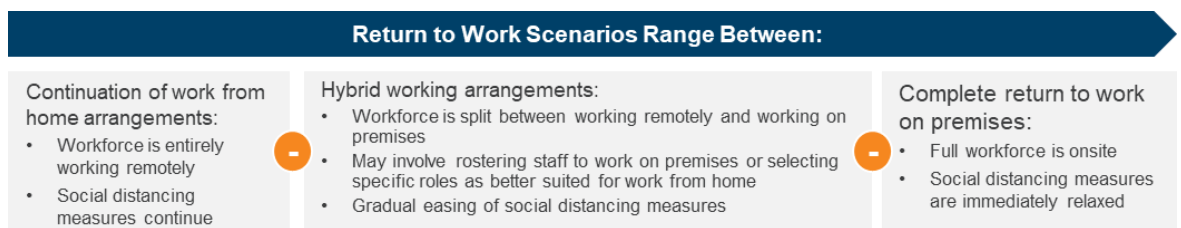


COVID-19 Return to the Workplace

Introduction

Over the last few months organisations have continued to adapt to large numbers of employees working remotely due to implications of Coronavirus (COVID-19). This has caused many different and new challenges for both organisations and employees to overcome. As Australian federal and state authorities start easing restrictions, organisations will gradually reopen work premises; therefore, now's the time to consider how employees will transition back to the workplace.

These return to workplace transition activities must be undertaken in a phased and measured way to ensure COVID-19 infection rates do not increase and to guarantee the wellbeing of the workforce. Recent global challenges have provided organisations with new learnings and positive work practices that should be considered for the foreseeable future of what is being termed the "new normal". The ultimate goal is to create a **safe** and **flexible** working environment as organisations reintegrate employees back to the workplace.



Protiviti Australia has identified five key areas which organisations should consider:

1. New regulations and government policy
2. People and culture
3. Technology
4. Property
5. Vendors

Considerations

New Regulations and Government Policy

The strict rules enforced by the Australian government have played a pivotal role in suppressing COVID-19 infection rates. While the government is aiming to reopen the Australian economy by July 2020, the rules imposed by each of the States will continue to be refined and re-assessed as organisations gradually transition their employees back into the workplace. It is fundamental that each organisation has a dedicated team and/or function (e.g. Risk and Compliance or People and Culture) that are keeping up to date with these updates and cascading it to the appropriate

stakeholders (i.e. help drive compliance with existing rules and/or have appropriate plans to drive compliance for upcoming regulations). Initially, these rules and regulations may have been managed by the Incident Management Team. As organisations look to transition back to the workplace, responsibility for monitoring compliance with these rules and regulations should be monitored through a Business as Usual (BAU) compliance management framework, policy and register.

People and Culture

Many people are keen to return to work, but there is also apprehension regarding being able to do so safely. Organisations will need to reassure employees about their health and safety through controlled access to the workplace (in accordance with any government regulations and relevant health authority guidance). Measures to safeguard employee welfare could include:

- **Employee temperature screening:** Establishing measures to check employee temperatures upon arrival to the workplace.
- **Stagger employee return and/ or arrival and departure times:** Giving priority employees that need to be in the workplace (and are comfortable doing so) with access given on a rotational basis (e.g. rotating between on and off-site). Alternatively, shifts could be created which stagger the number of employees onsite at any one time or help to avoid peak hour congestion on public transport.
- **Allowing for flexibility to cater to staff needs and preferences:** Continuing to encourage work from home arrangements where personal circumstances warrant it (e.g. employees with school aged children to allow for home schooling where required, those employees in a high-risk categories) or provide transportation alternatives to help avoid peak hour congestion.
- **Maintain social distancing measures:** Floor plans may need to be reconfigured (including the use of markers on the floor) to help support social distancing rules in offices, meeting rooms, customer facing areas and common areas. Meeting rooms will likely be more limited in capacity and this should be clearly indicated on the meeting room door. Work/lunch breaks could be staggered with restrictions to the number of employees allowed in a common area at any one time to allow for social distancing. Avoiding or minimising the need to travel (if restrictions are lifted) to other premises and use technology (e.g. video conferencing tools) instead to help facilitate meetings. Considering limitations on entry/exits to the workplace and other areas like lifts/elevators would also be useful.
- **Implementation of new hygiene measures:** To help minimise the spread of other influenza-like infections (that could lead to greater susceptibility to COVID-19), implement an incentive program or new guidelines that encourages employees to get annual flu vaccines (as recommended by the Minister for Health in April 2020). Additionally, the provisions of masks (when used as recommended) and single-use utensils may be introduced to the workplace in addition to the hand hygiene practices, increased frequency of cleaning and cough etiquette awareness measures that were reinforced at the start of COVID-19.
- **Ability to rapidly increase restrictions as required:** As government restrictions are eased, there may be a spike in COVID-19 cases. Organisations will need to remain flexible and be prepared to scale up or down COVID-19 measures in response to these changing conditions. Communications are vital during this period. They need to convey empathy to employees and should be forward-looking to give everyone an idea as to what to expect in terms of the duration

