

SMOKE FREE POLICY

It used to be that people could smoke just about wherever they liked, but times have changed. Now that it is known that passive smoking is dangerous, people are looking at ways they can be protected from the health risks of being around smoking. Many companies and organisations have decided to 'go smokefree', by introducing a policy of no-smoking at work.

A smokefree policy recognises that a smoky environment is dangerous to the health of both smokers and non-smokers, and outlines a plan for removing this health risk from the environment. This TAP unit looks at why smokefree policies are being introduced, and how to plan a smokefree policy.

A safe place to work - a legal right

The law states that Australian workplaces must be safe for the people who work in them and visit them. The responsibility rests with employers, who must provide a safe working environment for their staff, and with employees, who should not do anything to endanger the health of their fellow workers.¹

Australian courts have made clear decisions that passive smoking is dangerous to health. In February 1991, the Federal Court of Australia reviewed the evidence on passive smoking and ruled that it is a cause of lung cancer, asthma attacks and respiratory diseases.² Therefore if workplaces do not go smokefree, they run the risk of being taken to court. If it can be shown that someone has become sick due to being exposed to passive smoking in that particular work environment, the employer may be sued.³

In May 1992, a NSW District Court jury awarded a woman \$85,000 damages for injuries received through passive smoking at work. Although there had been a smoking ban since 1986, and restrictions on smoking since December 1983, the jury found that Liesel Scholem's employer was at fault in not protecting her from other people's cigarette smoke. Mrs Scholem claimed that her asthma had been made worse, and she had been diagnosed as having emphysema after her 12 years of working there.⁴

Even before these judgements, a number of workers' compensation cases concerning passive smoking had come before Australian courts (although most have been settled out of court). The workers had experienced problems like irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, allergy, headache, nausea, breathing problems and lung cancer due to passive smoking.⁵

Now that it is known passive smoking is dangerous to health, more and more workplaces are adopting policies about smoking at work. Some have banned smoking from the workplace completely, while others have moved towards partial bans, that only allow people to smoke in certain places specially set aside.

Recent surveys in Victoria⁶ and New South Wales⁷ show that the majority of top private companies in these states have introduced either partial or complete smokefree policies. In Victoria in 1991, 85% of the top 116 companies surveyed had either total or partial smokefree policies.⁶

And other considerations

Concern about having legal problems if their workplace is unsafe is one reason why companies and organisations might introduce a smokefree policy. Going smokefree has other benefits as well, including:⁸

- * Fewer people taking sick leave from smoking and passive smoking-caused illness
- * Increased productivity
- * Reduced cleaning and maintenance costs (carpets, furnishings, machinery affected by smoke)
- * Healthy, progressive image
- * Reduced fire risk
- * Possibly reduced insurance costs

A smokefree policy has advantages for employees too. They will have:

- * Healthier, cleaner and safer working environment
- * Reduction or removal of tension between smokers and non-smokers
- * Raised awareness of health risks of smoking
- * Possible assistance for smokers to quit

People like to be smokefree

A majority of Australians prefer to be in a smokefree environment.^{9,10} The following survey results were published in The Age newspaper in 1991.¹¹ The survey shows that most people prefer a smokefree workplace, and that a majority would also like hotel bars to be smokeless. Although most people will let others smoke in their home, they believe that smokers should ask permission first.

Table 1: Public opinion on where smoking should be allowed and smoking behaviour: Saulwick Age Poll

	Total	Men	Women	Blue collar	White collar	Melbourne	Sydney
Should smoking be allowed in:							
Workplaces?							
Yes	19	19	19	25	15	22	18
No	77	76	78	71	81	72	79
Don't Know	4	5	3	4	4	6	4
Hotel bars?							
Yes	56	56	57	66	56	64	50
No	38	41	37	30	39	31	43
Don't know	5	4	6	3	5	5	6
Enclosed shopping centres?							
Yes	22	24	21	23	25	40	21
No	75	75	76	75	72	56	76
Don't know	3	2	2	2	3	1	3
Should smokers ask permission to smoke?							
Yes	90	90	92	89	91	92	88
No	6	7	6	8	6	4	9
Don't know	3	3	2	3	2	4	4
Do you allow people to smoke in your home?							
Yes	64	62	67	69	63	71	65
No	35	38	33	31	37	28	36
Don't know	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Do you smoke?							
Yes	26	26	26	34	25	24	17
No	73	73	74	66	75	76	82
Don't know	1	1	0	1	0	0	1

All figures are percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

About the poll

Date: 14 & 15 August 1991
 Sample: 1000 voters
 Coverage: National
 Method: Telephone

Question: As you may know, smoking has been banned in certain places, but not in others.

