



OHS Professional magazine interview

September 2020

In a recent interview, Luke Holland, Partner in our Workplace Group, talks with Craig Donaldson, Editor of the OHS Professional magazine, about Managing WHS risks associated with COVID-19.

Craig: How well are most organisations adapting to COVID-19 generally when it comes to WHS risk management?

Luke: Most organisations have adapted remarkably well to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and done so within a very short timeframe. Traditional barriers have been largely overcome as organisations adapt to new ways of working—and ensure they don't get left behind. By way of example, a large portion of the Australian workforce is now working from home (WFH) either full time or in a hybrid model which was an idea unimaginable before the pandemic.

Craig: Where are the most common gaps/challenges/issues for them in this regard?

Luke: The move to COVID-Safe workplaces and WFH has been so successful that perhaps the biggest issue organisations need to consider is to stop, reflect and re-assess the new norm with fresh insight. At the onset of COVID-19, in many instances stop gap or interim measures were introduced. But now that we are months down the track in the COVID-Safe workplace and/or WFH has become commonplace, it is important to reflect on the risks and the measures put in place to ensure they are not only right for the workplace but also sustainable. Issues can vary and may involve physical and environmental risks, such as ergonomics, social distancing, and tools workers use, to psychological risks arising from isolated work practices or mental health concerns.

Craig: How do you see this evolving in the future in terms of areas of exposure and new ways of working for organisations and their employees?

Luke: Organisations who have made the paradigm shift, engaging their employees and encouraging collaboration with the help of technology, have transitioned well to COVID-Safe workplaces whether this be in the traditional workplace or with the move from an office setting to a WFH setting. Key to this is talking (or consulting as the WHS Act requires) with workers not just about physical risk but also about their mental health and wellbeing at this difficult time.

While seemingly obvious, treating each other respectfully while online has become a new risk area. Virtual etiquette or the new term “netiquette” points to the importance of treating each other in a respectful and safe manner, reducing the risk of bullying and harassment within the workplace.

Craig: What steps can organisations take to help minimise risk and take a more proactive approach to addressing above issues?

Luke: Speaking from our own experience at Sparke Helmore, we readily made the switch to a virtual world, but we know it is still very important to address the risks, and new risk, with open eyes. Just because people may not be physically in the office or workplace together at the same time, it doesn't mean that the risks aren't there. In many cases the online environment can heighten risk exposure, for example, when the workplace concept of starts and finishes may become blurred. We need to

use the same principles that we have always used to keep the workplace safe, namely:

1. identify all potential hazards and risks including new risks because the work environment is very different.
2. assess the risk by way of comprehensive risk assessment
3. implement the risk controls, and
4. review control measures on a regular basis and ensure compliance.

Craig: Any advice for OHS professionals in the above? Steps they can take?

Luke: The role of the OHS professional is more important than ever as they deal with the ongoing risks within the workplace while keeping an eye on those new or emerging risks that COVID-19 has presented. I think it is critical that OHS professionals get the resources they need to deal with the issues as they arise and focus on both the physical and mental health of the workforce.

About Luke

Luke is one of South Australia's leading workplace lawyers. He advises a range of employers on employment and work health and safety (WHS) issues and is known for his practical and balanced approach.



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This interview relates to the article “Managing WHS risks associated with COVID-19” published in the September issue of OHS Professional magazine.