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Essential Workforce Management Strategies for a Safe and Productive Return to Work

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The “New Normal” Not Just a Flip of a Switch

There is a lot of discussion about what the “new normal” will look like when it comes to getting the world back to work, but until we enter a post-COVID-19 era, you can’t simply flip a switch to turn everything back on. Similar to the way a dimmer switch allows your eyes to adjust by easing you into the light, your business must make a smooth and structured transition into the “new normal” to protect the health and well-being of your employees and customers while maximising your financial performance. With so many factors that can impact a re-opening plan—varying degrees of government restrictions, availability of employees, gaps in the supply chain, customer demand, and much more—following these 6 essential workforce management strategies will help you successfully emerge into the brightest light of whatever the “new normal” looks like.



Strategy 1

Prioritise Staffing for Phased Return to Work

Because most businesses have been forced to shut down or reduce their operations, redundancies, furloughs, and reduced rosters were inevitable. Now that many businesses have been given the green light to resume operations, there may be limiting factors that prevent you from operating at full capacity, such as occupancy limits, diminished customer demand, or supply chain shortages. You must evaluate your workforce and design a plan that prioritises how and when employees are recalled back to work. As part of the evaluation, consider the following:

The Roles and Skills Essential to Operations at Each Phase

If you had to furlough or lay off employees as result of the COVID-19 pandemic, you need to be proactive about building a return-to-work plan and keeping employees informed as decisions and adjustments are made. Throughout your return to work plan, you do not need the added burden of recruiting and onboarding new employees. Employee retention will be key to a successful execution.

Most organisations already know which roles are essential to their business, but during the re-opening process, you may need to create, pause, or adjust roles to accommodate changes to your operations. A shift to ecommerce and fulfillment solutions, a new delivery offering, store pickup offering, more extensive cleaning and sanitising procedures, or new product lines created to fulfill a gap in the supply chain are all great examples of operational changes that have occurred for many businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. To effectively fill new or changing roles, identify the skills required to perform those responsibilities and mine your existing roster of employees—active or inactive—to find individuals that might fit the criteria.

The Right Time to Re-Open and Hours of Operations

For businesses with multiple locations, it may not make sense or even be feasible to open every location because the cost to operate a location at a significantly lower occupancy limit may outweigh the revenue potential.

If your operations are going to be altered or if new procedures need to be implemented, you may want to try a soft opening or A/B testing across a few locations to iron out the kinks before opening at a broader level.



Once you have established which locations will be opened and when, you need to decide your hours of operation. For example, if your business has historically been operating 24x7, will there be enough demand for your product and services to justify reopening with those same hours?

Employee Availability and Preferences

Depending on your employees' circumstances, they may not be able to return to work in the same capacity or on the same roster. Before recalling employees, get a clear understanding of their current situation. They may not have access to childcare or they may have underlying health concerns that prevent them from returning to work onsite.

Some employees may be more anxious to get back to work as soon as possible or may have more flexibility regarding how and when they work. Get an understanding of whether or not they are willing to take on a new role, work in a different location, or change their work shift to accommodate the business need.

Gauging employee availability and preferences will help you prioritise which employees you recall and when, and being included in the process could boost their engagement and productivity levels.



Your Workforce Management Solution Can Help

The world is an unpredictable place. Having the right workforce management solution in place to help you make smarter and more strategic staff planning decisions can have a positive impact on business outcomes. For each phase of your return to work plan, your solution should help you:

- Run what-if scenarios using downward adjustments to historical data to forecast labour and optimise rosters, indicating whether it makes sense to re-open a location, change hours of operation, or alter business operations
- Identify the qualified and/or available individuals that can fill essential roles, modified roles, or entirely new roles—whether at their normal location or an alternative one
- Simplify and manage compliance with contractual obligations



Strategy 2

Shift Planning for Pre-Shift Health Checks and Social Distancing

For organisations that require employees to be onsite—whether due to a lack of infrastructure to support remote work or the physical nature of the work—social distancing must be top of mind as employees return to work. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but depending on the working environment of onsite employees, you may need to implement one or more of the following techniques to promote a safe work experience:

Pre-Shift Health Screenings and Check-Ins

With many regions mandating this practice, consider a multi-layered approach starting with a pre-shift health screening sent to employees prior to their arrival at work. The health screening should perform a preliminary assessment to determine whether the employee is cleared to enter the worksite. If cleared, send a code (or similar) to easily confirm clearance to enter the premises upon arrival.

For an added layer of safety, upon arrival at the worksite, ask all employees to report to work through a designated entry point and present their proof of clearance to work. This will help prevent people

from piggybacking behind a colleague and gaining entry without first submitting the pre-shift health screening questionnaire. This check-in process is a great opportunity to promote sanitation measures and conduct further health screenings, including thermal temperature checks and personal protection equipment inspections.