Do you think that people should be allowed to smoke or should not be allowed to smoke in workplaces? In hotel bars? In enclosed shopping centres?

Do you think that smokers should or should not ask for permission to smoke if they are in a room with other people?

Do you personally allow people to smoke in your home?

Do you smoke?

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Source: Saulwick Age Poll, The Age¹⁰

Planning a smokefree policy

Companies and organisations of all types and sizes are introducing a smokefree working environment. In organisations where there is little disagreement about introducing a policy, the change may be made simply; other organisations may need more complicated policies and to introduce changes in several stages.

A policy is most likely to be successful if the people who will be affected by the changes are involved in the planning of the policy. Union officials, occupational health and safety officers, workers and management all need to understand the issues involved, and to be consulted about the best way to introduce change.

Introducing a policy generally requires a workplace to move through the following stages:¹

1. Discuss why 'smokefree is better'

Inform all levels in the work force about the health, legal and economic aspects of smoking in the workplace.

2. Involve a range of workers - plan to go smokefree

Write the policy with workers from all levels of the workplace. The policy will cover the extent of smoking restrictions, the phase-in period, the education and consultation process, and what support and assistance for smokers will be provided. It will also outline how deal with people who do not follow the new rules.

3. Let everyone know about the policy - in advance

Educate and inform about the policy, using a variety of ways to suit the different groups within the worker's organisation.

4. Help workers prepare for a smokefree workplace

Support and assist smokers to adjust to the policy by: allowing phase-in periods and adjustment breaks; providing contact people to discuss problems with and advice on how to cope without cigarettes; providing access to quit information and quit courses if desired and providing incentives for those who want to quit.

5. Stick to the policy

Make sure that people comply with the policy. Smokefree policies are no different to any other occupational health and safety policy.

6. Check the policy - over time

Review the policy to make sure that it is working well and achieving its aims, and change it if necessary.

When introducing a policy, it is important to remind people that smoking is being restricted because it is a health and safety issue for workers. Some smokers may feel that it is their right to smoke whenever they want to, and that a smokefree policy discriminates against them. A workplace policy allows everyone to have a safer working environment, but leaves smokers free to choose to smoke away from the workplace.

Relaxing without smoke

The law makes it clear that the workplace should be safe but what about places where we go to relax, like pubs or restaurants? Since waiters and bar attendants work in pubs and restaurants, it could be argued that these kinds of places should be smokefree, for the safety of the people who work there. However most restaurants and pubs do not cater for those who prefer to be smokefree, even though surveys show that many people would like to be able to go out and enjoy themselves without having to breathe in smoke as well.^{10,11,12,13,14}

A policy for schools?

Like any other company, organisation or community group, schools can adopt a smokefree policy. Schools are workplaces for teachers and other staff, who are entitled to a safe workplace. Schools also have a duty to provide students with a safe and healthy educational environment, as well as giving them information about important health issues such as smoking.

Planning a policy for schools, as with any other smokefree policy, involves going through many stages (these are listed in the section called 'Planning a smokefree policy' on page five). A smokefree policy is equally important for teachers, staff and students. Issues related to smoking can be included in all areas of the school program. Going smokefree is a healthy choice that shows how good public health policy can be put into action.¹⁵

Activities - Smokefree Policies

1. Design smokefree posters, badges, flags or t-shirts for display and distribution around your school.
2. Survey two different workplaces to find out what their policy is on smoking. Some examples of workplaces are hospitals, retail shops, banks, factories and railway stations. Prepare a report that discusses similarities and differences between the two places. What problems exist with people smoking at work and how are these being dealt with?
3. Examine your school's policy on smoking. What differences are there between smokefree workplace and smokefree school policies? Consider how the different people involved in the school can support a smokefree school environment. What positive action can you and your classmates take to support the school policy?
4. Develop a smokefree policy for a workplace of your choice. (This may be your school - remember instead of 'workers', think of 'students, teachers and visitors'. In your policy outline:
 - * The kinds of changes that need to be made, how long it will take to implement the plan, what sort of activities or information will be needed to put the policy into place
 - * How the workers will be involved
 - * What benefits there will be for both employers and employees
 - * What use there would be of outside agencies such as the community health centre, occupational health and safety representatives, the Quit Campaign, union representatives or others.
5. Debate the issue:

'If it's legal to smoke, it should be legal to smoke anywhere'

OR

'Smoking should only take place among consenting adults in private'.

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