

IT's been a torrid year for SA businesses, with many suffering the effects of bushfires in the Adelaide Hills and on Kangaroo Island, then, mere weeks later, the COVID-19 epidemic arrived, turning many a business plan on its head. But businesses did adapt, and organisations such as Beyond Blue and state and federal government agencies swung into action. Here's some of their advice

CE: Kris, you've been in business for many years ... small to medium businesses are always full of ups and downs, but how would you rate 2020 in terms of the challenges you've had to face?

KL: Completely off the radar, off the charts. The bushfires came so incredibly close to our factory, literally, a couple of metres away from our back door and our gas tank farm. So it, basically, melted our electrical cabling that was connected to our compressors. So we had probably about four days where several of our coolrooms were completely shut off. So by the time we were able to get back into the factory, of course, we were to find that probably over 60 per cent of what we had in our coolrooms had to be put to waste, which was obviously a real pity. But on the flip side, we still had a factory and it was quite incredible, really, for me to have all my staff come back and everybody was actually really happy just to have a job. I just drew so much energy from the fact that nobody was hurt and we still have a factory. Yes, we've had to throw out so much stock, but, wow, let's look at the positive side of it. So then we had some pretty empty coolrooms, so we just rallied together and, I guess, drew energy from each other and just thought, well, we've just got to keep going, and so we just started making again, furiously – fast and furious, let's get going and let's make again and let's stock up those coolrooms. And we did. And commended everybody on how wonderful that went and there we were with our coolrooms brimming. And then there was COVID. Not in my wildest dreams, would I have thought that restaurants and cafes would have been ordered to be closed. Probably 60 – 70 per cent of my business is with chefs and restaurants, so, yeah, we've gone from the frying pan into the fire, if you like.

CE: You must have thrown your hands in the air at the time and thought, what next?
KL: Honestly, when I heard the COVID situation – I've been in business for over 20 years, and I've never ever had distributors email and say 'cancel that order', and it just kept coming through. And I just panicked. I thought 'this isn't going to be good. What am I going to do? I've got coolrooms full of cheese, I've got staff and I've got milk turning up'; that was the other issue that I had to deal with. So my initial reaction was to panic, and I had to go away and I really had to stop and think about the ripple effect of shutting everything down, we can't take any more milk. Sorry staff, you haven't got work. And, I guess, I just thought, no,

come on, Kris, just get on with it. You've just got to make it work. And so we ended up just saying that we would sell all of the food service stock online, so we quickly went online and tried to update what was there. I said let's cut our margin and sell to the broader community. And, honestly, it was just taken up so well. And, I guess, in many respects, I cut my margin, but I didn't waste anything, and it still kept the cogs turning, if you like. And I thought that it was probably a great way for us to be able to manage a situation that was out of our control.

CE: There's the saying that it's lonely at the top – you're the boss, you've got the responsibility for everyone. Who do you turn to in times like this when there's adversity that's out of your control?

KL: There's so much merit in collaborating. And that was one of the things that I decided to do. One of the main reasons is I don't really like doing things alone. It's nice to have company and it's quite strategic too, in a business sense, because every time I talk about something – that's my crowd of people that understands what I'm doing, but as soon as I start collaborating I'm actually reaching out to a whole bunch of other people that my collaborator perhaps has contact with. So it's also, I think, from an emotional point of view, a wonderful thing to be able to experience, because you realise then that you're not the only one, that there's others that are in the same position as you, and to be able to share that, I think, is a really important thing, emotionally.

CE: Greg, what sort of feedback do you get with business owners about pressures that they face?