Contactless Time Reporting

For those work environments where employees are required to clock in and out using shared equipment, look for alternative options that support contactless interaction to minimise the potential for cross contamination between users and the device's surface.

Place Gaps Between Shifts

Entry and exit points can become very crowded when employees enter and leave the worksite. If physical handovers are not required and operations can be paused for a short time, consider planning gaps between each shift. This supports orderly passage in and out of the building in a single direction and allows cleaning and sanitation of work areas between shifts with minimal cross-contamination.

Stagger Shifts and Breaks

If operations don't support a shutdown period between shifts, staggering employees' start and end times may be an alternative. This technique can prevent a crowded transition as employees arrive and leave the premises. In addition, consider rotating employee breaks and meals to prevent large gatherings in communal areas.

Rotate Between Onsite and Remote Work

If the nature of the work only requires a percentage of the work to be performed onsite, consider a hybrid approach in which employees rotate between onsite and remote work. For example, if your support team is assisting customers through multiple channels—online, phone, email, and in-person—you might put employees on a rotation where a percentage of the team handles in-person support onsite while the rest of the team handles remote support from home.

Your Workforce Management Solution Can Help

Planning shifts to support social distancing guidelines is easy when you put your workforce management solution to work for you. Here's how:

- Automatically send out pre-shift health check questionnaires prior to the rostered shift start and use clearance codes to authorise employees
- Prevent employees from clocking in who were non-responsive to pre-shift health screenings and check-ins
- Provide contactless clocking options, such as proximity badge readers that automatically detect the transaction type (e.g. in or out) without any interaction from the employee
- Making mass changes to shift start and end times and rest and meal breaks should be a snap whether across an entire group, shift, area, or location
- Assign rotation patterns with effective dates for onsite vs remote work rosters to minimise the number of employees onsite
- Communicate changes to rosters via employee self-service and send notifications about social distancing guidelines and other safety precautions



Strategy 3

Responsible Rostering for Safety and Productivity



Creating a safe and productive workplace is critical in today's unstable business climate. It requires you to understand what is and is not working and then quickly adjust to minimise the financial impact to your business.

Even the best re-opening plan will likely require adjustment as you navigate through these uncharted waters, meaning that you'll probably need to adjust rostering practices to improve on safety precautions and/or productivity.

Ongoing Refinement of Labour Demand Forecasts

With no precedent set during the planning phase, an educated guess using recommended guidelines and adjustments to historical data is the best you can do to forecast labour demand. As business progresses, you will start to gather more accurate data that reflects the current environment. This will allow you to make more accurate forecasts to your labour demand. For example:

- The length and frequency of customer visits may have changed
- The demand or popularity of products and services may fluctuate, requiring production lines or shifts to be put into operation or shutdown
- Online offerings may be more attractive than originally projected
- Shortages of raw materials may require scaling back production

Shifting the Nature of the Work

Be sure to gather and assess feedback from your customers and employees and analyse your business results to identify new trends. Aligning these data points will help you make smarter and more strategic decisions. As you did in the planning phase, you may find the need to modify operations, including creation or discontinuation of jobs or modifications to shifts and product lines. Examples of these situations include:

- A manufacturer may make a small investment to refit their plant and train employees so that they can fulfill a gap in the supply chain for essential products, bringing more employees back to work
- A retailer may find their customers prefer to shop online and want additional options like same or next day delivery, or virtual personal shoppers and stylists
- A municipality may see an increase in visitors to parks because gyms are closed, requiring more workers to enforce safety measures
- Utility and telecommunication consumers may want to minimise person-to-person contact with technicians requiring an increase in automation efforts
- Banking customers may prefer to call customer service or use online options instead of visiting a branch



Increasing Safety Precautions

The model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws require employers to maintain a safe and healthy worksite. For environments that require working in close proximity to others or with particularly vulnerable individuals, you may need to put more stringent policies in place to decrease the risks of exposure as some states are even requiring certification before re-opening. For example, busy locations may need additional staff to:

- Enforce the practice of social distancing and closely monitor entries and exits to keep occupancy levels at acceptable limits
- Increase cleaning and sanitation efforts
- In addition to employee health screening and check-in policies, ask visitors to submit to thermal temperature checks prior to entry and wear face coverings.

