

COVID-19: Next Steps for the Workplace

Organizational Questions for Returning to the Office

As States debate when to lift lockdown rules, organizations are left wondering how to safely open their offices and go back to work. In this array of unprecedented challenges, begin by accepting your organization is not going back to the old “normal.” When thinking about the steps your organizations should take, remember there is no “one size fits all” approach. Here are some important questions to consider so that your team, and your workplace, is ready:

EMPLOYEE ATTENDANCE:

- **Number of Employees on Site:** Will you restrict the number of employees on site? Stagger shifts?
- **Teleworking:** Will you continue to promote working from home and tele-working? Do your employees have the hardware and software and training they need to do so?
- **Productivity and Client Service:** How will your solution affect your productivity? Client service?
- **Accommodations:** What if your office is open but daycares, camps and schools remain closed? Will you make special accommodations for members of vulnerable populations (elderly, individuals with underlying health conditions or a compromised immune systems)?
- **Entry Screening:** How will you screen employees for entry into the workplace (questionnaire, temperature check on entry, etc.)?
- **Prepare for Absenteeism:** How will your organization operate if COVID-19 related absenteeism spikes? What are your essential operations and functions and have you done enough cross-training to ensure these functions will continue?
- **Company Policies:** Are your company’s attendance and PTO policies flexible enough to accommodate the different possible needs of employees?

OFFICE WORKSPACE AND COMMON AREAS:

- **Common Areas:** Which common areas may need to be shut down because it’s hard to monitor for social distancing? Which commonly-used items (door handles, centrally-located copiers, faxes) will require multiple sanitized cleanings throughout the day? Who will do that? Will you need an attendant at vending areas, kitchens or bathrooms?
- **Social Distancing Workspace:** Can you swap seating or restructure your floorplan/desk or cubicle layout to promote social distancing? Can you put up sneeze guard panels? Install social distancing decals on the floors of any shared spaces in the workplace?
- **Teleworking:** Is your organization going to promote tele-working (full-time, part-time, blended)? Are your employees set up to do it successfully? What management training/guidelines need to be established?
- **Mail & Packages:** How will you handle incoming deliveries? Will you require curbside delivery/pickup?
- **Sanitizing Supplies:** Plan to place disinfectant hand gel and antibacterial wipes throughout the office, including by copiers, scanners and all places people share. Provide no-contact trash receptacles for waste. Install high-efficiency air filters and/or increase ventilation rates if possible.

EMPLOYEE BEHAVIORS:

- **Promote Healthy Hygiene Practices:** Plan on posting social distancing and healthy hygiene practices reminders throughout the workplace. Be sure to comply with any State/local posting requirements.
- **Private Offices:** Employees with their own offices should be encouraged to stay in their offices as much as possible.
- **Video conferencing:** Encourage video conferencing over face-to-face meetings. How will your organization create and share videoconference guidelines? Do you have the right equipment? Is training needed?
- **PPE:** Is PPE (personal protective equipment) required/recommended in your workplace or for specific job duties? If so, are you ready to supply and maintain them? Do you need to prepare a written hazard assessment relating to PPE use? Are you generally encouraging masks or face coverings for your employees? If so, are you supplying them or will you approve employee-brought options?
- **Teleworking Expectations:** If your organization is promoting teleworking, how will you communicate expectations (responsiveness, hours, job responsibilities, etc.)? Do managers need additional training to manage at-home teams? Are your metrics flexible enough to withstand long-term full/partial teleworking? Ensure your metrics look at efficiency, profitability, and client service, and blend that with employees' health and well-being.
- **Healthy Habit Behavior Guide:** Create and distribute guidelines explaining expected employee in-office hygiene such as: frequent handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, staying home if they or a family member is ill or have traveled to a COVID-19 hotspot, reminding employees to regularly surface clean their workstation (phones, keyboards) and to not use each other's equipment, etc.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE:

