



## ***The Talking Law Podcast***

### Episode 112 - Return to Work : The guidelines you should have in place for staff returning to work post COVID

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## **Transcript**

**Joanna:** Hi, it's Joanna Oakey here and welcome back to Talking Law. A podcast proudly brought to you by our commercial legal practice Aspect Legal. Now today we have on the show the fabulous Robyn Purdy here to talk to us all about coronavirus and the return to work guideline and Robyn this is a bit ironic really that we've decided to talk about this to you at the moment.

**Robyn:** It is. Hi, Jo. Yes, it is. This is coming to you from the land of wishful thinking in Melbourne where we are in stage4/5 hard locked down here. So I've prepared these return to work guidelines looking forward to when we can implement them ourselves down here.

**Joanna:** Seemed like a good idea at the time when we decided that we have been podcast talking about the return to work guidelines. Obviously, the situation in our Melbourne office deteriorated substantially.

**Robyn:** Very true, very true, but still relevant for lots of our friends across the nation. So it's still

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very important to talk about this and look for us, for us in Victoria. It's going to be coming up soon, it's going to be relevant for us. So it's good to get a bit of a feel about what's on the radar ahead of us. Anyway, I think.

**Joanna:** That's good work. Robyn, this is optimism right? let's talk about it.

**Robyn:** Again from the land of wishful thinking, let's get into it.

## **Considerations for employers looking to bring their teams back into the office**

**Joanna:** All right, so look, what do you think the key standout items are for employers who are considering bringing their team back into the work environment? Now, what is it that they should be thinking about?

**Robyn:** Look, I think the first thing to consider is that just because you can doesn't necessarily mean you should. So we've seen now employees working really effectively from a home or remote working environment. So I think at the first instance, the important thing to think about is whether employees can continue to work from home. And it's recommended that if that can take place, and it should, limiting the number of people in a workplace is obviously going to reduce risks of transfer. That being said, when we've got employees coming back to work, we do want to make sure that they come back in a really safe manner. And so it's important then to consider what we can do it as employers to make sure that we keep our employees safe, and to make sure that we keep anybody else that's visiting our workspaces safe as well.

**Joanna:** No, I think you're absolutely right. It's interesting. I mean, and look, in the media, we've heard ad nauseum about many of the, I guess many of the impacts of Coronavirus, the whole work from home element in terms of the businesses greater adoption of understanding how it can really work for an organization. It's certainly the case I think I completely agree with you that rethinking whether or not you need everyone back in the office straightaway, just because you can, you know, is that a good idea or not? I'm actually thinking of, they probably shouldn't mention the name but there's a large legal firm who has just in the last couple of weeks come under fire because they were requiring their team to all come back to the office. And then there was a bit of an outbreak in the office and look, whether it creates a risk for an organization, in terms of the arguments of providing a safe workspace is one thing. But it's also I think this legal firm will probably reflect on the coverage of it as perhaps not a great step for its brand.

**Robyn:** That's right, I mean no one wants to be the cautionary tale in the media, that's for sure. So taking these steps now before we get to that point is really important. And again, just because you can doesn't mean you should we all know now that the traditional nine to five working model of bums in seats in offices isn't necessarily going to always be the right way to go for businesses. And you can still have your employees working for you in a really effective and productive way. Just from a remote location. It's going to make the employees feel more comfortable and ultimately you're going to get a better way. product out of them.

**Joanna:** But of course, we do have that pool of clients and I'm sure listeners as well, where maybe remote working isn't even a possibility. So for example, our clients are in manufacturing or in some form of distribution or, you know, retail.

**Robyn:** And you also have employees that themselves want to get back into the workplace that might be feeling a bit isolated at home, they want to get their kids back into a normal routine of parents going off to work. So there's lots of reasons there why having employees returned to the workplace is, you know, is a really good idea as well.



**Joanna:** Hmm. All right. Let's get stuck into it then Robyn. So return to work guideline. Step number one, think about whether you need to do it in the first place. But step number two, if you're having some of your employees come back, what should we be doing?

## Planning the transition back to the office

**Robyn:** Okay, so the obvious thing is, first of all, putting in place a plan to make sure that when you've got the employees coming back that you're ready for that to take place. Don't just sort of have everybody come in on the first day back without thinking through how this is actually going to work. And when you considering your plan, you want to be thinking about things like, first of all, making sure you've got the basic sanitary and hygiene practices in place, making sure that employees have got ready access to things like sanitizer masks, face shields if necessary. You know, that's the obvious stuff. In situations where you've got people sharing workplaces or workspaces, work equipment, something like a mouse or a keyboard, you might need to think about investing in extra equipment so that you're really limiting sharing as much as possible. Of course, you are going to have situations where sharing can't be avoided. You know, things like people using copiers, you're not obviously not going to get separate copier machines for each person. So you want to make sure that you're implementing really robust and thorough cleaning regimens within the workplace that goes across all of those high touch areas. You know, think about everything that you touch when you walk into a workplace. Everything from that elevator button to the door handles things in the lunchroom copier equipment and you know, things of that nature.

## Following best practices when you move back into your office

**Joanna:** Hmm, absolutely. Okay, so what then would you say the best practices that, you know, what's the bar that we should be aiming for here?

