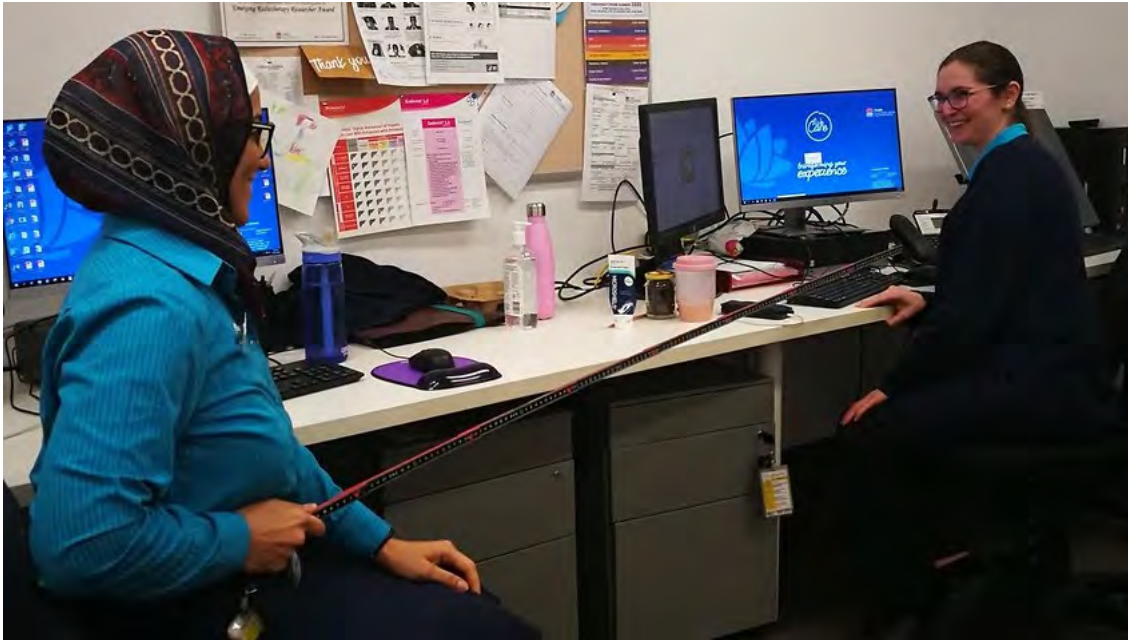


As Australians return to the office, what will socially-distant workplaces look like?



Colleagues at Liverpool Hospital's cancer clinic in NSW get to grips with social distancing. Source: Twitter/[@RaiRobba](#)

Socially-distant workplaces may become 'the new normal' in Australia amid lasting measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Updated 17/05/2020

By Marcus Megalokonomos

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Paroula Thurban is an icon in Australia's Greek community.

With a career spanning more than 50 years, she has been a pioneer in the teaching of traditional Greek dance to many generations in Sydney.

But because she is in her 70s, she has been self-isolating during the coronavirus pandemic, with her daughter Nicole Englezos carrying on her teaching legacy.



Greek dance teacher Paroula Thurban at an event in 2014.

Supplied

Ms Englezos says despite children usually being close together in dance classes, she has managed to successfully adopt social distancing measures in her workplace.

"Greek dancing, you know, is usually danced in a circle, holding hands, but due to the distancing measures we are not allowed to hold hands, but we find a way," she told SBS News.

"We either do it in lines and make sure the kids are the required distance apart. Students have to sanitise their hands before entering the gymnasium and then when exiting."



A traditional dance performance at a Greek festival.
Bourdo Photography

Ms Englezos says getting back to 'normal' has been great for her students.

"They're excited to learn, so our classes have been great," she said.

But her mother has found it difficult not being at work.

Nicole has instead been encouraging her to find other ways to contribute and keep her mind active.

"For now, I'm trying to get her back into the research, she's looking for music and studying the dances and costumes," she said.

How are Australian workplaces set to change?

After months of working from home, many people in Australia will be returning to the office, or their place of work, in the coming weeks.

But Prime Minister Scott Morrison has made it very clear that Australia will get close to the 'old normal', but it won't be quite the same for some time.



Hotdesking is expected to become a thing of the past.

AAP

"Until there is a vaccine, then there isn't the possibility of us getting fully back to normal. But we want to get back to it as close as we possibly can," he said.

Safe Work Australia recommends physical distancing of at least 1.5 metres, and in a given space, there must be four-square metres per person, where possible.



