



## CONVERSATIONS WITH COMMUNITY SECTOR LEADERS IN VICTORIA

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## TAKING CARE OF OUR STAFF SO THEY CAN DO THEIR BEST WORK

7<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> October 2020

## A Conversation Resource



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## Introduction

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Welcome to Our Conversation on:

*'Taking care of our staff so they can do their best work'*

Across organizations in the community sector people have had to adapt to working remotely due to the COVID-19 restrictions and this has in many cases created challenges for boards, managers, staff and their clients. In this facilitated conversation with a small group of community sector leaders we talked about:

- How we realise the benefits of working from home and better understand the disadvantages and risk.
- How we keep staff connected and safe while working at home.
- What staff working arrangements might look like in the emerging future and how we encourage and develop new ways of working.
- Some successes and failures so far.

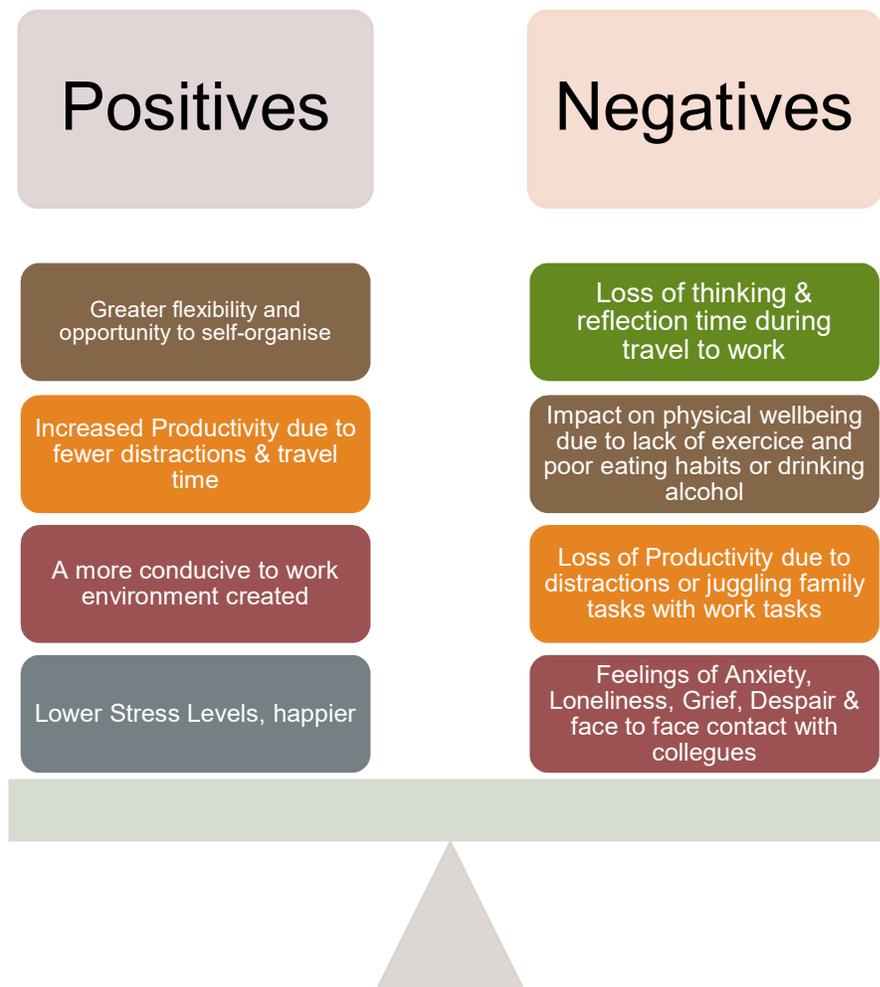
In our preparation for these conversations we undertook rapid desk research on emerging concepts and ideas that may be helpful to leaders; as well as practical suggestions that can help in the everyday work. This resource provides some useful information; tips and ideas. It captures emerging thinking on taking care of staff during these difficult times. Importantly, it captures the insights gained by the group of leaders that we have been in conversation with during this difficult time.

The information in this resource should not be taken as a comprehensive analysis of the subject. We have tried to present current information simply and succinctly. Links to resources and discussions are also provided if you would like to read some more.

