

MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Workplace responses to COVID-19

DATE: MARCH 2020



PURPOSE

This briefing note provides examples of how some Consult Australia member firms have responded to COVID-19. Its purpose is to help inform and assist the broader membership with workforce and workplace planning and response activities to COVID-19.

BACKGROUND

The global spread of COVID-19 (or referred to as Coronavirus) was confirmed as a pandemic by the World Health Organization in mid-March 2020, after a 13-fold global increase in the two-week period prior.

The Australian and state/territory governments have iteratively implemented a range of measures to slow the spread within the country. This includes a range of closures of certain non-essential services, travel restrictions, self-isolation requirements, restrictions on certain types of mass gatherings, and providing instructions and/or advice to the public and employers on how they can minimise risks.

These measures have also triggered a range of planning and response activities by businesses across the country focused on their workforce and services.

Feedback on the types of planning and response activities included in this briefing note has been provided by members of Consult Australia's People and HR Roundtable. This group comprises of senior HR, people and culture leaders from over 20 member firms.

PLANNING AND RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

Below are some actions currently being undertaken by member firms to plan and respond to current circumstances and potential further outbreaks of COVID-19.

- Establish a working group/task force to lead the firm's planning and response to COVID-19.
 - Depending on the firm, these could be established at different levels – i.e. for an office, region and/or globally. This team could help support the response of senior leaders and line managers.
 - Some firms are documenting the outcomes from these meetings on their internal intranet to keep all employees updated on decisions.
- Identify potential scenarios that may impact an employee's normal work arrangements and map how these would be managed through the firm's leave policy and other organisational policies.
 - This should consider if staff are required to care for someone in their household, or those unable to work at home due to their circumstances.

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- Some firms have put in place special leave and HR arrangements for any employee needing to self-isolate or quarantine – for example, some have put in place or upscaled working from home and flexible working options.
- These could also be cross-checked with any business continuity plans in place to determine if these also need further changes.
- Prepare FAQs and designate a contact person for any employee queries.
 - Staff queries to the contact person could then inform updates to the FAQs.
- Consider if any project sites or joint venture arrangements require their own planning and response approach. This may require a collective agreement with other firms and organisations.
- Develop an internal policy on employee attendance in the workplace, at internal and external events (including meetings), or at other gatherings.
- Other planning and/or response considerations of member firms include:
 - Determining impacts on recruitment activities, and if these will need to be 'virtual';
 - Providing regular leader updates to staff providing updates and reassuring employees;
 - Sharing/updating guidance on how to work safely at home (i.e. from a WHS perspective) and how to 'keep it human' when people or teams have to work remotely;
 - Ensuring all staff have their contact details updated in internal systems;
 - Reviewing visa expiry dates for relevant staff (i.e. those due to expire in the next three months) and consider actions required to minimise the risk of visa implications; and
 - Considering if your firm needs to increase the capacity of its VPN (virtual private network) to enable any mass working from home scenarios.

RESOURCES

- Commonwealth Department of Health – [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) health alert](#) (updated regularly)
- Fair Work Ombudsman – [Coronavirus and Australian workplace laws](#) (updated regularly)
- SafeWork Australia – [Coronavirus \(COVID-19: Advice for PCBU's](#) (businesses) (updated regularly)
 - Includes links to relevant WHS agencies at a state/territory level
- Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry – [COVID-19 Employer Guide](#) (March 2020)

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CONTACT US

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