Your Workforce Management Solution Can Help

A future-ready workforce management solution will enable a smart and agile approach to achieving your business objectives, including:

- Leveraging AI-enabled digital assistants to initiate pre-shift health screenings before the employee arrives for their shift
- Labour forecasting that uses machine learning technology to adjust forecasts based on historical data and restrictions
- Adding or contracting roles, shifts, and production lines with just a few clicks of a button
- Automatically identifying, contacting, and placing qualified replacement workers in vacant shifts based on the rules governed by your company policies



Strategy 4

Simplify Contact Tracing and Notification

In the unfortunate event that an employee is exposed to or diagnosed with COVID-19, your business must mobilise immediately to prevent further exposure across your employees, customers, and the broader public. Knowing when and where employees have worked, the areas they have accessed, and who they may have encountered is essential. You should be able to communicate risks quickly, but this can be challenging for organisations with hundreds or even thousands of employees in a single location.

The “Who” and “When”

Each roster and time entry should include information about when and where employees are working (including buildings, areas, and departments). Minimise interaction or transfer across different work locations during each shift to reduce the risk of broader exposure across your workforce. These steps will enable you to respond quickly and report on at-risk employees that may have been exposed within recommended look-back periods. This information can also be exported and run against your sales data to help identify any customers who may also be at risk of exposure.

Communication

Once you have the data you need on the “who” and “when”, interview those individuals to gather additional information and communicate next steps. To expedite this process, you need to know the best way to contact employees (phone, email, or text) and an easy way to efficiently facilitate bi-directional communication. Consider sending employees automated surveys via their preferred contact method to quickly obtain additional information and logically determine next steps. Be sure to ask questions that help you understand their movements within the locations in which they worked and their level of interaction with others to help measure the risk of exposure.



Your Workforce Management Solution Can Help

Your workforce management solution requires employees to communicate information about their work experience, such as where and when they worked or took breaks. Therefore, you should already have sufficient information available to effectively initiate contact tracing procedures. If you are not currently capturing this level of information, consider making some tweaks to your current configuration before re-opening. For example:

- Use existing analytics tools to build reports that easily determine the individuals an employee may have interacted with and assign an initial risk score to prioritise contact notifications
- Take advantage of employee contact preferences for communication of roster changes or shift offers to complete contact notifications with required next steps
- Leverage employee survey features or integration with logic-based survey solutions to automate information gathering, further refine the risk assessment, and communicate more detailed next steps based on the responses

Strategy 5

Know Employee Rights and Expectations



As employees return to work, they want to be reassured that their safety and legal rights are protected. To gain the highest levels of engagement and productivity, you must meet and exceed employee expectations, such as:

The Practice of Social Distancing

Prior to re-opening, it is critical to outline social distancing guidelines specific to your organisation's environment. This means evaluating each location to determine where social distancing practices may be disrupted and mitigate risks with clear signage and direction. For example, limit the number of people that can occupy a specific area, rearrange work areas and break rooms, and place signage to provide directional guidance such as one-way directions and/or paths of travel through a location.

Understand Employee Sentiment

To ensure a productive and safe work environment, make a concerted effort to understand how employees feel about their return to work and the procedures put in place to safeguard their health and well-being.

This can be as simple as pushing out short automated pulse surveys to gain “in the moment” employee feedback. For example:

- Prior to returning, ask employees to rate how they feel about returning to work and if there is anything your business can do to ease any apprehensions
- At the end of a shift, ask if employees felt as though social distancing practices were effective and how they might be improved upon
- As the workday begins, ask employees if they have access to effective personal protection equipment

Know Your Legal Obligations

Legislation and collective bargaining, or union, agreements will often include provisions related to layoffs, furloughs, and leave. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many government authorities and organisations have instituted new and/or temporary policies to support employers and employees throughout these uncertain times. Continually monitor these changes and implement processes to simplify and prove compliance.



Be Flexible

With diminished access to childcare, school closings, and additional consideration for individuals more vulnerable to COVID-19, employees need more flexibility. If your business can support more flexible work arrangements, such as working from home and flextime, you may want to consider defining policies that govern these options. This will ensure that you have the coverage you need, when you need it, and that employees have the flexibility to provide and care for their loved ones.

Additionally, if employees are being placed in situations where they have a greater risk of exposure, you may want to consider implementing temporary incentive pay programs, such as hazard pay premiums. These programs show that you understand the risks your employees are undertaking by returning to work and that you value their brave contributions.