## How we realise the benefits of working from home and better understand the disadvantages and risks

We now know that for many people working from home is a welcome change while for others it's simply awful. Of course for most of us it's somewhere in between. From our desktop research and our conversations with leaders, some of the positive and negative aspects of working from home have been reported as follows:

### What's good and bad with working from home



### *A nice working environment, feeling happy and being productive*

Some research indicates that employees who are happier working from home are more likely to stay loyal to their organization and less likely to quit their jobs, compared to workers in offices. Other surveys show that remote workers work more than 40 hours per week and they are more productive. This may be because they have fewer distractions compared to being in an office where other people can be distracting or simply because of the day-to-day interactions that also take up time (although these interactions are useful)<sup>1</sup>. Of course it could be argued that there are plenty of distractions at home as well. Anecdotally we often hear about people getting stuck doing things around the house when they should be working.

Nevertheless, some research argues that by working remotely, staff can create an environment conducive to work, according to their preferences. Further, some research is questioning the continued relevance of traditional office routines. For example, someone might find it easier to brainstorm while running. Another might be more productive at night. In our leaders conversations we talked about the traditional view of office hours being 9-5 and acknowledged that this may not be fit for purpose anymore. That is, we may need to reconsider the idea that if staff are working from home they may prefer, for example, to start later in the day and work late into the night than start at 9am and finish at 5pm. Of course this is reliant on the type of work they do. The suggestion was that individual workers should be allowed, where this is realistic, to devise their own hours of work plan and that this approach will enable individual workers to be more productive and happier in their job. Another tension here is recognizing that in some cases people can be working even when they are not sitting at their desk in front of their computer (of course it depends on their role); or that they can in fact be productive late at night and not too fatigued to do their work well,

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<sup>1</sup> (Quickbooks, Intuit, 2020; Surepayroll, 2019; Workwest, 2020; Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Reserach Brief COVID-19 #5, 2020)

contrary to common belief. Importantly, some argue that when staff are able to shape their work environment and how they do their work, their stress levels tend to be lower<sup>2</sup>.

While workers in community services have generally had opportunities to work from home, what is being proposed here is a workplace design that can purposefully make gains from offering a different way of working. A way of working that potentially offers workers greater control of their work. The benefits and disadvantages to both individual workers and their respective organisations must of course be considered on a case by case basis, but it may offer some food for thought. And it should be noted here that in our research we did not identify studies that specifically focused on employees in health and community sector organisations.



***What's your organisation's position and policy on how staff work from home? What informs this position and how is this reflected in your organisation's design?***

### **Some challenges**

Alongside the positives of working from home are the inevitable negatives discussed below.

#### ***A comfortable and functional work environment***

There are some challenges in setting up a comfortable and functional work environment at home and to maintain boundaries between home and work. This may be difficult if you do not have a separate and dedicated office for your work; but also if you find it difficult, for example, leaving the dishes unwashed because you now have to start work and there is not time to do that. If you were going to the office you would just shut the door behind you and not worry about it until you arrived home at the end of the day. But when you are working from home you might see the kitchen sink full of dishes every

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

time you pass the kitchen to go say go to the bathroom or to get your lunch, and it may be upsetting.

You need to have appropriate office furniture and equipment. If you are working several hours a day in front of your computer screen and/or on the phone understandably it is important to have appropriate office furniture for OH&S purposes; and the right equipment to be able to do your job. For example, if your office chair is not suitable you may experience aches and pains; and if your internet isn't fast enough or your home computer doesn't have up to date versions of software, your productivity and your wellbeing may be affected. We have been informed that some CEO's have asked for photos of their staff workstations at home so they can better understand how their staff are working. Some may see this as a little intrusive however it does raise the issue of how responsible organisations are for the wellbeing of their staff when they are working from home.

### *Being productive*

Staff may lose productivity simply from using social media and not even being fully aware of this, e.g. scrolling on phone, looking at emails, reading notices or alerts that pop up<sup>3</sup>. This may be due to boredom or simple distraction. Conversely, one of the main risks of working from home is the negative effects of working long hours and disengaging from work. Cited research suggests an association between working from home and long hours<sup>4</sup>. For some people distractions in the home may be difficult to manage. Having open conversations with staff about distractions in the home and how to manage these can be a useful problem solving exercise between managers and staff which may also work on building relationships and cohesion.

