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COVID-19: MANAGING EMPLOYEE SAFETY AS AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

While many Australians (and others) are staying home in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, those working in essential services like water and wastewater are out in the field ensuring community needs are met. The way sites operate has changed dramatically in an effort to keep employees safe and ensure business continuity; and while a lot of companies are in uncharted territory as they deal with COVID-19, adaptability and communication have emerged as the best way forward.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, essential service businesses have had to adapt quickly to restrictions and new ways of doing things, while ensuring continuity for customers and that their employees remain safe.

Specialist in water infrastructure, Australian company Interflow, has adapted its operations to ensure it can continue to help solve customers' problems out in the field, while taking the necessary steps to protect its people.

Adrian Smith, Executive Manager, Health Safety and Environment (HSE) at Interflow, explained that the Company was looking at the impacts of COVID-19 globally back in February, and then putting enterprise risk management plans in place. "COVID-19 has created significant changes to the way we work. We have implemented a Business Continuity Plan with five Response Teams to identify and resolve critical issues around workforce protection, supply chain stabilisation, customer engagement, operational lead and lag management, and stress testing financials." Adrian said.

Using similar parameters within its current health and safety strategy, Harm 2 Zero (H2O), Interflow's Response Teams meet twice a week to discuss any issues and actions that need to be taken. The Company's Executive Team has become the nerve centre of its COVID-19 response.



Interflow crew onsite under COVID-19 safety

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EMPLOYEE SAFETY STEPS IN THE FIELD

In action, these additional safety and procedural policies include implementing social distancing, which involves rethinking the way crews work; reinforcing hygiene as a top consideration; providing COVID-19 appropriate level of PPE for workers; ensuring up-to-date signage across all sites; and giving teams the right information so they are across all new Company procedures.

“We are currently developing a second communication pack for workers, with updated rules of engagement, and every week our Managing Director creates a video message to all employees.” Adrian said. “In this current situation, we are classed as essential and the most important thing is having our field teams across the details of what we are doing to manage this crisis.”

Open communication has been key to Interflow’s response, with a focus on using appropriate channels to disseminate updates. The business also ensures that information not only cascades down to all frontline workers, but also any issues from work sites filter back up to management.

An example of the success of this process was seen recently in the ACT, when one of Interflow’s clients visited a site to talk to frontline workers and ask them what Interflow has been doing in response to COVID-19. All workers on site knew exactly what additional safety and procedural policies had been put in place and everyone was able to give the client a consistent message, highlighting that the pandemic response is not just a high-level strategy, but something that has been implemented throughout the business.

With a workforce spanning Australia and New Zealand, Interflow has also been keeping on top of all health and government changes nationally, and in specific regions, to ensure the business remains compliant. The aim is for these new safety procedures is to become routine, as the impact of COVID-19 is likely to be felt for at least the next few months.

“Our clients see us as a valuable business partner, as an essential function to assist with their continuity. We are here to solve our customers’ problems, we are able to adapt, and our response to COVID-19 has allowed us to connect as one team quickly and efficiently.” Smith said.

Interflow will also be conducting a post-implementation review once operations return back to normal. Its response so far has allowed the Company to capture key information, what worked, what did not, which will provide vital lessons for the future. Website: www.interflow.com.au



Adrian Smith.

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