

*Insight* aims to provide useful information, links and tips in the areas of Risk Management, Work Health and Safety, Business Continuity Management, and other areas relating to management systems and corporate governance.

## Worker Mental Wellbeing in Times of Isolation

A high proportion of calls made to mental health support lines since the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns began have been related to some aspect of the coronavirus impacts. Of course, a lot of the distress is being experienced by those who've lost their place in Australia's workforce. However, mental wellbeing impacts on those still working, especially from home, are not insignificant. Employers have a duty of care to ensure workers have a safe work environment even if working at home, and this includes actively identifying and managing preventable mental health stressors.

Some of the health and wellbeing risks to workers in working-from-home arrangements are self-evident, such as physical injury risks resulting from new (potentially ergonomically unsound) workstations. Other risks, especially in the area of mental wellbeing, are less easily spotted, such as:

- Social isolation and loneliness.
- Fears around job security.
- Domestic stresses (difficulties working out a new work-life balance and physical space uses, limited 'break' time from family, home schooling pressures etc.).
- Role clarity uncertainties as usual work tasks have to be reconfigured to suit a remote workplace context.
- Increased stress around pressure to prove maintained or increased productivity in the home working environment.

Some of the strategies for employers to manage these risks can include:

- Implement mechanisms for workers to maintain contact with their usual workplace network, for example start-of-the-day virtual check-ins, online social meetings at morning-tea time etc.
- Maintain open and honest communications and provide regular (but not constant) updates around the organisation's plans and activities to manage financial downturns and other pandemic-related disruptions.



- Be understanding of the problems and disruptions faced by workers struggling to acclimatise to the new work environment, be flexible and check if reasonable adjustments can be made to either work tools or work tasks that will help mitigate the difficulties.
- Focus on the end goal of work tasks, not the means employed to get there, and consult with workers to determine the best workarounds for tasks.

Some additional **DOs and DON'Ts** for employers:

- DO encourage workers to raise any concerns and provide a central point of contact for this.
- DO implement processes for monitoring wellbeing risks, both physical and mental.
- DO provide an EAP if possible.
- DO encourage sharing of ideas and solutions around the organisation.
- DO keep communications upbeat as much as possible.
- DON'T be aggressive around productivity expectations.
- DON'T blur the line between work time and personal time by sending emails or work requests outside of usual work hours.

Some **DOs and DON'Ts** for workers:

- DO eat well and get enough rest.
- DO exercise regularly.
- DO stay in regular real-time contact with colleagues via video and phone calls.

- DO get ready for work the same way as usual and maintain a standard work-day timetable and routine.
- DO set some reasonable ground rules with others in your home around not interrupting work time etc.
- DO find ways to remotely connect with your non-work community too – family, friends, hobby and volunteer groups etc.
- DO remind yourself that however difficult things might be right now, this situation is not permanent.
- DON'T be tempted to self-medicate the additional stress with alcohol or drugs.
- DON'T make heaps of extra (unnecessary) emails and phone calls in an effort to prove that you're still busy.
- DON'T obsessively consume social or mainstream media reports about the pandemic. Check in once a day and then focus on something else more positive.

Please [contact QRMC](#) for more information.

## Due Diligence – what are 'appropriate resources and process'?

[Last month](#) we explored the 'Officers' Due Diligence requirements, paraphrasing Sec 27 of the WHS Act, to detail that 'Officers' are required to take 'reasonable steps' to:

- Firstly, acquire (and maintain) an **understanding** of WHS [Sec 27 (5)(a)] and an (effective) understanding of the organisation's operations and the hazards and risks [Sec (5)(b)]
- Then, ensure **appropriate resources and processes** are used to eliminate or minimise the WHS risks [Sec 27 (5)(c)] and ensure processes are in place for the timely receipt, consideration and response to incidents, hazards and risks [Sec 27 (5)(c)]
- And finally, implement **assurance and verification** process to ensure that hazards and risks are being appropriately controlled and that legal requirements are being fulfilled (Sec 27 (5) (e) and (f))

Now to explore the **appropriate resources and process** component.



*What does it mean?*

The Board and Executive Management, as 'Officers' of the organisation, must ensure the 'PCBU' has an appropriate level of financial and personnel resourcing in place to eliminate or minimise the WHS risks.

Then this needs to be coupled with ensuring a timely reporting and appropriate response to hazards, risks and incidents, and the analysis of the resulting data. The aim of this is to prompt a risk review process every time new information is available so that the risks (and change) are effectively managed.

*What needs to be done?*

Officers should take the following steps:

- Ensure management system and processes are implemented to assist with the management of the WHS risks, and those responsible for applying the system are held accountable
- Ensure action plans are in place across the organisation to manage the WHS risks
- Provide a budget allocation for WHS operations and improvements
- Appoint an adequate number of personnel with appropriate WHS knowledge, skills and capability
- Maintain and upgrade premises, plant and infrastructure
- Implement efficient and timely reporting systems incorporating a process for escalation of unresolved WHS issues to Officers (i.e. EMT/CEO/Board)
- Analyse all provided data, whether it be drawn from hazard, risk or incident reports

Please [contact QRMC](#) for more information.