



## COVID-19 Returning to Work

## Risk Control

### Prep guide

As governments begin to ease business closure orders in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, employers face the task of reopening their physical workplaces. Regardless of whether employees are returning to corporate spaces, manufacturing complexes, industrial factories or other commercial settings; employers need a workable, detailed re-entry plan in order to protect workers from unintended harm and minimise further disruption to business operations.

Non-compliant handling of the reopening process can have serious risk and liability consequences, including worker injury and exposure due to substandard safety protocols, fines and penalties for regulatory noncompliance, and employment-related legal challenges.

This CNA Hardy resource presents strategies to help employers navigate the re-entry process, including critical first steps in the planning process and initiatives to ensure that workplace re-entry plans comply with essential safety and exposure control requirements. By taking time to prepare and plan for re-entry provisions, employers minimise disruption, encourage trust in the workplace and fulfil their responsibility to safeguard employees.

### Getting started

Successful transition to a post-pandemic workplace depends upon organisational readiness for change, risk identification and mitigation, regulatory compliance and effective communication. The following preparatory measures, among others, are essential to achieving impactful change in the workplace:

#### Appoint a return-to-work committee

The first step in addressing the realities of a new work environment is to initiate a dialogue among individuals who bring a range of experience and expertise to the reopening process.

Assemble a committee comprised of key stakeholders, including managers, workforce representatives, human resources professionals, occupational safety advisors, security personnel and environmental health experts, among others as appropriate.

In addition, appoint a committee chairperson who is responsible for overseeing the workplace re-entry period, to manage and oversee the immediate and effective change required. Together with committee members, the chair will facilitate a workplace risk assessment, draft a re-entry plan, and serve as a highly visible contact for employees regarding policy and procedure directives.

#### Identify workplace risks and hazards.

##### Risk assessment

A suitable and sufficient workplace risk assessment is a statutory legal requirement. It allows employers to understand their vulnerabilities, implement measures for a safe working environment and enhance their legal position in the event of liability claims.

An assessment should encompass all work locations and shifts, and include the following areas of focus, at a minimum:

- Business practices and critical operations
- Business continuity plans
- Potential points and methods of COVID-19 exposure for returning workers
- Shared workspaces, and potential for flexible work sites and hours
- Work travel (including to, from and during work, and use of public transport) and meeting options
- Employee/visitor access controls
- Risks relating to suppliers, contractors and clients
- Employee training requirements and capabilities
- Cross-training needs in the event of absenteeism and/or agency coverage
- Environmental cleaning and disinfection practices
- Social distancing and work station arrangements
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) and respiratory protective equipment (RPE) provisions and training in the use of it, including hand hygiene protocols
- Alternate supply chains for critical goods
- Provisions to identify and isolate employees with symptoms of COVID-19
- Services and delivery options
- Sick absence policy and management
- Methods for monitoring public health information and reporting communicable diseases
- Confidentiality provisions for employee and visitor health information in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

To help employers assess the potential for workplace exposure in a comprehensive manner, a checklist is available from [CNA Hardy – Restarting Business Premises Following Shutdown](#).

### Compliance monitoring

The COVID-19 pandemic has been characterised by rapidly changing compliance requirements updated by the relevant governments in each country.

Employers must frequently monitor compliance protocols and instructions during the re-entry period to ensure compliance with the government updates. By appointing a Compliance Manager or department, employers are more likely to produce a comprehensive history of compliance mandates and activities during critical site surveys, as well as a thorough record of important action implementation and revision dates.

### Develop a communications plan

An organised and transparent approach for conveying workplace directives is essential for building trust in the workplace. A written communication plan should encompass re-entry objectives and management expectations, utilising various methods of conveyance, including the following:

- Dedicated sections on company intranet websites, designed to allow and encourage communication channels between management and the workforce
- Virtual meetings intended to promote workplace transparency regarding employee responsibilities, performance goals and compliance issues
- Employee contact helplines, established to relay urgent updates and safety messages
- Appointment of 'Compliance Supervisors,' selected to advise and instruct employees on the safe use of workspaces
- Signage, leaflets and alert bulletins, posted and circulated to reiterate social distancing protocols and housekeeping measures, among other safety initiatives
- Communication documents, including Question & Answer postings and stay-safe guidance

### Key re-entry plan initiatives

Businesses that lack a formal re-entry and exposure control plan are at a disadvantage in the areas of regulatory compliance and legal defence. Employers can customise a written plan to fit their circumstances – considering operational requirements, facility locations and workforce capacity – but most contain these key initiatives:

#### Sanitise and clean the workplace

Maintaining a clean, safe and healthy work environment is essential to reducing COVID-19 exposures and reassuring apprehensive employees as they return. Using disinfectants perform an initial preventative decontamination of workspaces, including all high-touch surfaces, such as desks, tables, chairs, door handles, elevator controls, light switches, and toilets.

