



A Checklist for Returning to the Workplace Post-Lockdown

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When restrictions ease and workplaces begin to welcome back staff members, HR professionals will face many important decisions, such as:

- Where will people work? Will remote working continue (partially or fully)?
- How can we ensure employees' safety in the workplace?
- Will we require employees to be vaccinated – and if so, how will we keep track of those obligations?
- Do employees require any compliance training?
- How can we mitigate the risk of COVID-19 in the future?

This 5-step guide – and accompanying checklist – outlines everything that needs to be considered for a strategic and practical transition back into the workplace.

1. Familiarise yourself with the guidelines in your local area

Before you do anything, make sure you're familiar with the latest health guidelines in your state or territory / region. Regularly review this information, as it is likely to change to reflect the vaccination rates in your area.

- Australians can get general information [here](#).
- New Zealanders can get general information [here](#).

2. Determine how and where employees want to work

The pandemic has changed the way people work, and employees' expectations around how, where and when they work has evolved. So, business leaders will need to decide: will the workforce be predominately onsite or remote – or hybrid?

A global study by PwC¹, which surveyed 32,500 participants from 19 countries, including 2000 Australians, asked respondents about their preferences for remote vs. in-person working. The results showed that three-quarters (74%) of Australian workers expressed a preference for a hybrid working environment; and 16% of workers expressed a preference for a wholly virtual place of work.

In New Zealand, the sentiment is similar. When asked in a study whether they would like to continue working from home, over two-thirds (67%) of workers said they would like a mix of home-based and office-based working, perhaps working remotely a few times a week or month.²

1. Upskilling Hopes and Fears, PwC, 2021

2. "Remote working during COVID-19", New Zealand National Survey: Initial Report July 2020, Work Futures OTAGO

Key considerations of a hybrid work model

Considering those employee preferences, many organisations may choose to adopt a hybrid work model to keep employees engaged and productive. For many, this is a new venture.

Below are some key questions to ask when building a hybrid work model:

- How will dispersed teams stay connected?
- How will productivity be measured across dispersed teams?
- Do employees / teams have everything they need in order to perform their duties remotely?
- How can we enhance the employee experience (EX) within a hybrid model ([read ELMO's blog to learn practical tips](#)).
- How will employee sentiment be measured, and feedback be gathered? Will we use regular pulse surveys?

[ELMO Survey](#) enables organisations to conduct and manage staff surveys throughout all points of the employee lifecycle to gain actionable insights into your employees' attitudes and opinions towards work.

3. Determine how you will ensure employee safety in the workplace

Employers are obligated to take reasonable steps to ensure the health and safety of workers who work from home or remotely. When statutory pandemic restrictions lift, and workers can return to their places of work, employers will need to conduct a risk assessment of the workplace and practices to identify ways to improve worker welfare and safety.

The main areas of risk include:

- **Ventilation:** Ensure the workplace has an adequate supply of fresh air – whether natural (open windows, vents, etc.) or mechanical (fans, ducts, etc.)
- **Cleanliness:** Keep the workplace and contact areas clean and regularly disinfected to reduce chance of infection.
- **Hygiene:** Provide hand sanitiser facilities and erect signage to remind workers to maintain hand hygiene.

Protecting high-risk employees

Organisations should take necessary measures to protect vulnerable employees, such as those with compromised immune systems. Precautions to protect high-risk employees include:

- Allowing vulnerable employees to work from home if they feel uncomfortable returning to their place of work
- Encourage all employees to stay home if they are feeling unwell, or have been exposed to someone who has tested positive with COVID-19
- Set up isolated workstations
- Provide additional protective equipment
- Offer emotional support from managers or via an employee assistance program (EAP)

4. Determine whether you will develop a vaccination policy

When strategising a return-to-work plan, you may be thinking about developing a COVID-19 vaccination policy. For organisations that identify requirements to monitor employee vaccination status or require regular COVID-19 testing, there are several business-specific elements to factor in before issuing a policy.

To get you started, here are three key things to focus on:

1. Identify what your vaccination policy will contain – don't replicate a policy from the internet, instead ensure your policy is carefully tailored to your company's needs.
2. Get employee support and gauge sentiment through open communication and feedback.
3. Keep up-to-date records of your employees' vaccination records, preferably in a secure cloud-based HR solution – and always abide by relevant employment laws, especially those relating to employee data usage and privacy.