Your Workforce Management Solution Can Help

Consider leveraging your workforce management solution to help manage employee rights and expectations, including:

- Automating temporary changes to legislative and contractual provisions with configuration and effective dates
- Managing prioritisation of a return to work after furloughs based on contractual obligations
- Communicating flexible working arrangements and expectations, such as rotations between onsite and working-from-home hours, establishing core hours in which an employee must work, or restricting the span of hours they can work within a given day
- Pushing out pulse surveys to get critical “in the moment” feedback from employees regarding their experience and your return-to-work policies, including how well social distancing was practiced and availability of personal protection equipment
- With several new leave laws being introduced at regional, national, state/provincial, and local levels, leave case management tools can simplify the benefit administration process and prove compliance to avoid litigation, fines, and penalties

Strategy 6

Prepare for Legislation Changes and Rollbacks

Many legal obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic are temporary in nature to help both employees and employers emerge from the pandemic in a position that will allow them to thrive. Some of these measures are for a finite period of time while others are more open ended. Not only is it important to monitor legislative changes, but you should also have an effective method for starting and stopping any new benefits and obligations as well as automating any calculations, reporting, or documentation rules.

Your Workforce Management Solution Can Help

Enterprise workforce management solutions should be future-ready and not solely reliant on parameter-driven rules. In uncertain times, you need the ability to quickly mobilise and change configuration to meet your evolving needs without waiting for product enhancements. Your provider should offer tools to help you ease administration with effective dates, automation, workflows, and auditing capabilities that help you prove compliance, such as:

- Providing a single source of truth for all eligibility data, documentation, and workflows to easily automate the coordination of leave benefits at legislative and contractual levels
- Effective-dated policies to automatically calculate current and new pay premiums and other incentive policies
- Support for automated calculation of retrospective policies for accurate and consistent application of new rules intended to go into effect as of a historical date
- Audit capabilities that prove compliance with date and time stamps as well as data that shows who made changes and when



A Quick Recap

As you look to turn the lights back on, now is not the time to be over eager in achieving full brightness. Nor is it the time to have faulty wiring and false starts. Easing your employees and customers into the light with fine-tuned safety procedures and equipment that is in good working order will help everyone feel protected and will enable your organisation to regroup for a successful re-entry into the market. These 6 strategies will help you come out on the other side ready to thrive:

Prioritise Staffing for Phased Return to Work

- Plan early to identify and prioritise when and where employees will return to work
- Evaluate employee readiness and availability
- Consider soft openings with limited hours of operation to pilot your re-opening strategy
- Determine if new roles should be added while others are paused to safeguard employee and customer well-being

Pre-Shift Health and Safety Checks and Social Distancing Measures

- Automate pre-shift health screenings to clear employees for work prior to arrival
- Employ contactless time reporting options to minimise physical interaction with shared devices
- Implement gaps between shifts that allow for employees to exit the building before the next shift starts and for cleaning and sanitation of workspaces
- Stagger shifts and breaks to minimise the amount of traffic at entry and exit points or large gatherings in communal spaces
- Use rosters rotations for onsite vs. offsite work to minimise the number of people onsite at any given time

Responsible Rostering for Safety and Productivity

- Continually refine labour forecasts based on actual financial performance, customer traffic, and productivity data to optimise rosters for the current business climate
- Shift the nature of work to meet new customer demands—whether related to products and services offered or new ways of delivering your current offerings
- Increase or adjust safety precautions to meet actual business activity and to ensure a safe work environment and customer experience

Simplify Contact Tracing and Notification

- Digitally track who is working and when to easily identify and report on at-risk individuals when an employee reports COVID-19 exposure or diagnosis
- Automate risk assessments and communication of next steps if a risk of exposure is present

Know Employee Rights and Expectations

- Promote social distancing to ensure employees are comfortable in their work environment
- Open the lines of communication to ensure the measures put in place are working
- Implement flexible working arrangement to support employees' personal obligations
- Offer pay premiums and incentives for employees working in higher risk areas of exposure

Prepare for Legislation Changes and Rollbacks

- Monitor changing legal obligations—legislative or contractual—to protect employee rights
- Digitise and automate compliance-related processes, such as new leave laws and layoff and furlough policies, with audit trails to prove compliance

If you would like to learn more about how WorkForce Software can empower your organisation to navigate these uncharted waters, contact us today for a [personalised consultation and demonstration](#).



About WFS Australia

We empower our customers to follow their own path. Built on 20 years of workforce management innovation including rostering and time & attendance, **the WorkForce Suite** adapts to your organisation, delivering a breakthrough employee experience in the cloud—no matter how unique your pay rules, labour regulations, rosters, and employee self-service needs are. Enterprise grade and future-ready, WorkForce removes the noise from your manager's busy day, protects your organisation against compliance risks, provides leadership with strategic business insights, and delivers real employee engagement at the time and place work happens. Whether your employees are global, unionised, full-time, part-time, mobile, or seasonal, we make managing your workforce easy, less costly, and more rewarding for everyone.

To learn more about how the WorkForce Suite can help your organisation cut labour costs and gain access to actionable metrics, organisation-wide, visit wfsaustralia.com or call 1300 766 365