and what is happening within the organisation. Knowing who was in the office at the same time as someone with a suspected or confirmed infection is an important measure.

- **Managing the needs and privacy of vulnerable groups:** COVID-19 has presented a challenge to organisations in balancing employee privacy with health and safety. As health information falls within the category of “sensitive information” under the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) the lines can blur as employees comply with health screening and other measures adopted by an organisation. A Privacy Impact Assessment is one-way organisations can provide peace of mind to employees and demonstrate compliance with the Act and to regulators if required.
- **Supporting employee mental health:** Considering ways to offer more support (group discussions, therapy sessions or additional leave, etc.) to employees who have been struggling mentally during the isolation period or have had loved ones affected by COVID-19. Ongoing monitoring of the employee workforce through this period and continued empathy towards employees will be vital for staff well-being.
- **Strategies to manage performance of staff working remotely:** In any work environment, trust is key. Managing expectations with a focus on deliverables and deadlines is vital in any environment but even more so when working remotely. A workplace founded on trust can be a powerful motivating force. In a remote environment, expectations must be set and managed and employees encouraged to establish the necessary discipline to separate themselves in the home from distractions. But at the same time, management should trust employees to manage their projects, deadlines and overall responsibilities, even if they need to deviate from a traditional workday schedule to accommodate personal obligations during these extraordinary times.
- **Opportunity to reshape the culture to suit future direction:** For all organisations and industries, this situation presents a substantial opportunity to realign work practices to better manage teams and develop flexibility.

It is also pivotal that organisations provide regular communication and training to staff members on new health and safety measures to help improve awareness and comfort level in returning to the workplace.

Technology

Technology has played an instrumental role in supporting the remote working environment as changes are made to the way we interact within the workplace. IT functions have been busy ensuring technology availability and security for a mobile workforce and leveraging automation for efficiencies. As we look to transition back to the “new normal”, the following should be considered:

- **Enhanced Security Tools:** Numerous organisations have accelerated the migration to digital technologies and in doing so, changed the organisation’s risk and threat profile. Consideration should be given to how security will be addressed in the transition to the “new normal” operating model; Were there unanticipated costs for security tools, licenses or services tools that must now be managed? Were temporary modifications made to security controls (such as bypassing the VPN and if so, do these need to be scaled back? Does the organisation need to rapidly evaluate and implement the adoption of enhanced security tools?
- **Digital strategy:** Many organisations will look to formalise and refresh their digital strategy, which encompasses how technology can help facilitate the organisation to achieve its overarching business strategy. This may include moving into a cloud environment (e.g. help reduce

IT costs, providing scalability, business continuity, data security, mobility) and/ or introducing technological applications that can improve customer experience.