GJ: Running a small business can be really challenging, even at the best of times, even when we're not in the midst of a pandemic, we hear from the small business community about some of the challenges that they do face and they are things like really long working hours, social isolation, customer demands, cash flow issues, responsibility for the staff, not only for managing staff, but that feeling of responsibility for keeping them employed. And a big one is work/life balance. So many small business owners feel like this is a 24/7 job, and people have their houses on the line. So that weight of responsibility and the conflicting demands between your work and your home life can be really challenging. Look, the other thing that we know is small business owners, they can be really focused on running their business, it's their passion. And so

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Starting a small business back up is much harder than shutting it down, so what are the next steps for employers wanting to get back to work?
Business Editor Cameron England asks Glenn Farrell of SafeWork SA, Kris Lloyd of Woodside Cheese and Greg Jennings of Beyond Blue for their expert opinions



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overly tend to become focused on their business, on their staff, on their customers, on keeping those doors open. So we know that sometimes they can be a bit reluctant to ask for help. All those pressures can add up, particularly when things are tough or aren't going well. And they can start to impact on your mental health. I'll use sole traders as an example – so a sole trader, running their own business – during the day, if they're a baker, baking the bread, maybe searching for

erated. In COVID times we're hearing reports of some different issues – things like loneliness, family violence, work anxiety, financial pressures, all of these things tend to add up.

CE: So where should a business owner turn? The Beyond Blue website would be an obvious place to start.

GJ: One thing I want to make really clear is that, actually, half of all Australians, at some point in their life, will experience a mental health issue. So

port service. We've recently set up, with support from federal government, a specific coronavirus mental wellbeing support service. That's available on 1800 512 348, or at coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au. That would be my recommended first starting point for anyone who's experiencing any sort of distress, stress, anxiety, any concern that you might have.

CE: Kris, you launched a brand called Spilt Milk this year. Has having a sense of humour or being adaptable in the face of these things helped you get through?
KL: I guess it was a bit of a play on words, but I honestly said to the cheesemakers, we've got the choice; we can either tell our milk suppliers to go away and the consequences of that would have been quite devastating. So I literally said to them, 'okay, guys, there's no point in crying over spilt milk, let's just get on with it, go and make a new cheese'. And it was, basically, as simple as that. We've collaborated with Sparkke – they had a vintage cider that was on tap, and there were no taps running, so that cider was going to go down the drain and our milk – we had no purpose to continue making the fresh cheeses that that milk was assigned for, because the cafes were shut. So we repurposed two different items and brought them together to create something that I think has put a lot of smiles on peo-

ple's faces and tastes bloody good.

CE: Glenn, What are an employers' obligations around providing a safe workplace from a mental health perspective?

GF: Under the Work Health and Safety legislation there are obligations on employers, but also self-employed people. So that any risk to any person relating to health or safety they have to eliminate. Now quite often you can't eliminate risks all together, so the next step is then to minimise, as far as reasonably practicable. So health is actually defined as both physical and psychological health in the Work Health and Safety Act. So it's probably something that again is quite often overlooked, but here at SafeWork SA we're doing our hardest to try and educate businesses and getting lots of resources on our website to help businesses understand where they can get help.

CE: In terms of regulations around safety, they are changing rapidly, where should businesses go for the most up-to-date advice?

GF: What I would suggest, because quite often we hear information coming through via the media, the news, and quite often that's at a commonwealth level. So the first point of call would be the South Australian government website, which is sa.gov.au. Now, this I would say is the starting point,

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new clients, new cafes to get their bread into. Then chasing invoices and doing the books at night. They're long days. They're challenging days. And we actually commissioned some research a couple of years back, about the mental health impacts for small business owners. What we found was small business owners reported higher levels of psychological distress than medium to large business owners, and particularly the sole traders. So over a third – 36 per cent of sole traders reported high levels of psychological distress. Right now, in COVID times, some of these issues are exac-

it is completely natural. Everyone's mental health exists on a continuum. From a green end where you're positive and functioning and you have really good coping mechanisms to deal with day-to-day life, and the pressures that you'll face. Through to the middle – the orange, where you might be at risk of developing a mental health issue, through to the red end, where you might be experiencing severe symptoms or conditions. Over the past couple of months we have seen an increase in demand for our support service. So, around a 30 to 40 per cent increase in calls to the Beyond Blue sup-