For Australian businesses, the best resource to use to find out information on employee and employer rights the [Fair Work Ombudsman](#) and New Zealand businesses should use [Employment New Zealand](#). We recommend seeking professional legal advice before putting any policy in place.

To read more on introducing and managing a vaccination policy within your business, read [ELMO's blog](#).

[ELMO COVIDsecure](#) enables employers to automate record keeping of the COVID-19 testing and vaccination status of the entire or targeted areas of their workforce in a single, secure platform with strict access control measures. COVIDsecure also provides a library of COVID-19 HR policy templates that can be customised to suit your organisation's unique needs.

5. Determine whether employees will need compliance training

Ensure workers have completed relevant training and are aware of any return-to-the-workplace guidelines. Training may relate to workplace safety and disinfection protocols, or procedures relating to flexible / remote working.

To deliver training, aim to have access to up-to-date training resources and be able to measure the completion and effectiveness of any training undertaken.

[ELMO Course Library](#) offers over 400 eLearning courses covering a range of topics including compliance, soft skills and productivity training. With regular updates to online course content, ELMO Course Library helps to ensure that the skills of your employees remain sharp and up to date.

A return-to-work checklist

For ease of use, this checklist is broken down into several key sections, each of which addresses a specific focus area.

Several of these pointers won't be new to organisations that conducted a safe return-to-work strategy in 2020, but they are good reminders, nonetheless.

Creating a safe and hygienic environment

The virus is still very much a threat to public health, so this is a critical area that covers everything from employee health to cleaning and hygiene.

Cleaning and hygiene:

- Ensure that all employees have easy access to hand sanitiser, paper towels, tissues, antibacterial soap, disinfectant spray and closed bins.
- Make sure there's a good supply of soap and paper towels in bathrooms and kitchens.
- Distribute personal protective equipment (face masks and gloves) to all offices and branches.
- Erect signage that reminds staff of COVID-safe behaviours: how to effectively wash their hands; when to wear a face covering; when to remain physically distant; and when to check in using a QR code (you can download signage for Australian workplaces [here](#) and for New Zealand workplaces [here](#)).
- Review regular deliveries to the workplace and request contactless delivery. Check that systems for e-invoicing are in place.
- Organise daily cleaning of office spaces. Consider hiring a cleaning company to thoroughly clean your workplace on a regular basis.
- Stock the cupboards with appropriate cleaning products and personal protective equipment. Follow this guide for [disinfecting your workplace](#).
- Ensure the workplace has an adequate supply of fresh air (e.g. open windows, vents, fans, etc.)

For retail and customer-facing roles:

- Install protective shields to create a barrier between employees and customers.
- Accept only cashless transactions (if possible) and erect a sign informing customers about this.
- Put up signage asking customers to only touch objects they intend to purchase.
- Put social distancing markers in high-traffic areas.

Physical distancing:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Put signs in lifts and rooms to ensure the maximum limit of people isn't exceeded.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide more desks and chairs to honour the latest physical distancing requirements for your state or territory / region – based on the level of restrictions that your region is dealing with.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Make sure that staff are able to honour the latest physical distancing requirements in gathering spaces (such as kitchens, meeting rooms and bathrooms). Put social distancing makers in these areas, to remind employees of the expectations.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If possible, abandon hot desking and discourage staff from using the phones, desks, offices and tools of other employees.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Encourage employees to conduct their meetings over the phone or online, instead of in person. If this isn't possible, make sure that face-to-face meetings are held in a large space.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Organise daily cleaning of office spaces. Consider hiring a cleaning company to thoroughly clean your workplace on a regular basis.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider allowing employees who catch public transport to travel outside of the busiest hours, to minimise their exposure to the virus while travelling.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Create a schedule that staggers mealtimes and rest breaks so employees can easily honour social distancing requirements in the kitchen.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wherever possible, provide contactless pickup and delivery of products and supplies.

Medical:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Introduce daily temperature readings for all employees in the workplace.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Encourage employees to stay away from the workplace and get tested for COVID-19 if they show any symptoms. Ask them to call the Australian Coronavirus hotline (1800 020 080) or the New Zealand hotline (0800 358 5453).