- **Organizational Culture:** How is your organization supporting its core values, mission and culture in the midst of all this transition? How are you supporting your organization's culture in a full or partial on-line world? What's changing through this pandemic that will affect how business has been done in the past, and what effect is that having on your people and culture?
- **Marketing and Recruiting:** How does your organization need to shift marketing efforts and evaluate recruiting needs and approach over the next year?
- **Client Service:** How you support your clients and the service you extend to them reflects your culture. How will this shift over the next 12 months? How can you connect with your clients in new ways to support them and their businesses during this unsettled time?
- **Corporate Social Responsibility:** How are you encouraging mental wellness among your employees and clients? How are you ensuring both your team and your company are financially secure? How are you finding ways to support your local community and businesses?

BUSINESS TRAVEL

- **Business Travel guidelines and protocols:** Will your organization allow business travel and, if so, what are the parameters and restrictions? How are you communicating this out to the employees? How will your company monitor federal, State and local guidelines for travel?

OFFICE VISITORS

- **Visitor Entry:** Will you allow visitors and, if so, when? For what? Think about how to restrict where they are allowed within your physical location.
- **Visitor Hygiene and Safety Policies:** Will you require visitors to wear masks? Will you take their temperatures? Will you have them fill out an on-line (or paper) COVID-19 questionnaire before being allowed on site? Be sure to post your organization's COVID-19 safety rules in all common areas and meeting spaces where visitors may be (ex: no handshakes, 6 feet distance, masks, etc.)
- **Meetings:** If allowing on-site meetings, how will you restrict meeting size and location? How will you ensure the rooms are sanitized properly? How will you ensure there is a time buffer between scheduled meetings to avoid overlap between two groups and to allow time for cleanings?
- **Reception:** What is proper Receptionist protocol in terms of interaction with guests? How will you provide a barrier that can be easily cleaned and prevent contact?
- **Sanitizing Supplies:** Be sure to provide antibacterial hand gel, disinfectant wipes and tissues in any area that may have visitors.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

- **Taskforce/Committee:** Form a task force or committee responsible for setting organizational policies and procedures.
- **Stay Informed:** Who in the organization is responsible for keeping current on federal, state, and local public health guidance and information regarding COVID-19? Which reputable and reliable sources will your organization follow in terms of recommendations?
- **Communication with Employees:** How will your organization provide employees with education and training on COVID-19 risk factors, infection control, proper protocols and hygiene practices, and your organizations policies and procedures? Will you have them sign that they've participated in the training?

Families First Coronavirus Response Act:

Your COVID-19 Taskforce/Committee or HR provider needs to have a strong understanding of the new parameters and guidelines of the FFCRA when it comes to aspects of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) that pertain to COVID-19, as well as the Emergency Sick Leave program for COVID-19. Who is responsible for understanding those rules and ensuring your organization is in compliance?

WORKPLACE COVID-19 PROCEDURES FOR EXPOSURE:

In addition to general safety practices, your organization needs a clear outbreak response plan if it is discovered that someone, or their family member, is suspected of having or has a confirmed case of COVID-19.

Your COVID-19 Taskforce/Committee should have a plan for both.

- **Identifying potential cases in the workplace:** What are your procedures to identify and isolate individuals who have symptoms/signs of COVID-19? How will you keep their identity confidential? What happens if a close family member of an employee has a suspected case? Develop a risk assessment plan and questionnaire to use. What are your processes for recording and/or reporting instances to OSHA and/or local and State authorities?
- **Quarantine:** If an employee has been exposed to COVID-19, they should be required to self-quarantine for 14 days (recommended by CDC).
- **Contact Tracing:** What are your plans for identifying co-workers or others the affected individual may have come in contact with the infected employee? How will you notify clients, contractors, or employees who may have been infected?

One of the things we are certain of when it comes to COVID-19 is that we still have a lot to learn. So coming back into the office over the next few months will not be like flipping a light switch. For the first time in history, we are going to reintroduce millions of people back into the US workforce in the midst of an infectious disease we are actively trying to suppress.

Your organization's plans need to be flexible, adaptable to ongoing changes and provide the ability to shut back down as needed.



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