



# Controlling WHS risk when working from home doesn't work

## SUMMARY

Our manufacturing and distribution networks within Australia are crucial to enable everyone to obtain the essentials for daily life.

With the development of COVID-19, we are all being asked to exercise social distancing and to enhance cleaning and hygiene protocols. Much of the advice is about "working from home" where possible. But that is not going to get crucial goods made and distributed.

We have put together a list of possible control measures from our general knowledge of manufacturing and from examples members have provided to us.

**PLEASE MONITOR REGULARLY FOR UPDATES TO THIS AND OTHER ADVICE  
– KNOWLEDGE AND OFFICIAL ADVICE IS EVOLVING RAPIDLY**

## Introduction

This document deals with what organisations can do to meet social distancing and cleaning and hygiene requirements for work continuing in manufacturing and other workplaces that can't work from home.

The control measures in this document may not all be relevant to your organisation. They are ideas for consideration, not specific actions that will deal with all issues that you may be facing. You know your workplace better than anyone else. But you must be considering the issues

**TIP: The answer to many of your workplace questions is – whatever it takes to reduce transmission risk.**

**We are all in the health industry for the time being.**

If you have any effective ideas, let us know by clicking the "share" button on our dedicated [COVID-19 webpage](#), so that we can update this information with more practical examples.

## Reinforce the importance of hand washing and social distancing

We are finding that some organisations are struggling with workers who are not following the health protocols that are being established, and upgraded, by governments.

It is important that everyone recognises that they are a vital link in maintaining the health of our communities.

Do not be reluctant to reinforce the importance of thorough hand washing as a WHS requirement.

It seems basic, but not everyone understands the significant importance of this hygiene requirement during this time of crisis; it is protecting everyone, including the families of everyone who continues to work outside the home.

**TIP: The virus is coated in a fat. Imagine you have dipped your hands in fat and want to clean it all off. That's why soap and 20 seconds are important and why soap is better than sanitiser. Sanitiser is far better than not washing.**

## Consultation will give you the best answers

Consultation is a critical thing to do when making decisions about how to best manage hazards and risks in the workplace. We are hearing that some of the best COVID-19 risk controls are coming from the workers who know exactly how work is actually done (not how you think it is being done).

They can also help to identify and also what non-work activities might be creating risks.

An example has been provided to us where there was a “virtual” walkthrough of everything the workers do from the time they arrive at work.

This has enabled the employer to identify possible contamination risks they have not thought of, such as turnstiles when entering the site and time clocks.

**TIP: Understanding people’s movements at work will greatly improve contact tracing for positive tests, which is a major part of the health response. [Look here to understand what health authorities mean by close contact.](#)**

## Identify and control your specific risks

Identify what work activities create a risk of [close contact](#) or communal use of equipment.

Implement obvious control measures quickly then review according to the legally required hierarchy to check if there is a better way.

[Ai Group’s Health and Safety Resource Centre](#) provides more information about identifying and managing risk.

## Increase cleaning and hygiene protocols

Make sure you have in place heightened cleaning and hygiene protocols. All staff should maximise hand washing in the way recommended by health authorities ([click here](#) for a poster that could be displayed in workplaces).

Below are some specific extra considerations for the workplace:

- If you are providing handwipes and sanitisers they are most effective if they are alcohol based – generally in the range of 60% to 80% alcohol.
- If multiple workers are using equipment, provide appropriate cleaning materials for handles, and operational controls and ensure that they are used whenever the operator changes.
- Ensure cleaning staff use appropriate gloves and any other appropriate personal protective equipment when undertaking all cleaning work.
- Have extra cleaning in place for high traffic touchpoints during break times.
- Introduce a daily cleaning regime and/or consider between shift changeovers.
- Review other facilities that are provided. Is the equipment used to supply drinking water, such as bubblers, a transmission risk? Should communal equipment (such as sandwich makers and cutlery) be removed?

### **Decrease interaction between workers and workgroups when possible**

- No unnecessary contact between workgroups within the workplace.
- Consider splitting up your support teams so that you have backup resources if one person becomes unable to work (e.g. have members of the accounting team work in separate offices).
- Use skype or similar to interact when necessary, even with those in the same building.
- Identify whether some work can be undertaken in different locations, or at different times, to reduce the physical contact between workers.
- Would there be less contact between workers if the production line could be slowed down?
- Consider providing distance visual indicators, such as markings on the floor, to emphasise how far apart people should be.
- If the width of walkways is limiting the ability to maintain social distancing if people are passing each other, is it possible to make them one walkway?
- If meetings must take place in person, use larger rooms to allow the recommended social distancing between people - currently a minimum of 1.5 metres, within a space that provides 4 square metres per person. But the more the better.
- Consider holding meetings outside in the fresh air, whilst maintaining social distancing.
- Split up office areas to reduce contact between people.
- Stagger breaks to reduce the number of people congregating in meal rooms.
- Keep teams separated from each other during breaks.