Reassure employees:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Appoint a staff member to oversee compliance with health and safety guidelines. This is also the person that workers can talk to if they have any concerns.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ask building management what hygiene protocols are being implemented in your building and share this information with staff.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keep all lines of communication open and inform staff about the practical and emotional support that your business will give them.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Detail what training on new workplace safety and disinfection protocols have been implemented and communicate this to employees.

Supporting the mental wellbeing of your employees

Organisations should support the mental and emotional wellness of employees as they return to the workplace. This is particularly important for employees who have been required to self-isolate for medical reasons, employees who find themselves in financial difficulty, and employees who are separated from loved ones, or have lost a loved one to the virus.

- Give workers information about the support that's available to them (for example, an employee assistance program (EAP), or mental health counselling).
- Make sure you continue to conduct surveys and ask employees how they're feeling about returning to the workplace or working from home.
- Continue regular check-ins with employees, regardless of whether they are working remotely or working in the office. Educate managers about the warning signs to look out for if someone is struggling and ensure all managers know where to obtain professional help.

The Australian and New Zealand governments have put together mental health support resources for people who feel worried about COVID-19, which you should share with all employees. Australian employers can find this [here](#) and New Zealand employers can find this [here](#).

Planning for the future

While the finer details are critical, so too is planning for the future – and that requires looking at the bigger picture. In addition to developing a business continuity plan to overcome future disruptions, consider what will be required in the recovery period, as the business and wider community gets back on its feet.

- Establish a task force that monitors COVID-19 news and relevant government policies. Align every business decision with these policies and make sure you regularly communicate any changes with employees, to keep them feeling engaged and reassured.
- Develop a contingency plan that supports business operations in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak in your workplace.
- Consider what support you will give to workers who contract COVID-19 or need to look after sick family members.
- Familiarise yourself with the changes that your relevant government body has made to pay and leave entitlements, and make sure you honour these. Australian businesses can find information [here](#), and New Zealand businesses can find out information [here](#).
- Introduce flexible leave policies that enable employees to take time off in they're infected with COVID-19 or caring for a loved one, without feeling worried about their job security. Relax your attendance policies so that employees are encouraged to stay home when feeling unwell (even if symptoms are minor).

- Make sure you honour privacy laws when handling the health information of an employee. Read about privacy laws in [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#), for specific information.
- Update your organisation's travel policies to define essential and non-essential travel requirements amidst domestic and global travel restrictions.
- Create a document that contains the latest protocols for responding to global disasters or emergencies, and make sure that employees have access to this. Perform trial-run or testing exercises on the new revised emergency plan, so that everyone knows what to do.
- Update your database of staff emergency contacts, so you can easily reach the right person in an employee becomes unwell.

COVID-19 vaccination:

- Stay up to date on the latest trusted vaccine advice and how it affects your workplace, visitors and customers. Australian businesses can find information [here](#), and New Zealand businesses can find information [here](#).
- Develop and circulate a COVID-19 vaccination policy (we recommend enlisting the help of a lawyer).
- Consider implementing technology such as ELMO COVIDsecure (see below) to help monitor and store vaccination / COVID-19 testing records.

ELMO COVIDsecure enables employers to automate record keeping of the COVID-19 testing and vaccination status of the entire or targeted areas of their workforce such as location, department or even role, in a single, secure platform with strict access control measures. COVIDsecure provides a library of COVID-19 HR policy templates that can be customised to suit your organisation's unique needs. These policies can be rapidly deployed to employees and benefit from in-built acknowledgement tracking.

HR can prepare plans to re-open physical workplaces and establish and communicate processes for ongoing COVID-19 risk management. COVIDsecure also provides HR and leadership with a powerful dashboard to provide a real-time view of critical information to assist with COVID-19 risk management.

How ELMO can help

[ELMO Software](#) (ASX:ELO) is a cloud-based solution that helps thousands of organisations across Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom to effectively manage their people, process and pay. ELMO solutions span the entire employee lifecycle from 'hire to retire'. They can be used together or stand-alone, and are configurable according to an organisation's unique processes and workflows. Automate and streamline your operations to reduce costs, increase efficiency and bolster productivity.

For further information:

Contact us