### *Competently working online*

Staff may experience difficulties in doing some work online. Some leaders reported that it takes a few goes before people

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<sup>3</sup> (Quickbooks, Intuit, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> (Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Reserach Brief COVID-19 #5, 2020)

get comfortable with working online. For example, community development workers are usually working on site, having good group conversations and building new relationships were identified as experienced difficulties in our conversations with leaders. It was suggested that nuanced solutions are required. In addition, it was reported that direct care workers felt they were 'doing all the hard work' when comparing themselves to other staff working on line.

### *Anxiety, isolation and wellbeing*

Staff may become anxious being on their own for long periods of time as well as from hearing news about the pandemic. They may feel lonely and even grieve about having lost the work routine and stimulation they experience at work with their colleagues.

For some workers, especially those living alone, working from home has been an experience of isolation and possibly loss and sadness, according to the leader's conversations. Further, some staff may experience abuse and violence in the home, especially during lockdown, with no escape. Research and data indicate that when work is brought into the home the potential for conflict may increase<sup>5</sup>. In September 2020 Victoria Police reported that Victoria's lockdown contributed to the highest rates of family violence in the state's history with increases in first time reporting<sup>6</sup>.

In our leaders conversations it was reported that some staff complained that they couldn't cope working on line anymore. These staff stated they were desperate to get back to work, for space and human energy and to access the equipment.

Some research also suggests that in some cases staff may become lethargic and despondent from not having to physically follow a routine of activity and eating. This may lead

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<sup>5</sup> (Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Reserach Brief COVID-19 #5, 2020)

<sup>6</sup> (The Age, 2020)

to reduced physical activity and poor eating habits, especially if they are living alone and thereby affect their wellbeing<sup>7</sup>.

According to the Black Dog Institute some of the feelings that people working from home may experience include:

- Feeling isolated, lonely, disconnected
- Not being able to 'switch off'
- Feeling unmotivated
- Having difficulty prioritizing work
- Feeling uncertain about work performance
- Having difficulties sleeping<sup>8</sup>

### *Trusting staff to do their work*

One of the biggest reasons leaders get uncomfortable about staff working from home is they are afraid their staff will take advantage of it and not truly work. Discussions on the issue of trusting employees suggest that this begs the question as to why you would employ staff that you don't trust in the first place. Now more than ever, employees want the opportunity to work from home, and because it's a valued perk, most employees aren't going to abuse it. While they may not work the same way they would in the office, they are still going to get their tasks done in the way that works most productively for them. As long as the work is done correctly and on-time, it's best to not split hairs about how it happened. The leaders we spoke with stated that their staff assumed that their managers trusted them to fulfill their job requirements as expected. The leaders also agreed that it was not helpful to them or their staff to start from a position of distrust and to micromanage staff. Instead, they preferred strategies whereby they could understand what their staff were up to through regular meetings and information exchange. Involving staff in understanding how the organization is travelling during the

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<sup>7</sup> (Workwest, 2020; Surepayroll, 2019; Quickbooks, Intuit, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> (Black Dog Institute, 2020)

pandemic was identified as important for building trust and commitment. Moreover, many leaders acknowledged the work of their staff during these challenging times and showed their gratitude with gifts such as wellbeing packs, time off etc.

### **Gaining insights into the situation of staff working at home**

Our conversations with the leaders confirmed that it is very important to understand the experiences of individual workers at home, not only to ensure they are fulfilling their roles and tasks, but also to make sure they are safe and well. Having conversations with staff to understand their needs, supervision and professional development requirements is important and may be forgotten when staff are working from home. How to do all this when staff are working from home can also be difficult in some cases. Asking some questions may be a starting point to help you to assess the situation and determine what is required. **We suggest you ask your staff working from home:**

1. How are they finding working from home? What's being good and what's been difficult?
2. What are they enjoying about working from home?
3. What are they missing from working in the office/field?
4. Do staff have everything they need to do their work effectively and efficiently?
5. Are there specific work tasks that are difficult to carry out when working remotely?
6. What would help staff to work more happily and productively at home?