### **Changing work hours to reduce contact between workers**

Any changes to shift arrangements or start and finish times must be undertaken in consultation with workers and may require agreement. It is important to consider the personal circumstances of individual workers who may not have the flexibility to change work arrangements.

Nevertheless, if you identify an opportunity to reduce risk you should not be reluctant to pursue quick change.

Ai Group's Workplace Advice Line can assist you to understand and apply the requirements of the relevant industrial instruments (Fair Work Act, Awards and Enterprise Agreements) and they can also help you to respond to specific concerns raised by workers.

Even if you are not considering making changes now, it helps to be prepared by understanding what options might be available.

- Consider changing work arrangements so that one group of workers starts and finishes early and another group starts and finishes later to minimise time together.
- If shift work is occurring can changes be made to start and finish times to ensure that there is no crossover of workers – e.g. one hour between the end of one shift and the start of the next.
- Consider introducing new shift arrangements. A current example from a member is the introduction of 3 x 12.5-hour shifts across a 6-day week; this may also assist if employees are faced with school closures at some time in the future as it may be easier to manage childcare across fewer working days.
- Can you split your core production team into two groups who do not interact?
- Do you have key person weaknesses? Train at least two people to do every critical job but keep them apart.
- Separate entries and facilities for each shift; some organisations have hired additional portable facilities to allow this to happen.

### **Limit direct contact with external organisations and people**

If contact is necessary, consider seeking assurances about the control measures that the organisation or individual has in place. Ensure there is access to personal hygiene items (soap and water or alcohol-based sanitisers) at all entrances.

- Install signage on all access points advising of required protocols and the importance of not entering if unwell and to seek medical advice.
- Introduce separation protocols for deliveries – no physical contact (like signing documents, consider emailing receipt confirmation).
- Ensure your delivery drivers are engaging in good personal hygiene practices and have processes in place for cleaning the cab of the truck.
- Contractors only coming onsite when absolutely necessary.
- Restrict visitors to essential requirements.

### **Going onto external worksites**

If your organisation is providing services to another business, such as maintenance or delivery services, consider what protocols you need to have in place to ensure the health of your workers.

- Contact the workplaces to identify what they have in place to minimise the risk.
- Have a protocol in place to receive an update on any COVID-19 issues before each visit.
- In addition to onsite hygiene equipment, provide alcohol based wipes to staff to enable them to supplement provisions.
- Reinforce the importance of social distancing.
- Allow your workers to refuse to service sites that are not complying with hygiene and social distancing protocols.
- Have systems in place to provide feedback to these sites about any systemic issues identified.

### **Travelling to and from work**

Travelling on public transport may be confronting during these times. Consider what arrangements could be made to provide parking onsite or nearby for workers who normally use public transport.

**TIP: It's hard to social distance properly sharing a car.**

### **Remind workers about the importance of their external activities**

Workers and their families exercising good hygiene and social distancing away from work is just as critical as what happens at work. These protocols are there for their protection to keep their workplace and income going.

Take the opportunity to emphasise this in discussions and consider providing resources for them to take home, e.g. printed copies of the hand washing poster.

### **Provide information and support for workers**

It is a difficult time for everyone. As more people start to work from home and workplaces begin to close, people who are continuing to work may begin to feel more anxious about their exposures. There may also be financial concerns if partners or family members are facing unpaid leave, even if your workers are not at direct risk of financial impact.

This anxiety may show itself in increased tension in the workplace or through general changes in the behaviour of people. It is essential that managers and supervisors are supported to provide individual support and that those supervisors and managers also have access to support.

It is very important for leaders to help everyone understand how their individual contribution is assisting the organisation to generate incomes and keep key supply chains working for the community.

If you have a current Employee Assistance Program (EAP), make sure it is widely promoted and the specific services are identified. Many people think of EAP as purely a counselling service, but many EAPs also provide direct access to financial advice.

If you don't have an EAP, promote the free services that are available to access.

This link will take you to a list of helplines that may be useful: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/national-help-lines-and-websites>.

This link will take you to the National Debt Helpline which provides FREE independent financial counselling for employees who may have household income stress: <https://ndh.org.au/>

### **You don't have to do it alone**

Ai Group is well placed to draw on our daily interaction with employers and our detailed knowledge of legislative requirements to provide you with assistance and guidance, or to just be a sounding board.

Feel free to reach out to your regular Ai Group contacts for support or contact the Workplace Advice Line for detailed advice on how to respond to the changing times that currently face Australian businesses.

Call 1300 55 66 77 or email [workplaceadvice@aigroup.com.au](mailto:workplaceadvice@aigroup.com.au) and an Adviser will call you back.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

**For further information or assistance, please contact the  
Ai Group Workplace Advice Line on 1300 55 66 77**