

The impact of returning to office-based working on mental wellbeing

During the pandemic many organisations required their staff to work remotely as part of their COVID safe plans. As restrictions are eased more and more organisations will have to consider their policy on a return to the office. This case study presents the findings of a piece of work considering how to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff during this process.



In August 2020 a public sector call centre in Queensland undertook a [Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessment](#) on a return to office-based working. 50% of staff had been working remotely for six months. As part of the process actions to mitigate negative and build upon positive impacts were identified informing the organisations approach manage a return to office-based work.

Key findings

The Assessment identified aspects of a return to office-based working that impact on the wellbeing of both staff returning from remote working and staff who remained on-site during the pandemic. The issues raised by staff are closely aligned to the literature. It should be noted that there was limited literature relating to remote working during Covid-19. The MWIA found that:

- A return to office-based working was likely to impact differently on different staff groups and more significantly on staff with underlying health conditions, parenting and caring responsibilities and staff who are single.
- Some aspects of a return to office-based working such as team cohesion and social networks, problem solving, access to technical and emotional support were likely to be impacted positively by a return to on-site working.
- Other aspects such as a general sense of control, work life balance, a healthy lifestyle, an ability to think clearly and a sense of safety were likely to be impacted negatively by a return to full-time on-site working.

“Overall, we found it to be a very valuable process that improved staff engagement outcomes.”

Key actions to mitigate negative impacts and build on positive impacts

- Create an individual co-designed plan for each member of staff returning to office-based working that takes into account how staff groups are impacted differently.
- Have a staggered and phased return
- Consider a combination of work from home and onsite working on a temporary or permanent basis
- Have a clear and transparent criteria for working from home
- Allow for greater flexibility with working hours e.g. split shifts and flexible leave options
- Follow up and 'check in' with staff after they return
- Provide an up-to-date Covid safe plan to returning staff
- Consider workplace health and safety requirements for any staff who continue to work from home
- Provide a quiet space in the office for staff who need 'time out'
- Promote wellbeing activities for staff at work
- Offer different desk options for staff that account for work style and preferences
- Welcome staff back e.g. create a 'welcome back' pack
- Plan activities that build a sense of team cohesion
- Consider the impact on staff who have remained on-site during Covid, particularly those who would have liked to work from home

What happened as a result?

"What it did for our leadership team is hone their thinking and help them implement actions in a more considered way. Through this process, I was able to lead our team to consider impacts on the various demographics which resulted in a much more staff led and well considered, supportive process. Most people did not take up the options around flexible hours etc., but just talking through the options improved staff sentiment and feelings of value."

Further Information

This case study was produced as part of the Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessment (MWIA) Demonstration Project, funded by the Queensland Mental Health Commission. The aim of the project was to demonstrate how a focus on mental wellbeing can improve outcomes for individuals, organisations and communities. Further information about this case study and other case studies can be found at <https://www.thrivewbc.com/case-studies>