

## Employer Priorities in the Current Restrictions

The government announcement this week will no doubt have a significant impact on organisations in the community and voluntary sector nationwide. Employers are once again facing the prospect of a changing workforce, changing expectations and a different way of working as they manoeuvre through the on-going restrictions at Level 5. Employer priorities must now focus on the expectations surrounding flexibility in the remote workforce, the necessary changes under workforce planning and any accommodations necessary in maintaining health and wellbeing, an overview of which can be found below.

### **Flexibility and the Remote Workforce**

All but essential services should now be operating in a remote working space and with the current restrictions now replicating those that were in place in March of last year, employers must balance operational necessity with the on-going health, safety and welfare of all employees.

To do this effectively, communication must continue to be frequent and transparent. Organisations must engage their workforces by providing autonomy as well as encouraging collaborative practices. There must be an equitable approach to dealing with employees so that risks associated with employment equality issues are mitigated. Finally, flexibility must be modelled so that both management and employees can continue to navigate in the current restrictions and work together for organisational success. This means that accommodations may have to be considered for those who have childcare concerns. Ensuring the appropriate policies are in place to cover all leave arrangements, especially those falling under parental leave options, is a must. Considerations of flexibility in terms of staggered work hours may have to be applied in certain circumstance insofar as the organisational needs are still being met. These options will only work where communication of expectations is defined at the outset.

### **Workforce Changes**

Probably the most obvious and unfortunate unintentional consequence of the most recent government restrictions has been the substantial impact of changes to the workforce. Whether workforce planning occurred in the initial stages or not, most organisations have been, or will be, impacted with pay cuts, layoffs, short time or redundancy situations.

To deal with this effectively organisations need to implement a workforce plan, assess newly emerged priorities, analyse the financial circumstances of the organisation and assess the current needs to fully understand the suitability of skills, experience and requirements within the new norm. Proper planning and transparent communications are key to managing the unintended consequences that come from changes to roles and impacts on the workforce. Organisations implementing any of these types of changes should pay particular attention to the legislation governing these situations as well as contractual implications for those impacted.

### **Health and Wellbeing**

The Work Safely Protocol continues to focus on mental health wellbeing and in the current environment it is imperative that employers address these issues as a matter of urgency. The high

number of Covid cases means that feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety are being felt once again by employees. It is therefore essential that employers ensure the correct supports are put in place. Update appropriate policies, engage the services of an employee assistance programme and ensure occupational health physicians are at hand to reinforce the tangible supports required at this time. Proactive employee management is essential in further supporting employees and this can be done through regular 1:1's and consistent messaging to employees as part of the overall communications plan. Finally focusing on employee engagement will prove prudent to the overall employee experience and will assist with maintaining the wellbeing of employees. All of these actions are interlinked and will support the health and wellbeing aspect required at this time.

### **Key Take Aways**

- Set clear expectations on deliverables and balance this with flexibility.
- Provide frequent and transparent communications.
- Ensure the correct supports are in place to maintain and foster health and wellbeing as a priority.
- Ensure the appropriate policies are in place and communicated to all employees.

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