## How we keep staff connected and safe while working at home

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### Ways to stay connected

Leader's conversations indicated that keeping staff connected and keeping all levels within the organisation in the communication loop is vital for gaining the trust of all, including boards. The ways that the leaders have stayed connected with their staff have included:

- Weekly staff meetings on line
- One-to-one meetings on line with individual staff members to see how people are travelling and to check they are OK.
- Leaders sending regular messages to keep staff informed.
- Small teams checking in daily online.
- Using check-in questions to draw out random conversations, e.g. what's the best thing you've done all week?
- Having lunches and socializing on line with themes to help ease tension.
- Team activities online, e.g. using photos, quizzes etc.
- Team events online, e.g. celebrating aged care worker day.

Embracing the home environment was also welcomed by the leaders. They felt that it was a nice backdrop seeing, e.g. staff member's children and pets in the background, enabling informal conversations to take place.

The Centre for Social Impact suggests that the best conditions for making connections are where connection is a byproduct not a focus of activities. Connection occurs where there is time and space to test out peoples shared characteristics and build trust.

In the workplace this is likely to occur in tasks and activities where people need to allocate tasks negotiate and even debate. Pairing up those who have something to teach, with those that are keen to learn can be fruitful, especially if you:

- Make it fun – laughing, making music, singing
- Mix it up – being online at same time but only occasionally interacting
- Simulate – hybrid workplaces<sup>9</sup>

Other suggestions include helping staff to stay healthy and have a work-life balance. This may include encouraging staff to:

- Take breaks from news stories related to the virus, including social media posts. It can be stressful to hear about the pandemic repeatedly
- Encouraging staff to do simple calming techniques like deep breathing, stretching, and meditation (resources could be provided to direct staff); as well as encouraging staff to have regular exercise, good nutrition, and plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes, e.g. developing a daily work schedule that includes these activities<sup>10</sup>.

The Black Dog Institute suggests that some of the ways that you can support staff during COVID-19, particularly those struggling with stress and other emotions include:

- Maintaining regular catch-ups with your team
- Looking out for signs of struggle
- Setting up regular 1:1 meetings with staff you're concerned about
- Providing support, both in and beyond the workplace

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<sup>9</sup> (Farmer, et al., 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

- Keeping an eye on your own mental health<sup>11</sup>

### *Establishing a remote leadership team*

If you haven't already established a remote leadership team you may want to consider this. While this may be a useful mechanism for planning and direction, the presence of a remote leadership team that stays connected with staff, can enable staff to see the effort being undertaken by leaders and others in the organization; and the emerging issues and achievements. The remote leadership team can thereby help to build trust and confidence among staff. Depending on the size of your organisation individuals within the team can be assigned to find solutions and be key communicators. Who may suit this role will vary<sup>12</sup>.

### *A pandemic plan*

Similarly, developing a pandemic plan will provide guidance on day to day business and as well as impending concerns for your organisation. It will also focus the attention of the CEO, managers and staff on implementing the priorities and in meeting the challenges together. It will help the organization to continue its operations, albeit differently in some areas.

Part of this plan can include developing the capacity to document and 'prioritise the challenges in real time'<sup>13</sup>. This will make the work being carried out transparent to all and assist in assigning individuals to find solutions on different tasks within the plan.

Some of the leaders we have been speaking with have indicated they have such a plan in place. As the pandemic will not be fully under control until a safe and reliable vaccine has been found and circulated; establishment of a remote leadership team and a pandemic plan may still be useful.

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<sup>11</sup> (Black Dog Institute, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> (Murphy, 2020; Our Community Pty Ltd, 2016)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

### *Learning from the emerging challenges: a source of truth*

One method for documenting challenges in real time is to establish a 'source of truth' using a handbook, newsletter or even a blog. It may be as simple as a spreadsheet. It will need to be accessible by all, perhaps in a team room, e.g. on SLACK, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or located on a common drive within your IT system. It will need to be updated. Its strength is to keep everyone in the communication loop in an efficient and consistent way; again, this activity can help to build trust. Through this activity leaders are responsible for '...embracing iteration of implementing new systems. They need to be open about what is and is not working and messaging this to all employees through the 'source of truth'<sup>14</sup>.

Whichever way your organisation decides to provide a transparent communication system, the leadership team should not hold back from implementing it and keeping it current.

