?
- What will be each employee's responsibility in terms of 'self due diligence' in the future? Will they self test? Will they willingly self isolate and inform their manager?

These are all key issues and questions that will need to be addressed in the new 'COVID normal'.

Is HR ready for this? If asked this question 12 months ago, I would have said no. I think it is safe to say the people dimension of the pandemic for organisations is the greatest challenge ever presented to HR professionals. I believe we can meet this challenge. It will come down to our ability to manage cultural change and a massive shift in behaviours and how, or rather where, we view the workplace. The way we work has changed forever. HR needs to realise this and support our organisations as they transition into the 'new normal'.

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