



## Preparing for a safe return to work.

Who is returning to work in the post-pandemic COVID-19 era? There is a great divide, and it varies by job function.

Industries that require some sort of manufacturing or production activity have largely gone back to work, after union representatives ensured suitable safety precautions were in place. Providers of essential supplies (groceries, office products) have returned to work with appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Service industries are a mixed bag. Insurance salespeople quickly learned how to replace face-to-face sales calls with conference or video calls, and their customers appreciated the no-contact approach. However, many service workers whose job functions rely on heavy customer interaction (for example, waiters/waitresses) haven't been able to return to work because of state-mandated restrictions. And, some states that allowed workers to return in April or May have since imposed restrictions due to COVID-19 outbreaks.

### **Some employees would like to return to the office.**

Although companies adapted remote work to mitigate the risks to their workforces, many employees would like to return to onsite work. A national online survey of 1,000 U.S. employees reports that 53% would "feel comfortable or very comfortable going back to the office now." However, only 38% of those surveyed would return rather than working remotely.<sup>1</sup>

It may come as no surprise that those who live alone are most interested in returning to onsite work. They want a normal daily routine (42%), as well as face-to-face interaction with colleagues (20%). For other employees, a combination of onsite and remote work would strike the right balance. Forty-two percent said they would be willing to come to the office a few days.<sup>2</sup>

### **Taking precautions for a safe return.**

As the pandemic continues, with its varying infection levels, employees understandably have mixed feelings about safety at work. Deciding whether to follow social distancing, cleaning, and mask practices are very real – and personal – considerations.

Although many businesses haven't yet called back their full workforces, preparations to do so are underway. The simple fact is, a full house in the future may include substantially fewer workers than in the past to accommodate social distancing. Some of those who work remotely will never return to the office on a full-time basis.

Preventing workplace exposures to COVID-19 is the bottom line. Decisions to resume operations must consider the level of disease transmission in the local community and a company's ability to protect its employees and customers. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) suggests that every employer should have a plan that:<sup>3</sup>

- Is specific to the employer's workplace.
- Identifies all areas and job tasks with potential exposure to COVID-19.
- Includes control measures to eliminate or reduce such exposure.

## Preventing transmission among employees.

Every employer has staff who report for work while sick. In the case of COVID-19, however, top management must mandate that illness can't be tolerated due to the virus's serious respiratory threat. Sick employees must stay home and notify their supervisors.

Whether to conduct daily health checks before employees enter a facility, like temperature screenings and visual assessments for symptoms, is a difficult decision for employers to make. But it is now commonplace for healthcare workers and many food handlers. If such testing is done, it should protect a worker's privacy and avoid any stigma about being sent home.

Employers are responsible for providing safe and healthy workspaces. Many businesses are conducting engineering assessments to determine:

- What PPE is appropriate for a worker's specific duties? Protective shields for cashiers are an example.
- Is the building maximizing ventilation rates and using MERV-13 or the highest compatible filter?
- Do workspaces need to be altered to maintain proper social distancing?

## Communicate expectations.

Businesses should clearly communicate to employees and customers what is expected of them and whose guidelines (e.g., CDC) the business follows. In addition, employers will be expected to practice what they preach by providing a clean environment.

- Use posters at each entrance to encourage hand hygiene and covered coughs, sneezes.
- Place touchless hand sanitizer stations in multiple locations.

- Encourage the use of cloth facial coverings in the workplace, if appropriate.
- Ask customers who are ill to stay home.
- Provide employees with disinfectant wipes and cleaners that are effective against the virus.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, like counters and payment terminals.

If an employee contracts COVID-19, immediately inform employees of how you will handle the situation. To remain silent will only create anxiety among employees.

## Help employees cope with concerns, stress.

Like any unusual or unexpected event, the pandemic is causing undue stress for some employees, particularly anyone who has lost a loved one to COVID-19. Managers should look for potential signs of an employee who is struggling to cope, which might include:

- Changes in performance and productivity.
- Absenteeism that is not communicated.
- Irritability or anger.
- Difficulty adjusting to changes in the workplace or the routine.

If a business has access to behavior health counselors (or can make them available), managers should remind employees of that benefit and how to access counselors.

The decision to return employees to the office is a critical one that requires proper planning and execution. Companies will be expected to not only provide a secure physical environment, but one that also accounts for the emotional impact of the pandemic on its employees. As the medical community works toward a solution, employers must be flexible and willing to make further adjustments.

1 The Ladders, "This is How Many Employees Actually Want to Go Back to the Office Right Now," June 25, 2020

2 Ibid

3 Centers for Disease Control, "Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," May 6, 2020