

# HEALTH @WORK™



## **Fresh obligations for employers as ‘new normal’ commences after lockdown**

Once society begins “life as normal” following the COVID-19 lockdown, employers will have a responsibility to ensure a safe working environment for staff, with not only hygiene, but also physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual measures in place for an indefinite period, says **Paresha Kala and Kate Powell, Senior Consultants, Health Management Solutions at Alexander Forbes Health.**

As we await Government’s update on what the lockdown regulations will be after 30 April 2020, we begin to define what the “new normal” looks like – an ongoing process as we become accustomed to the benefits it may bring, such as reduced time spent in traffic as virtual meetings grow in popularity

In looking after our employees’ psychological and emotional needs, we should remember that everyone has had a different experience of lockdown and will all have different needs on returning to the workplace.

With this in mind, employers will have to put measures in place for hygiene as well as physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual wellbeing, for several months once the doors to the workplace reopen.

Employers will need to ensure a safe working environment by emphasising the following preventative measures:

- Ideally taking staff, visitors and contract worker temperatures and keeping a visitors’ logbook.
- Encourage employees to stay home if they are sick
- Maintain regular housekeeping practices which includes routine cleaning and regular disinfecting of surfaces and equipment. This includes pre-cleaning the offices before return to work commences
- Maintain own workspace, no sharing of equipment or workstations
- Develop a plan of action if staff develop symptoms of the virus
- Avoid large meetings and limit them to the number of attendees. Internal as well as client meetings should continue with virtual conferencing where possible
- Avoid hugging or shaking hands with your colleagues ensuring that social distancing recommendations are maintained which includes

keeping at least two metres between you and another person. This includes seating arrangements as well as casual engagements

- Avoid crowded lifts and rather use the stairs or the escalators.
- Prepare your care kit for employees, which includes hand sanitiser, face masks, and hand gloves
- Encourage employees to wear face masks and wash your hands as soon as you reach home or work.
- Provide wipes for handbags or briefcases, which often carry the most amount of germs
- Maintain the twenty-second protocol for handwashing, and provide paper towels and a closed pedal bin for them to be disposed in

The stress of managing work-life integration has never been more important than it will be after the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees could develop symptoms of stress-related disorders including low mood, insomnia, anxiety, irritability, emotional exhaustion, and depression which may be attributed to the fear of becoming sick, risk of infection, losing a loved one, as well as the prospect of financial hardship as a result of the economic recession.

In addition to the impact on our economy and businesses one cannot discount the impact that the lockdown has had on people's social wellbeing. This includes the emotional effects mentioned above, but when looking at the impact on workplace relationships and social management, the lockdown has changed the way we engage with colleagues as well as clients.

Consideration must be given on how to support managers and employees to develop and maintain healthy relationships both within the workplace and with external parties. This will promote improved emotional wellbeing as well as foster healthy workplace relationships to support productivity. Aspects to consider include:

- Managers to use wellness assistance programmes and mentoring to improve emotional sensitivity and strategies to support new ways of working
- Understanding the importance of staying connected with regular team and individual check-ins to foster an environment which supports open communication.
- Encouraging recognition of good work and team support despite uncertain work circumstances
- Fostering an environment with clear expectations and boundaries to help create a sense of control where there is uncertainty in many other areas of life
- Implementation of activities to promote connectivity despite distancing. This can include:
  - Pause areas that are physically set up to follow social distancing principles, but allow and encourage engagement with each other.
  - Virtual team activities to allow time to engage in recreation or team building activities such as coffee meetings or team exercise challenges.
- Ensuring regular engagement with clients using a variety of mediums including email, calls and virtual meetings to ensure connections are maintained on not just a practical level but an emotional level that maintains relationships central to business.
- For many staff who have been working at home, they will also face the stresses of reintegrating into daily commutes, and the fact that they have built up different ways of interacting with colleagues and clients, consider allowing staff who have worked successfully from home to continue to do so if they are vulnerable or have high risk co-morbidities

While the “new normal” will be an ongoing process design, what we know for sure is that employees are already affected on many levels, and employers must be cognisant of this and assist where possible.

Opening up clear and “fear free” channels of communication between management and employees, and employees and other employees may well go a long way to developing better and more meaningful work interactions.

To find out more about how we can help you, contact Myrna Sachs on [SachsM@aforges.com](mailto:SachsM@aforges.com)

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