Robba Rai
@RaiRobba

It was a fun exercise today measuring safe distances in the office, thankfully I didn't take anyone's eye out 😊 Taking social distancing measures seriously to keep our high risk patients safe 🙏🙏

[@bogmund](#) [@Nasreen_Kaadan](#) [@TROGfightcancer](#)
[@CancerSPHERE](#)



14 12:32 AM - Mar 25, 2020 · Cancer Clinic Liverpool Hospital

[See Robba Rai's other Tweets](#)

Health and safety experts also say hand sanitiser should be permanently available near lifts and entrance areas, as it is in hospitals.

Interactions with colleagues will change too, as once-normal communication and behaviours may be perceived as impolite or inconsiderate if they fall out of the distancing and hygiene guidelines.

It's also predicted to mean an end for hotdesking.



Safe Work Australia

@safe_work_aus

See our infographic: five things to do in your workplace to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19. safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/5-things-do...



3 8:00 PM - May 14, 2020

[See Safe Work Australia's other Tweets](#)

Organisational psychologist, executive coach and consultant, Rachel Setti said: "we may go back to a more permanent desk working arrangement".

"My hunch is that [shared workspaces] will be re-looked at because we know from a hygiene perspective there are lots of downsides in sharing keyboards and sharing desks."

"But if you combined a review of hotdesking with a review of remote working, and marry those up, you may actually come up with some really good outcomes."

Will employees continue to work from home?

Social media giant Twitter says [it is unlikely to open offices before September](#) and employees will be permitted to work from home permanently.

"Opening offices will be our decision. When and if our employees come back, will be theirs," a Twitter spokesperson said.



AAP

"The past few months have proven we can make that work, so if our employees are in a situation that enables them to work from home and they want to continue to do so forever, we will make that happen."

Google and Facebook also recently extended their work-from-home policies until 2021, while Amazon confirmed its work-from-home policy will remain until at least October this year.

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[Australia's places of worship reopen their doors as coronavirus restrictions ease](#)

But for everyone else, as the government's restrictions ease, it will be up to their individual employer.

Ms Setti said: "Until there is confidence in one way or another that COVID-19 is no longer a significant danger, social distancing is here to stay for the moment, however longer term I think that the most significant change will be attitudes to remote working".

**Sue Stephenson**
@susanstevo

To celebrate the relaxing of [#SocialDistancing](#) rules, my co-workers & I are moving out of the office in my bedroom & into the lounge room.
[#workingfromhome](#) [#COVID19Aus](#) [@UTSFass](#)



30 12:37 AM - May 16, 2020

[See Sue Stephenson's other Tweets](#)

"Most organisations have done an exceptional job of setting their staff up working from home and remotely almost overnight - a strategy that may have taken them five years, it took them 2 weeks."

"I, therefore, think we are more likely to see negotiation around combined office and work-from-home arrangements."

What else might change?

Employers should expect more "sickies" due to a change in attitudes about health, Ms Setti said.

Staff will no longer come into work when they're not feeling well.

"[You won't have] a colleague coming in, coughing and spluttering saying 'I have got a document to submit or a project to finish off so I have to be here'," she said.

"The coronavirus gift has been our overnight access to tools to work from home, so my prediction is that rather than soldier on it's probably going to become more normal and likely for that person to give their boss a call and say 'I'm working from home, I'll log in, I'm available for you, I'm feeling a little bit under the weather but I'm OK'."



Brenden Wood
@BrendenWood

Replying to @BrendenWood

Social distancing is a lot harder on the early morning trains. Lots of tradies catch trains at this time of the day. My take - blue collar workers are still required at their 'office' + white collar workers have more flexible working-location options. [#coronavirus](#)



2:41 PM - Mar 29, 2020 · Homebush Station

[See Brenden Wood's other Tweets](#)

The changes may seem daunting for business leaders but Ms Setti says it provides an opportunity for positive culture change.

"There was a poll in 2017 indicating that only 15 per cent of the world's employees are engaged in their workplace - 85 are not engaged - and this is worldwide, not exclusive to Australia," she said.

[READ MORE](#)



[Coronavirus restrictions are easing, forcing Australia's migrant businesses to adapt](#)

"That really gets me thinking that this is a perfect time for employers to reset and emerge as employers of choice."

"Leaders have such a rare opportunity to shift their culture towards a more engaging environment."

People in Australia must stay at least 1.5 metres away from others. Check your state's restrictions on gathering limits.

Testing for coronavirus is now widely available across Australia. If you are experiencing cold or flu symptoms, arrange a test by calling your doctor or contact the Coronavirus Health Information Hotline on 1800 020 080.

The federal government's coronavirus tracing app COVIDSafe is available for download from your phone's app store.

SBS is committed to informing Australia's diverse communities about the latest COVID-19 developments. News and information is available in 63 languages at [sbs.com.au/coronavirus](https://www.sbs.com.au/coronavirus)

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