

May 18, 2020

10 Steps to a Return-to-Work Preparedness Plan

Across the country, states are easing coronavirus-related restrictions, and now hosts of new workplace issues are emerging – along with the over-arching question of what the work environment will look like as businesses strive to protect the health of employees and customers. For several weeks, non-essential businesses and their employees have ridden out the “stay at home” mandates, but the next phase may not be so temporary. The path forward is uncharted and made even more challenging as the reopening guidance, which varies by state, evolves almost daily. Businesses need a return-to-work plan.

While many organizations have successfully equipped employees to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous others are unable to conduct business in a virtual atmosphere. They cannot provide their products or services through a remote work model. And to make matters worse, the economic crash has resulted in a devastating loss of customers.

Adapt to Reach “New Normal”

Edging back into a functioning physical work environment may feel like walking a tightrope: relying on a confidence that feels threatened; advancing with cautious, considered moves; and finding and maintaining a center of gravity because organizations are vulnerable to the unexpected.

The overwhelming considerations business face to protect the health of their employees and customers are strategic and tactical:

- Leadership challenges
- Re-engaging a potentially fragile workforce
- Modifying workplace practices and the work environment to safeguard employees, customers and vendors

Now is a good time to borrow and adapt strategies from the manufacturing industry’s playbook, where safety in the workplace has been front and center since the Occupational Health & Safety Administration (OSHA) was established in 1971.

With so much to consider, it’s important to take a structured approach to prepare a return to a business as (nowhere near) usual environment. Social distancing, virtual meetings, protective equipment and the need to avoid travel must be incorporated in the workplace.

Re-engaging employees is crucial: they need to feel motivated, valued and productive. But first things first: one of the basic needs that humans share is a need for safety and security. It’s unlikely that employees will feel motivated, valued and productive if they don’t feel safe. Now is the time to manage and mitigate the risk.

The best approach is a measured one, customized to accommodate the varying levels of health risk being faced and implementing practices that achieve a balance between acceptable levels of business performance and acceptable levels of relative risk.

Return-to-Work Plan: 10 Steps

It’s time to take action. Beyond requirements at the state level, every organization should have a preparedness plan based on an assessment of physical and operational risks *specific to their organization* – and in many cases, the plan will need to be customized to specific types of employees.

1. **Create a committee of key stakeholders** to ensure that there will be dedicated focus to implementing and managing a safe space and safe practices. In addition to a committee head, include employees from all functional areas of the organization: operations/production, administration, and line staff.
2. **Identify external technical resources** to assist with technical issues and risk management. In small organizations, or in organizations where staff is at capacity, engage third-party resources who can help. These could include human resources consultants, safety consultants, and legal experts.
3. **Develop and document a communication plan** which focuses on educating the workforce and regularly reporting results and critical issues. Consider the “Stop Start Continue” approach:
 - What do we need to start doing immediately?
 - What do we need to stop doing?
 - What current practices will continue to work well and how can we sustain them?

This will be an iterative process, and its value hinges upon monitoring, reporting, learning from near misses and being agile enough to recalibrate as needed.

4. **Understand the legal requirements** specific to employment law, and be aware of what may not be *required* but may work well in your organization.
5. **Assess the infrastructure** to make sure that communications and technology platforms will meet increased demands.
6. **Reconfigure workspaces or practices** to keep employees at a safe physical distance from each other. If you have an open workspace, it may be difficult to keep employees six feet apart. Cubicle walls of an appropriate height can solve this problem. Evaluate operational ways of reducing the likelihood of exposure: staggering work shifts, downsizing operations to allow for appropriate social distancing, etc.
7. **Identify potential sources of COVID-19** that employees may be exposed to through the nature of their work and also the current risk factors in the local community. The plan should clearly address your approach to minimizing the risk.
8. **Determine the risk that travelers** from other cities, states or countries have on your employees.
9. **Implement precautions** for employees with individual risk factors due to age, chronic medical conditions or other health issues that place them at risk; as well as for employees who have immediate family members who are at risk.
10. **Establish strategies for conducting business with a reduced workforce** due to staffing cuts and/or unexpected absenteeism (cross-training and skill development, leveraging digital learning where possible).

Assess Coronavirus Risk

An employer may have varying levels of risk to the novel coronavirus, based upon different types of jobs performed, geographic locations and the current physical work environment. Lower levels of coronavirus risk include jobs that have minimal occupational contact with other workers or the general public.

Jobs in the medium health risk category typically require frequent and/or close contact with people who *may have been* infected but are not known or suspected patients. This could include frequent contact with the general public and/or frequent contact with travelers.

Jobs with high or very high potential for Coronavirus exposure include those delivering general healthcare, medical or mortuary services, and those performing specific types of medical and lab procedures.

Note that each state where you have business locations may have differing requirements. The matrix below illustrates a high-level overview of considerations applicable to all organizations, the potential health risk by job setting; and outlines important factors to consider before resuming operations.

| Job setting | General Risk Level | Administrative | Workplace Practices | Workplace Environment |
|--|--------------------|--|---|--|
| Considerations | | | | |
| All | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document policies for reducing risk of exposure Implement a communications plan Train employees on new practices Minimize contact among workers <i>(remote working where practical, virtual meeting, restricted travel)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide hand sanitizers, tissues, no-touch trash bins; supplies for disinfecting workspaces Post hand washing signs and instructions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve ventilation Install high efficiency air filters Ensure work environment is cleaned and sanitized |
| Specific Considerations | | | | |
| Healthcare/Medical | Very High to High | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance monitoring of employees Job-specific training Make counseling available | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PPE appropriate for the job (<i>gloves, gown, shield, mask respirator</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialized ventilation Isolation rooms where needed |
| Community Setting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> general public schools high density work places | Medium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate availability of medical screening Keep customers and vendors informed of safety practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PPE appropriate to the risk level and job setting (<i>mask, gloves</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical barriers where appropriate <i>(drive through service for customers; shields/sneeze guards)</i> |
| Production Environment | Medium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider staggering shifts Modify staffing levels to maintain safe distancing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PPE appropriate to the risk level and job setting Where appropriate, limit customers and the public's access to the worksite | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical barriers where appropriate |

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| Field Service (non-medical, non-community setting) | Medium to Low | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep customers and vendors informed of safety practices Determine if work can be performed during times where less interpersonal contact is likely | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a face mask if required Continue to use PPE that would normally be used for the job | |
| Sales (outside/field sales) | Medium to Low | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work remotely when possible Conduct virtual meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a face mask if required | |
| Office | Low | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep customers and vendors informed of safety practices Ensure workspaces allow for appropriate distancing Continue to allow staff to work remotely when feasible Allow scheduling of hours that will reduce number of employees on site | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a face mask if required Where appropriate, limit customers and the public's access to the worksite | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Install physical barriers (cubicle walls) where appropriate distancing is not possible. |

Guide Employees through Change

These are monumental changes that pose logistical, financial, operational and cultural challenges. They require the formation – and consistent reinforcement – of different approaches and new habits and behaviors. Leadership and communication are more critical now than before the COVID-19 pandemic, as many employees will feel vulnerable for quite some time.

Making changes to the physical environment and to workplace practices is part of the solution, organizations must also re-engage employees through sustained communication, a willingness by leadership and employees to adapt to these changes, and resources to ensure that employees know that their well-being is the first order of business.

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