It outlines all the decisions and declarations that have been made, that are specific to this state. So we have a state co-ordinator, Commissioner, Grant Stevens; he makes the decisions for this state based on expert advice. Now, those decisions become enforceable by the police and other authorised officers. So depending on what industry you're in, have a look at that information to see if there's any specific directions or decisions that have been made for your sector. From there I would then go to SafeWork SA's website. On

our website there's specific information around the workplace, and there's links then to industry guidance. We've got something like, I think, 23 different industry sectors that are listed, and all the health and safety regulators around the country have been working very closely with unions and their business associations in order to provide this really practical advice for specific industry sectors.
CE: Are there challenges around bringing staff and also their customers back?
GF: Absolutely, there's going

to be challenges and I think these will differ depending on the industry. The advice is to have a very considered plan for returning your workers back to the workplace. The guidance that's available will assist in identifying what needs to be considered. I think strong communication is extremely key with your workforce so, consultation or just talking with your staff to understand what the needs are, what their concerns might be. Ultimately, businesses need to get back as swiftly as possible but very carefully in a planned ap-

proach. There's going to be changes to how people may be expected to work. Obviously, communication signage around a workplace. You start to look around your workplace, identify how you can accommodate your workforce back, look to see where all those areas are where there's high contact points or interactions not with just each other but maybe with clients and patrons. Obviously, there's certain public activities that are required to fill out a COVIDSafe plan, so, that again is a direction that's come from SA

Government. That plan will also go through all those steps, what need to apply for certain public activities.

CE: How can businesses manage their social distancing obligations?

GF: There's lots of information going out there. We try and tailor that advice and put it into practical terms wherever we can. So, for example, lifts, there's not many lifts in South Australia that are greater than four square metres, so, I think somebody did some calculations to say if we need to get all our workers back into the office environment it might take till 2pm in the afternoon if we were to apply the social distancing measures to a lift. So, we've added more guidance material for businesses in relation to lifts for example. Trying to take a commonsense approach to how we enforce the work health and safety legislation through this period. We understand it's incredibly challenging but certainly any workplace can start to measure out the square metreage of their work environment and start to understand how they can start to rearrange. Encourage video conferencing and the likes. There's lots of posters and signage that you can download off these websites to put around the workplace and even create your own.

CE: Kris, you've always been a very strong advocate for buying South Australian produce. I'm wondering what can a consumer do, is it a time to take even more care to buy local?

KL: Absolutely, I am an advocate for buying local, for buying South Australian, but at the same time I do want to make a point that I do understand how important exports and imports are for an economy, but I do encourage people to have a look at what they are putting in their shopping trolley. There's a whole bunch of stuff that I think that we are really so very, very, lucky to have here in South Australia. We shouldn't take it for granted. Supporting local producers is so incredibly important. Especially those that are producing a fresh product because it's that that is going to go to waste.

CE: Greg, do employees also need to keep an eye on their anxiety or stress levels and where would they turn for resources?

GJ: This pandemic has changed every single business and the nature of work for every single employee and, so, whether you've been working from home, whether you're a frontline worker or whether you're going to enter a new job following the pandemic the nature of work is going to be different for everyone and one of the probably the most common conversations we're having at the moment is how do we support out staff to get back to the workplace. I certainly think that one of the main things people are grappling with is this health anxiety. So, fears that staff members are having about coming back to work and contracting COVID-19 and this is where we see how physical health and mental health are inextricably linked. My advice to businesses is to really start to reflect on what some of those stresses that staff might be facing are. I don't think there's any such thing as over communication right now. Talk to your staff, let them know what you're doing. Let your staff know what you're putting in place to keep them safe and well at work. I think the other main point I'd say is start to think about workplace flexibility.

CE: And I note with your coronavirus mental wellbeing support service there are actually counsellors available to talk to pretty much all the time.

GJ: We have both a website which has fantastic information, we have trained mental health professionals available 24 hours a day seven days a week to talk to people who might have any concerns through this pandemic, so, that option is absolutely always there and I would encourage anyone who's not feeling the best to put up your hand, ask for help, call Beyond Blue, call our coronavirus mental health wellbeing support service.

CE: And Glenn, how often would you suggest a business owner check on new rules and regulations?

GF: I would say every couple of days I'd still be checking in. There's some great apps that you can download which are linked to the government website and they can give you alerts when there's new information.

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