![AHRI Australian HR Institute logo]

The AHRI team is here for you. We look forward to supporting you through this, and beyond.

If you have any questions, please reach us via enquiries@ahri.com.au

We had a huge response to our Live Facebook Q&A about successfully working through COVID-19. Below is handy template that you can use as a starting point as we navigate through this crisis.

1.

How can we care for the mental health of our employees?

It's very important that we have greater awareness of everyone's mental health – working from home all the time is going to expose everyone to greater periods of solitude and less physical/social networks so everyone needs to have a strategy for managing your own and your employees' wellbeing.

It's not just about the individuals who currently have mental health issues, it's on all of us to think about this strategy and work with individual team members to "check in" not "check up", and see what else they can do to support them.

2.

How can we manage anxiety around the situation, especially around casual workers?

Everyone needs to think about their own strategies that work for their individual work environment. Have some structure in your day that brings in exercise, time to breathe, time to reflect. Practically, keeping a positive mindset is really important. One tip is to start a daily meeting with 2 questions "what are you grateful for" and "how do you rate your day out of 10". This can help everyone to recognise those things that are working for them and flags if additional support might be needed for a team member.

Make sure your employees are aware of and can access your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and managers should be more skilled-up to be able to communicate effectively and look for warning signs around anxiety and their own team members.

In the case of casual workers, consider what alternate employment might be available for them in your community, sector, or with business partners.

Different areas of casual employment are opening up during the pandemic, and your casual workforce may well have transferable skills (for example to Qantas/Woolworths scenario).

3.

What are some tips for managers who are now having to manage their teams remotely?

Teams will operate very differently, but there are a couple of common guidance points. Everyone needs structure – managers should be structuring their days and their weeks. Structured communications – have a start-of-day quick meeting to manage team priorities and have clear messages about what to focus on.

Managers will have a far greater requirement to communicate with their whole teams and individuals every day, and should be role-modelling the work practices that make WFH sustainable, for example taking breaks and practising good workplace health & safety.

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4.

What strategies can you suggest for parents with children who are now at home?

Balancing work and childcare or other caring duties is difficult, and will require some flexibility. Flexible work policies that articulate that WFH is not a substitute for childcare will need to be revised to reflect the reality that children will be home with their working parents.

From a practical perspective, managers should work with individual employees to understand what specific caring responsibilities they require, and how much work can actually be completed during the work day. This may include taking some breaks during the day and catching up later, or potentially taking some carer's leave.

5.

Where do we stand in regards to leave provisions during this time? Can we ask staff to take personal leave or other leave?

If employees are ill, then they will need to use their personal leave. If employees are caring for an ill family member, they can access their carers leave.

There is some grey area around the requirement to take annual leave or special leave, if provided – for example, if employees have just come back from overseas (other than a business trip) and have to self-quarantine, if they are unable to work from home, they may have to access personal leave.

6.

What are the health and safety provisions around a working-from-home setup?

There may need to be some flexibility around using Health and Safety checklists due to the current situation - it's still important to use it so that employees can have the most ergonomic arrangement possible, but it's going to be unrealistic to have a 100% completed checklist.

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7.

How do we creatively find funds for leadership development in these cash-strapped times?

The demands on leaders is even more critical during these uncertain times. It's imperative that leadership teams understand their own leadership capability and their default under stress.

There will be a need for greater openness around how they work individually and cooperatively, particularly as these conversations will be largely conducted remotely.

While investment in development often doesn't occur at times of crisis, it may in fact be the perfect opportunity for leadership teams to draw on their coaches and mentors and reflect on the insights gained through recent leadership programs, to conduct their own "checkup".

While funding will be a factor, every organisation will be identifying that this "black swan" event is a game changer and the implications on leadership capability are significant.

HR partners play an important role on identifying the gaps and being able to quickly curate relevant materials (of which there is an abundance) and identify formal interventions where needed.

8.

What are the legal implications around contracts, standing down employees or requiring employees to use leave?

There are a range of options available in order to lawfully secure business continuity during the current economic climate. Employers should obtain legal advice to discuss their options and to ensure that their chosen course of action is compliant.

Options could include:

- Standing down employees if work stoppages are required

- Directing employees to perform alternate duties or work at alternate locations

- Entering into agreements with employees to work reduced hours, have temporary salary reductions, take accrued personal, annual and/or long service leave (at half time or less for individual staff depending on financial need), or other flexible options

- Reducing the non-permanent workforce

This is a difficult area. You will need to check your contracts or any EBA to see if there are provisions within those regarding stand down.

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9.

Who pays for my internet if I'm working from home?

From a practical perspective, most people do have unlimited broadband nowadays with pervasive use of streaming services and so there would be no additional cost to employees. In the unusual circumstance that someone has utilised all their data allowance, then possibly the employer would be able to subsidise some of that cost or the employee could claim it as an expense in their tax return.

10.

What equipment should employers be providing for employees working from home?

The basics: Laptops, a mouse, screens (if available). Most organisations would expect employees to have their own internet access, a desk and appropriate chair, and potentially computer screens while the device would typically be provided by employers. Many people have a preference and are able to use their own device to remotely log in to their employer's systems.

11.

What can HR partners do to assist the CEO and senior leadership in communicating effectively?

There's a higher degree of ambiguity for everyone than we have previously experienced. The ability of senior leadership to collaborate to make fast, good decisions and be able to communicate those as soon as they can to the rest of the organisation.

12.

Can new employees' start dates be moved if it's not possible to onboard them, or if there is no work for them?

Essentially, you're allowed to withdraw an offer for a variety of reasons – but that doesn't mean there won't be any consequences. Always consult an employment lawyer before making any rash decisions and enquire about what the potential legal ramifications of taking back an offer may be.

13.

Does AHRI have any WHS guidelines for WFH employees?

Yes – our AHRI:ASSIST website has several checklists and guides for managing WHS for working-from-home employees, and we will highlight them on the website for easy access.

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