### **Managing staff needs**

The leaders we spoke with identified the following as important in taking care of staff to make sure they can do their best work:

- Directing staff to the Employment Assistance Program (EAP) to support their mental health and wellbeing.
- Identifying staff professional needs in relation to working remotely.
- Ensuring staff are able to contribute to information flows across the organisation.
- Managing tensions between different groups of staff, e.g. those on Jobkeeper, those working online and those working on site.

And it shouldn't be underestimated; this all takes time, effort and considerable emotional engagement for all involved.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## What staff working arrangements might look like in the emerging future and how we encourage and develop new ways

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Having experienced the severe lockdown in Victoria, there is considerable discussion about 'the new normal' and an acceptance that despite the health, social and economic devastation of the pandemic both in Australia and overseas, some positives did emerge. It seems that for many people the office they will return to will not be the same as the office they occupied in the past.

### The hybrid office

There is talk of the 'hybrid office' now. This is a place where people can experience their work through both face-to-face contact and virtually on their computers and other devices. It's a scenario that gives rise to great flexibility in self-organising one's work, e.g. scheduling face-to-face meeting when traffic is low and working from home either side of such meetings. Many organisations are now reviewing whether they need all that office space! They are reconsidering whether they should continue to pay rent for office space or use these funds to support staff to work from home. These practical configurations are being considered alongside our knowledge that people make social connections at work which are both life and work enhancing.

According to the Zoom Video Communications Software company, in one of their recent surveys, over 75% of people surveyed who are working remotely would like to continue to work remotely post CoVID-19, at least occasionally; and 54% would like it to be their primary way of working. While this may be interesting information it should be considered with caution as the contexts, range of activities and workforces of organizations vary. It does however suggest that, if appropriate, it may be useful to survey your staff to find out what the office could look like and how it could operate post COVID-19. Capturing the positive and negative experiences of

staff during the pandemic may help to mitigate the continuation of negative experiences resulting from working remotely and to come up with practices that are fit for your organization and the work you do. This activity may also identify possible costs savings; efficiencies and alternative practices for delivering services.

If you are considering exploring the possibility of a hybrid office you may consider this. During the pandemic we need to keep safe and we may focus on narrowing down a problem so that we can find a solution. But we often fail to notice that in doing so we constrain the solution and make it ordinary. Asking different questions helps slow down the process. When we begin to take in the full range of data available to us we consequently have a significantly wider set of possible options. So for example, **instead of the typical questions that we might ask, it may be useful to ask:**



- **What do I expect not to find? How could I attune to the unexpected?**
- **What might I be discounting or explaining away a little too quickly?**
- **What would happen if I shifted one of my core assumptions on an issue, just as an experiment?**

Considering multiple perspectives opens up our field of vision. Diversity might create more disagreement and short-term conflict, but in an uncertain environment, a more expansive set of solutions is desirable. **We can:**

- **Take the perspective of someone who frustrates or irritates us**
- **Seek out the opinions of people beyond our comfort zone**
- **Listen to what other people have to say<sup>15</sup>.**

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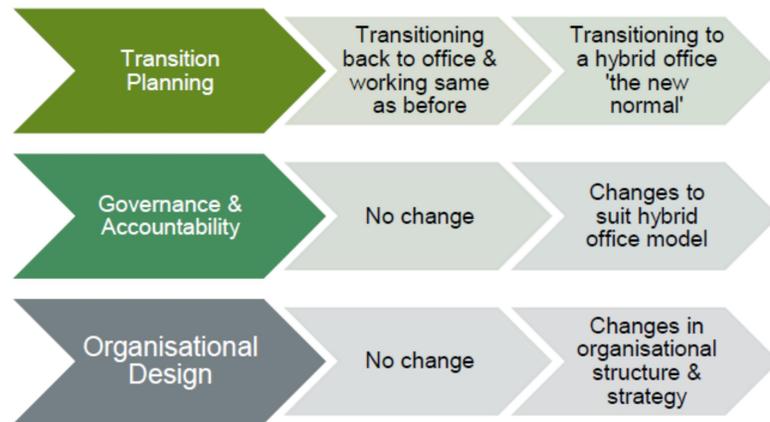
<sup>15</sup> (Achi & Garvey Berger, 2015)

The hybrid office of the future requires people to be technologically competent and set up so they can use available platforms and devices to conduct their work effectively and efficiently from wherever they are working. This transition may require changes in the way leaders and staff interact with each other; and the way they set up their home to ensure an appropriate and equipped working environment. The first step for organisations will be to assess what they want to do. This assessment may include consideration of:

- How people will work, e.g. some leaders told us that 'OH&S was significant at the beginning, especially where working at 'kitchen table', or 'bedroom'.
- How they will be accountable for their performance; what will be key performance indicators? How will staff be monitored to assess if they are meeting their objectives?
- How staff will be connected to work collegiately.
- Government requirements, especially if these are tied to funding conditions. For example, one leader stated: *'Weird to tell them what they must have 'at home' – it's their home, can I tell them they have to have... Where is the regulation giving the right to dictate what someone must do at home '.*

The following diagram may help to think about this with consideration of:

- Development and/or refinement of occupational health and safety policies and procedures.
- Review of workforce engagement and communication.
- Changes in roles and responsibilities.
- Review of mechanisms for continuous quality improvement.
- Re-design of planning and review approaches.
- Review of service development methods.



### Policies and practices

For some organisations, having their staff working from home is disruptive. In these situations leaders need to come up with new possibilities and think creatively about how to make it work well. There are many suggestions about how to manage people working from home, to ensure they are productive, happy and connected. Lots of tips are provided on supporting staff and also ensuring that policies and procedures are adhered to. For some organisations there may be policy and procedure gaps because they have not had staff working from home before. **If this is your situation you probably need to conduct a policy and procedures review to ensure things like occupational health and safety, use of staff own resources, e.g. internet, insurances and so on, are covered.**

### Some things to consider

If you are going to have staff working from home at least for some of their working time, we suggest you start by considering the following:

#### *Letting staff choose their work from home day*

While having a set schedule and knowing when people will be in your office is helpful, there won't be a magical day of the week that works best for everyone on your team. Offering the option to choose a day will make your staff feel valued, boost staff engagement and lead to higher productivity.

### *A productive work space and a healthy work-life balance*

When working from home some staff may find it's easy to sit on the couch in pajamas and work away. While that may be a more comfortable way to work, it doesn't always create the most productive mindset. It may be useful to encourage staff to create a space that is designed to help them get their work done, even if it's as simple as a desk in the living room instead of their couch. It may be important to consider how the organization can provide practical support to people working from home.

### *What do staff need?*

Everyone will be adjusting to working a little differently and unforeseen problems may surface. It's important to know if staff are facing any particular difficulties or discomfort. There are several ways that you can obtain information from your staff, depending on the organization.

### *Educating staff*

Providing resources and information about working effectively and efficiently from home is the latest professional development (PD). While there is now a myriad of YouTube videos, checklist and instruction manuals, at the end of the day you need to find out what is relevant and useful to your organization. This could include a range of topics from appropriate office furniture, time management and use of technology to staying healthy and safe.

### *Enjoying the workplace*

Enjoying the workplace at home is also about having some fun. Creating regular catch up with staff to talk about things not related to work is important. Whereas in the office these catchups occur at birthday lunches, in the staff room and the car park, they now have to be deliberately organized. So set up some regular fun activities with staff, e.g. sharing photos, chats about pets, even playing a board game online.

### *Being accessible and structured*

Maintaining some form of structure even if staff are dispersed between the office, home and in the field, will help to keep people connected and to feel secure. Encouraging staff to apply structure to their work at home, e.g. having regular breaks, is also very important. Most importantly as we have seen people responding differently to the threat of COVID-19 infection and lifestyle restrictions, it is vital that leaders are accessible to their staff. It is therefore important to let your team know that you are available to talk about any concerns and to provide resources, direction and support if they are experiencing difficulties working from home or in response to living through the pandemic.

## Further Information

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To read some more go to:

[https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/csi-covid\\_factsheet\\_loneliness.pdf](https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/csi-covid_factsheet_loneliness.pdf)

<https://www.zenefits.com/workest/promoting-mental-health-in-the-midst-of-coronavirus/>

<https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/news/working-from-home-a-checklist-to-support-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus/>

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LDC Group consults to government and health and community services. This resource is part of a series of initiatives by LDC Group to support community service organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

You can find out how LDC Group can assist your organisation on our website: [www ldc net au](http://www ldc net au) or by contacting us on:

T: 03 9509 6972 | E: [admin@ldc.net.au](mailto:admin@ldc.net.au).