**Robyn:** Well, that's a that's a really hard question. I think the bars high, well the bar is different for everybody really. And it's going to ultimately depend on your the nature of your own workplace and what you're doing there. I think, you know, what you want to be always having in the forefront of your mind is the guidelines that we're getting from the government and in terms of things like physical distancing, or social distancing, as we're now really familiar with this new term. What may have been the usual practice in terms of things like hot desking might not be appropriate anymore. And you might have a situation where that was really the primary way that your office was set up, and so there might be some real changes there that needs to be implemented. Depending on what kind of a workplace you have, you might need to consider investing in some internal infrastructure redoing your reception area to provide shields for receptionist who may be having a high contact with a lot of people see that in places like supermarkets where they've got those shields around the cashiers and the checkouts now to protect you know, the staff that are working and doing their job. You know, we all think about the the obvious things like the sanitation and the cleaning and things like that, but it may also extend to offering employees car parking, so that they're limiting the amount of time that they're traveling on public transport. And, you know, staggering work starting and finishing times so that you don't have a whole influx of people coming into the space. At the same time investing in a second lunch room or kitchenette so that you can separate your employees and ensure that that physical distancing takes place.

## Reducing the risk of COVID entering your organisation

**Joanna:** Hmm. It's interesting. Talking about all of this because it does feel like a long list even though we've I think you've summarized it really well, there are, of course, a lot of considerations here. It's while we're sitting down and stepping through each of these areas, but I think there are some and you know, it's not just about your obligation as an employer to provide a safe working environment. It's also about trying to reduce the level of risk of COVID or other infections coming

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into your organization, then taking out your workforce towards a period of time which, you know, could be extraordinarily detrimental to any business. And, you know, of course, there's been a lot of discussion about A teams and B teams, splitting teams, you know, if you must have people in the office then having certain components of the team who are allocated to do time schedules to come in, you know, and that can be very useful for an environment when you need staff to come in such as, you know, perhaps manufacturing. So I think that there's some, you know, interesting approaches that are being used. But one of the things that I have noticed recently in the media and that I've been reflecting on, is that I think, ultimately, at the moment, businesses are actually seeing less sickness. We see their staff, because, you know, there's just been because of the heightened protocols, the much greater social distancing, there's just a lot less spread of the usual germs and loogies that cause sickness. So this, you know, it's perhaps a benefit, I don't know what you call it. But certainly it's been a side effect of all of the new protocols that have come into place because of COVID that I think are leading to a lessening of sickness just over across the board in a workplace, I guess, you know, it's important for employers to recognize that and to be balancing that, you know, recognizing that they're able to then balance that against some of the pain that they may feel that they're going through implementing all of these things that you're talking about Robyn.

**Robyn:** Yeah, absolutely. You know, we're seeing reportings that influenza rates this year are the lowest that have been reported in quite some time. And that's not just because of an increase in people taking the flu vaccination, but because we're all following these very strict hygiene practices, social distancing, that's in place, people working from home, and also a little bit of a change in the mentality that, you know, previously, there was, I think, at least in some workplaces, this mentality and perception that if you know, you were sick, you just soldier on you know, you just got the came into work you took a couple of panadol you know, and you you sucked it up and you got on with the job. And really there was that mentality of pushing through illnesses and not letting down employers. And now I think we're all coming to realize that that's not necessarily the way that we should be going about things that we all have at least a social responsibility to one another and to our communities to not do that. And employers are taking a really strong front foot now by directing their employees Look, if you're sick, stay at home, either work remotely take the sick leave that's available to you, but it's no longer seen as appropriate now to be coming into workplaces when you're unwell. And that's not just in relation to COVID illnesses, but now you know, coughs colds sniffles, but you know, God help us come hay fever season.

**Joanna:** Eating my words about the reduce sickness in the workplace.

**Robyn:** As a hay fever sufferer who starts very early in the season. I can foresee a lot of frowny faces at the supermarket. I will put everybody on alert now that it's a hay fever sneeze and not a COVID sneeze

**Joanna:** If any of our clients deal with Robyn in a few weeks time, it's hay fever. Well look, that's great. I guess Are there any parting words for me here, Robyn?

## **Aspect Legal on hand to support your return to work**

**Robyn:** Oh, look, I think really just Aspect Legal is here to help. We've developed a very robust return to work policy and some guidelines that we're happy to help you with risk management in terms of concerns with employees coming back. Although I'm in Melbourne and not directly experiencing this myself, I am available to you to walk you through these things. So please don't hesitate to get in contact with us. We want every We want to stay safe. We want everyone to be COVID aware. We don't want people back in lockdown. So you know, let's get on with this together in a safe manner. We're here to help.

**Joanna:** Brilliant, Robyn. You have just said it so well. There's nothing left for me add. Absolutely



amazing. Robyn, I just want to say a massive thank you for coming on today.

**Robyn:** My pleasure.

**Joanna:** Well that's it for this episode of Talking Law with our very own Robyn Purdy. Now of course, if you'd like more information about this topic, then just head over to our website at [talkinglaw.com.au](http://talkinglaw.com.au) where you'll be able to get a download of this transcript of this podcast episode if you'd like to read it in more detail and there. On our website. You'll also be able to find details of how to contact Robyn and our other legal Eagles at Aspect Legal If you or your clients would like help with any of the items that we covered today. And finally If you enjoyed what you heard today and you're not a regular subscriber, don't forget to hit subscribe on your favorite podcast player. Well that's it. Thanks again for listening in. You're listening to Talking Law a podcast proudly brought to you by our commercial legal practice Aspect Legal. See you next time.