



Work And Careers Workplace Coronavirus pandemic

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## Sydney employers send staff home as mask mandate kicks in

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Many of Sydney's biggest employers are responding to the NSW government order mandating masks in the office by asking staff to work from home.

Law firm Gilbert-Tobin, NAB and consultancy Accenture were among the major companies that are either requiring or asking Sydney-based staff to work from home for the duration of the extended restrictions.



Workplace expert and psychologist Dr Amy Silver says mask wearing in the office will increase social awkwardness.

Those living in Greater Sydney, the Central Coast, the Blue Mountains and the Wollongong and Shellharbour areas are required to wear a mask in the office and have no more than five visitors to their home from 4pm on Wednesday, after the NSW outbreak grew to 31 local cases.

Many of the staff at Gilbert-Tobin headed home early on Wednesday afternoon before the rules came into force. The law firm imported the protocols from its Melbourne office to Sydney, allowing staff to work from home or the office if they need to.

In the office employees will need to wear a mask except if they are completely alone in an enclosed meeting room. It is the first time the NSW government has mandated masks in all workplaces.



NAB's chief operating officer, Les Matheson, wrote to all 31,000 NAB employees on Wednesday urging them to work remotely if they can. Staff needed on site, at branches or who cannot work from home, will be required to wear masks and social distance.

"We understand that wearing a mask all day at work will be a challenge for some and we encourage those who can work from home to do so," Mr Matheson wrote.

**It's a hammer blow for business but we've been down this path before. Hopefully it's only for a week.**

— Damian Kelly, Business Sydney

Accenture's staff in its Sydney office were also encouraged to head home, or follow the directions of their clients if they are working on their sites.

"Our Accenture offices remain open but for those who can work from home we are encouraging them to do so. For our employees who are based at the client site, we are asking that they adhere to the requirements of their respective clients," said Lisa Crennan, Accenture Australia & New Zealand geographic services lead.

Insurance giant IAG also encouraged staff from the affected local government areas to work from home if they can and anyone attending an office would need to wear a mask indoors.

Nine, publisher of *The Australian Financial Review*, told Sydney staff they were required to wear a mask in the office and is also offering onsite COVID-19 testing for asymptomatic employees.

Business owners were expected to let NSW employees work from home instead of requesting they came into the office where face masks were mandatory, said Damian Kelly of lobby group Business Sydney.

"A lot of business owners are giving staff the option to stay home, whereas previously they were more reliant on getting people to come into the office. So there's certainly a bit of caution about all this."

Mr Kelly added that the new rules were a "hammer blow" for businesses in the state.

"No doubt this is a blow, but it is a blow to the entire community. It's a hammer blow for business but we've been down this path before, we're resilient. Hopefully it's only for a week," he said.

Workplace expert Alec Bashinsky said employees, especially office workers, would likely choose to work from home rather than have to wear a mask for an extended period.

"It'll have a big impact on productivity if you're sitting there for eight hours wearing a mask. You'll have to go outside to take the mask off," said Mr Bashinsky, an Asia Pacific Partner at the Josh Bersin Academy, a HR consultancy.

"Employers will have a tough time keeping people in the office for the duration of the day. So you'll find more and more people will opt to work from home," said Mr Bashinsky, an Asia Pacific Partner at the Josh Bersin Academy, a HR consultancy.



Alec Bashinsky, an Asia Pacific Partner at the Josh Bersin Academy.

### 'Socially awkward'

Workplace expert and psychologist Dr Amy Silver agreed most people would not want to go into work.

"Any of these new restrictions, anything that comes in, brings a sense of change and newness, and newness is a little bit frightening for our brain," Dr Silver said.

Mask wearing would make office life more socially awkward for workers who were already monitoring their behaviour to abide by new physical distancing norms.

"Even handshakes are a bit awkward. Nobody really knows what the other person wants. That is bringing in a level of self-consciousness around the way we carry ourselves," Dr Silver said.

Aaron McEwan, vice-president at Gartner HR, said the situation in Sydney was a reminder for employers that the virus was not going anywhere.

Businesses needed to be prepared for future shutdowns and the reality that employees could be sent back to work remotely shortly after they had returned to the office.

"It's a really strong argument that if the work can be done remotely there's really not a lot of benefit in mandating that employees should come back to offices."

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