

Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Fly-In-Fly-Out practices

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a swift and profound impact on every corner of the global economy. Disrupted supply chain networks and restricted travel have complicated the operations of all organisations, particularly those with operations in remote locations where a significant portion of the normal workforce is Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO).

Local and central governments across the globe have reacted to slow the spread of COVID-19 by closing international and state borders, and many regions have restricted travel. To address this, some organisations have temporarily relocated their FIFO workforce (sometimes with their families), so they are closer to operational sites, while others have lengthened rosters to minimise handover time and reduce risks introduced by travel. In Perth, a leading miner has introduced the equivalent of a 'road-side breath test' where a small blood sample is taken via a finger prick which is then processed to detect viral-related antibodies in the individual's blood. Once on site, gyms are closed, social events ceased, local travel restricted, and food is pre-served or pre-packaged to further reduce potential transmissions. Meanwhile, offshore oil and gas producers have established hotel camps to isolate incoming employees from infection sources and begin monitoring symptoms prior to mobilisation.

While some restrictions will lift as the situation evolves, travel may remain difficult as many airlines are in distress with lower volumes and significantly reduced flight schedules.

What can your organisation do?

- **Restrict site access.** Move as many people as possible to remote work to reduce transmission risks – you may be surprised how many site-based roles can be done remotely once you have the right digital tools.
- **Establish extended rosters and residential contracts.** Moving to longer rosters and residential contracts reduces the number of handovers and cuts back on travel time, reducing the risk of virus transmission.
- **Establish regular screenings.** Screening all workers as they return for work and regularly when they are on site will enable you to keep your team healthy and reduce transmission risks.
- **Identify how long you anticipate the situation will continue.** If you expect FIFO operations to return to normal once lockdown conditions are relaxed, relocating someone to a temporary residential role may be a good solution for you.



Can your organisation shift from FIFO to residential?

- **Accommodation and services.** Remote towns and sites often do not have enough spare capacity to absorb a major increase in population. Organisations should explore the availability of local housing and services to determine whether a residential workforce could be accommodated.
- **Consolidating your workforce.** Not everyone will want to move from FIFO to residential, so you will need to work out what will happen to those who opt not to move – can they be shifted into an alternative role or will their role become redundant?
- **Unions.** If you are considering any significant changes, it is critical to have open discussions with union delegates as early as possible, as they will be concerned about arriving at a fair and positive outcome for their members.

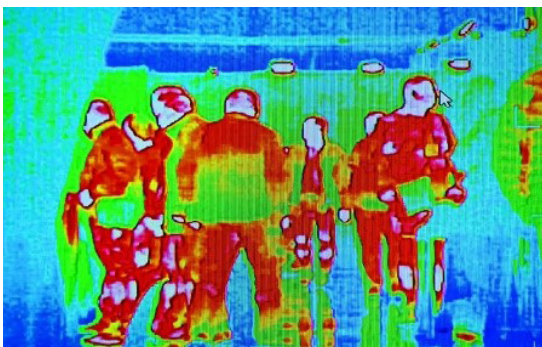
If your organisation shifts to residential contracts, what needs to happen?

- **Revising contracts.** Contracts will need to be updated to reflect changed working conditions. Employees may expect increased compensation if they move to a residential contract or if they are required to live in a remote location.
- **Accommodating families.** Employees who are relocating their families will need a deeper range of support, including family-oriented services like access to schools and childcare. They will also need other family-oriented services like access to schools and childcare.

What other methods or tools can your organisation use to navigate this situation?

- **Think in defined time frames.** When modifying working conditions, start with a defined period to give people clarity – three months is a reasonable starting point, provided there is a common understanding that this may extend if conditions persist.
- **Establish a WAR Room to facilitate problem-solving.** Dedicate a forum for your response team to come together (ideally virtually) to facilitate rapid problem solving, review response readiness and establish a plan to modify rosters and conditions.
- **Evaluate and plan for a range of scenarios.** Develop scenarios to describe the spectrum of possible outcomes, identifying the most and least attractive response option in each scenario. This information should also inform discussions with stakeholders to align on a preferred operational approach.
- **Identify trigger points.** Once you have an agreed response, clear trigger points will help identify when you need to make a decision or modify your approach as the situation develops.

Finally, what tools are there to help screen your workforce?



- **Advanced temperature screening.** Several companies have off-the-shelf thermal imaging and advanced analytics packages that can that can instantly screen your employees as they enter site, giving you an early warning if someone shows signs of elevated temperature.
- **Pre-roster questionnaire.** Establish a questionnaire to help identify anyone that has been overseas, interstate or in contact with a known case before they arrive on site. Simple but effective.
- **Finger prick blood testing.** Adopt a procedure to screen employees' pre-roster for viral anti-bodies as another line of defence against COVID-19. This space is rapidly developing so ensure you are up to date with the latest techniques available to protect your business.

About the authors



Angus Wells has 25 years experience working with capital intensive businesses to improve performance. He has helped turn around mining and oil and gas businesses operating in remote and difficult conditions with FIFO and residential workforces in Australia, NZ, PNG and Indonesia.



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