

COVID-19 and Best Practices for Returning to Work

The thought of bringing employees back to work during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is generally a positive one, but it must be handled carefully and with forethought. Some employees will be concerned about their health and safety upon returning to work, so letting them know what steps you have taken and will take can help ease those concerns. Such steps could include how and when you will bring employees back, how you will maintain coworker distance, whether and how you will screen employees and customers/vendors before entering the building, what personal protective equipment will be available and/or required, and how the workplace will be cleaned.

When and who to bring back

To help maintain physical distance between employees, you might want to bring them back in waves, instead of all at once. You would need to consider who to bring back first, and who would be best to bring back later. Perhaps you have employees who are successfully working from home and prefer to do so. They might be good candidates for a later return.

You might also consider staggering shifts or other work scheduling changes to limit the number of employees at the physical worksite at any given point in time.

Worksite layout

In addition to limiting the number of employees in the workplace, look at the floorplan and identify where you can increase the distance between workstations such as cubicles and collaboration areas. Conference rooms should also limit the number of employees in meetings at any given point in time. Establishing one-way walking traffic in hallways can also help.

Face masks

A current hot topic is face masks. You will need to determine if you will allow or require them, taking into consideration your policies and state or local law. If you are going to require them, you need to consider if you will require a particular type. If so, you might be required to pay for them, and should be sure you have secured a reliable source to supply them. Some face masks are designed to be cleaned; as such, you would need to come up with a strategy on how they will be cleaned and by whom.

Employee screening

Many questions revolve around screening employees before being allowed to enter the work facility. Such a screening could include a health questionnaire and temperature taking. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which enforces workplace anti-discrimination laws, has indicated that such screening is allowable during a pandemic. That doesn't mean such actions are to be taken lightly. While questionnaires may be more straightforward, employee temperature taking poses more potential issues. You would need to determine who would be taking the temperatures, how they will be taken, the acceptable threshold temperature, and what steps will be taken if an employee exceeds that threshold.

Which method you will use to take employee temperatures can play a role in your strategy. Many thermometers require close proximity between people, so appropriate personal protective equipment may be required. The test should be accurate and consistent, so trained individuals (healthcare providers are optimal) should be identified.

Employee privacy and confidentiality laws must also be considered. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires employee medical information be kept confidential. Therefore, temperatures should be taken in private. Some state data privacy laws include medical information as protected personal information; therefore, breach risks need to be identified as well as strategies for responding should one occur.

Disinfect work areas

To help prevent coronavirus in the workplace, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) workplace guidance recommends that employers maintain regular housekeeping practices, including routine cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces, equipment, and other elements of the work environment. It's particularly important to clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces such as workstations, keyboards, phones, doorknobs, and handrails.

Take steps to ensure everyone adheres to respiratory hygiene such as proper cough etiquette and handwashing hygiene. Part of this process will entail ensuring that you have a reliable source for the appropriate cleaning products, as well as ample hand soap and sanitizer for employee use.

Communications

Employees should know what to expect before they return to work. Craft a clear and open communication plan to inform employees about their roles and expectations upon returning to work and beyond. Allow employees to ask questions.

You should also have a process in place for employees to report issues, such as coworkers not maintaining a safe physical distance, and ensure employees are aware of the process.

Customers/vendors

If your workplace is open to customers and/or vendors, you will need to determine how to keep employees who work directly with people from outside the company safe. Perhaps physical barriers, face masks, more online or curbside transactions, or other strategies can be employed. Some employers may choose to screen customers and vendors the same way they screen employees before allowing them into the facility.

Reluctant returns

Despite having a well-planned strategy for bringing employees back, some employees might still have trepidation. Refusal to return to a safe workplace with no extenuating circumstances may be grounds for discipline, including termination. You will need to be prepared to address such situations taking into consideration your company policies, procedures, and best practices that align with your overall brand.

Hiring process

Some employers continue to hire. As such, the usual interviewing process may need to be adjusted. While visual cues are often a part of an interview, video interviews have been used for years and may be a more normal part of the hiring process.

Conclusion

Planning what the company is prepared to do, is doing, and what resources are available and can be devoted, will help the organization get through this historic situation.