- **Use of automation to better manage operations:** In transitioning to the “new normal”, organisations will consider how to make existing business processes more efficient and effective. This may include the implementation of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) related initiatives. For example, the use of RPA for rules driven processes (such as accounts payable and accounts receivable payments which in the absence of staff would enable these payments to be processed).
- **Lessons learned:** Operational resilience is not a new conversation, but present circumstances offer organisations an unprecedented learning opportunity. Forward-thinking companies are not only going through the motions of moving the business forward - keeping the lights on and keeping people employed - but also keeping track of what works and what does not. As soon as restrictions are lifted and organisations begin to return to business as usual, companies need to be sure to take the time to reflect on the lessons learned and to codify those lessons in an “after action” report so they do not lose this unique opportunity for improvement.
- **Operational resilience testing:** Annual testing of operational resilience (including cyber testing) plans should be expanded to include pandemic scenarios (e.g. remote working or absence of 50% staff, increased use of tele/videoconferencing). Disaster recovery testing should test the capacity of IT and underlying infrastructure so that they adequately support sharp increases in business demands (e.g. online services) and the needs of a large mobile workforce.

Property

In response to social distancing and mandated lockdowns necessitated by COVID-19, people are collaborating virtually on a scale never seen before. Despite the major difficulties and losses resulting from this crisis that we'll undoubtedly confront in the months and even years to come, leading organisations are already beginning to figure out the organisational changes and strategic adaptations to implement once the crisis abates. Many aspects of their organisations will be different. Workforces will be altered. Some will shrink, at least temporarily, while others will grow, and it is very possible that a greater number of organisations will adjust to operate in a far more virtual manner.

- **Strategic alignment:** With fewer employees coming into the office (through reduced workforce sizes or more staff opting for the flexibility of working from home arrangements), organisations might find that they require less office space. Would a property footprint reduction or increase align with the organisational strategy? Conversely, organisations may need to increase their office space to allow for social distancing measures.
- **Key drivers of staff costs:** How do these changes when working from home?
- **Timing:** Do current leases allow for renegotiation to reduce the footprint or fees?
- **Opportunities:** Can workspaces be redesigned and/or sub-leased?

Vendors

- **Refresh of vendor contracts:** A review of vendor contracts will be required to determine which contracts should be updated and revised to better align to the “new normal” (including building the required operational resilience clauses into these contracts as outlined in the point below), including the identification of vendors that are no longer able to operate to the same extent as before (due to restrictions).
- **Building operational resilience:** Following any activation of business resilience plans, it is timely to reflect on lessons learned and build up operational resilience, so organisations are stronger when the next event hits. As we move to the “new normal” it is important to review supplier agreements. Organisations should expect all critical suppliers to be able to demonstrate how they assess their risks. There should be a formal, written understanding of exactly how the supplier would maintain supply in the event of a disaster. Some options include locking in a fixed price, negotiating prioritised supply or having backup sources in the vendor’s supply chain. Questions that boards and executives should be asking now to avoid supply problems down the road:
 - Which suppliers do we depend on for essential raw materials, component parts or services in our supply chain to customers?
 - What would happen if we were to lose one of them for any reason?
 - How long would we be able to operate?
 - Are there other qualified sources that are readily available?
- **Utilising a strong vendor risk program (supplier management):** Now is an ideal time for companies to take a hard look at their current approach to strategic sourcing, and related activities such as Vendor Risk Management Program (for understanding vendor risks, inspecting and testing vendors, documenting the results of such testing, and more) and processes for identifying and controlling potential weaknesses such as quality issues and cybersecurity risks that exist deeper within the supply chain. These assessments should determine where improvements can be made so they can emerge from the present crisis as strongly as ever.

How Protiviti Can Help

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt business activity across the globe, organisations are reconfiguring the workplace and adopting new business practises to align with social distancing, stay-in-place directives and other public health protocols. As they do so, they are confronting questions related to their resiliency in shifting to a distributed workplace, adopting appropriate security measures around the enabling technologies they choose to deploy, and implementing ongoing changes in business models and processes affecting how they interact with people in the aftermath of the crisis.

Protiviti has the experience, know-how and expertise to help companies navigate these challenges. We can provide companies with access to industry, digital and innovation talent who can bring disruptive thinking to the table in helping them rethink their business, not just in the short term, but also in the medium to longer term. Companies can benefit from working with our professionals who share their values, have knowledge and understanding of the technologies they deploy, and are able to draw on a risk perspective. Our people are fully operational as our firm functions remotely during this crisis, so we are with our clients all the way - now, in the next phase and once the eventual equilibrium is achieved in the market.

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