



Australia Responds to Coronavirus

By Leah Shepherd

August 27, 2020

Due to the steps Australia took early in the pandemic, the country has seen success in keeping the coronavirus from spreading. The country has reported only 463 deaths and 24,236 confirmed cases as of Aug. 21, according to the World Health Organization.

Starting on March 15, all travelers arriving in or returning to Australia were required to self-isolate for 14 days or face high fines. And on March 20, Australia closed its borders to all nonresidents.

State governments closed nonessential businesses and imposed social-distancing rules in March. The country started loosening those rules in May, but after a rise in infection rates, some states decided to reinstate them in July and August.

A few heavily populated areas have struggled with recent outbreaks. In the first week of August, a cluster of infections in the state of Victoria caused local authorities to enforce a night curfew, tighten restrictions on daily activities and order large parts of the state economy to close. In addition, employees now must wear face masks at work. Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city, is in Victoria.

Operational Changes

Employers in Australia are transforming the way they do business in order to comply with new laws and keep their employees and customers safe.

More than 80 percent of HR professionals reported that their organization has or will change its operation, delivery and strategy due to COVID-19, according to a June survey from the Australian HR Institute. Almost half of those who reported an impact said this was likely to be a permanent change to their business operating models.

Common business changes included:

- Greater flexibility.
- More digital and online services.
- Virtual training.
- Organizational restructuring.
- Digitization to focus on efficiencies.

The survey found that 68 percent of HR practitioners said remote work is being considered as part of their organization's long-term real estate planning.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Employers in Australia are "allowing workers to continue to work at home and prohibiting employees who are unwell from entering the

workplace," said Michael Michalandos, a Sydney-based partner with international law firm Baker & McKenzie. "There have been many instances of employees who have attended workplaces appearing unwell being outed by fellow employees concerned about infection. Those employers who have reopened offices have limited the number of employees in the office or rotated workers. Social-distancing measures are being enforced in most workplaces, and there has been an increase in regular sanitization."

Employers are taking steps to avoid reducing their staff. "Australian employers by and large have regarded redundancies [layoffs] and the termination of employment as a last resort, probably because of greater legal hurdles as compared with the U.S.," Michalandos said. "They have placed a greater focus on flexible working arrangements in the short term to weather the storm. Employers are continuing to require employees to take periods of paid and unpaid leave or reduced working hours due to a shortage of work."

Safety Concerns

Meanwhile, employers are facing new requirements to prevent the spread of the virus. "Workplace health and safety laws have been adjusted to encompass COVID-19, so there is now a legal requirement on all Australian employers to provide a COVID-safe workplace," said Sarah McCann-Bartlett, CEO of the Melbourne-based Australian HR Institute.

There are limited circumstances in which Australian employers can legally require employees to be tested for coronavirus before returning to work.

If an employee has symptoms of coronavirus, the employer should tell the employee not to work, or to telecommute if the job can be done safely from home and the employee is well enough to work.

Employees Are Not Comfortable Returning

Only 27 percent of employees in Australia are comfortable returning to the workplace, according to the Australian HR Institute's June survey.

For the most part, though, employees in Australia have been adjusting to the operational changes.

"Employees have generally been quite accommodating in adopting new work models, and in many instances agreeing to reduce their pay and working hours or [to] take accrued paid leave or unpaid leave," Michalandos said. "In the long term, these measures are more likely to preserve jobs and businesses. Knee-jerk termination can become quite expensive due to the cost of termination payments. It may also involve significant legal risk."

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Variation by Industry

The pandemic did not affect everyone equally. In Australia, like in many other countries, the hardest-hit sectors have been hospitality, travel and entertainment. "We have seen significant restructuring in these industries," Michalandos said.

At the same time, "the IT industry has been the most resilient, particularly because it was an early adopter of flexible work. The nature of the work allows greater flexibility. Services and professional industries have also moved quickly to remote working models," he added.

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