Also clean and disinfect shared equipment, such as phones, pens, keyboards, touchscreens and remote controls.

To further mitigate exposure, determine a workable schedule for ongoing environmental cleaning and disinfection, especially of highly trafficked areas and services. Consult the government advice relevant to your country. Lastly, cases of confirmed on-site exposure prompt immediate decontamination of potentially contaminated areas, as set out in a written procedure.

### Modify workspaces for social distancing.

Social distancing requirements will be essential in disease prevention, including limited office attendance numbers and a minimum of 2 metres (or specified government distances) separation from co-workers. The following environmental modifications can further assist in safeguarding employees:

- Limit points of entry, and use covered egress and ingress portals for buildings and other structures.
- Remove chairs and computer monitors from unused workstations.
- Revise seating and workstations in common areas workspaces.
- Apply floor markings or other visuals to establish one-way directional traffic and movement patterns.
- Install transparent shields and other physical barriers between workstations, in reception areas and on assembly lines.

### Draft an exposure control plan.

To reduce work-related exposures to COVID-19, governments recommend development of an infectious disease preparedness and response plan. As part of a plan, develop measures to promptly isolate employees who report illness during workhours. This includes a designated area where workers can be isolated and receive medical support. Strictly enforce an employee's home isolation in line with governmental requirements as part of the exposure protocol. In addition, implement contact tracing procedures to identify potentially exposed employees, and follow legal requirements on reporting occupational disease

### Implement essential safety protocols.

Once workplace hazards have been spatially mitigated and potential exposure points identified, both business and employee risks must be addressed. Be sure to document all measures taken, as these records may be critical to limiting employer exposure to potential claims.

A preventative approach begins with the implementation of basic safety protocols, including the following:

- Social distancing signage and face mask expectations
- Access control systems that restricting and monitoring building or area access, along with health screening protocols
- Maximum occupancy limits and an enforceable procedure to ensure compliance with social distancing requirements
- Staggered shifts and break times to reduce the number of employees in one location

- Mandatory hand washing requirements, using appropriate sanitizers that are available throughout the premises.
- Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE) provisions determined by Face-fit testing. Physical controls to prevent congestion in elevators, stairways, restrooms, meeting rooms and cafeterias, along with centralised waste receptacles
- Discontinued self-service food / drink stations - ban on shared work equipment, such as headsets, keyboards/mouse controls, and other objects that come in frequent contact with hands, or are used near the eyes, nose or mouth
- Clear work stations from personal items.

### Address the safety needs of employees in higher-risk settings.

Special guidance is required for employees who work in environments that are residential, located off-site or high public areas such as banking and retail operations.

The threat of exposure can be substantially higher for these workers than that of employees in a contained work environment.

The following can assist with high-risk worker protections:

- Advise employees to minimise contact with high-touch surfaces, such as key entry pads, card readers, door handles, light switches and restroom surfaces.
- Adopt paperless payment systems, and instruct customers to use their own pen if a signature is required, or have a designated receptacle for pens that require sanitising after customer use.
- Disinfect key entry or touchpad surfaces regularly.
- Erect Perspex barriers where employees are in close proximity to customers, or if they are expected to converse with them.
- Provide suitable and sufficient PPE, including face coverings, gloves, shoe covers, and hand and surface sanitizers, as well.
- Reinforce the importance of hand hygiene and the use of sanitiser before and after customer contact.
- Establish a disinfection/cleaning routine for off-site environments, including work surfaces, tools and equipment, service uniforms. Also adopt strict waste removal specifications.
- Refrain from using customer restrooms, and decline to accept any beverage or food offering
- Allow additional time to ensure precautions are complied with, and inform customers of all measures being taken to protect them and the employee.
- Avoid nonessential employee travel requirements.

### Plan ahead for PPE supply demands

In order to prevent problematic shortages of protective supplies and equipment, assess and project the amount of PPE required which may include gloves, disposable facemasks, full-face shields, respirators, hand hygiene supplies, overalls and waterproof shoe and boot covers, among other items.

When selecting suppliers, consider the lead time necessary for ordering and delivering PPE, as well as whether it is procured from a local or foreign manufacturer, as the latter can present additional risks for product delay and contamination. All PPE must be to the standard required in the country of use. Adopt engineering controls.

An effective re-entry programme encompasses the use of engineering controls, such as improved air filtration and ventilation systems minimising employee exposure to air toxins. In addition, a combination of the following engineering controls, along with others, can help curb liability, heighten compliance levels and contribute to a workforce peace of mind:

- Place card readers a safe distance from cashiers.
- Offer remote shopping arrangements, including online ordering, home delivery and collection.
- Rearrange furnishings to promote 2 metres (or set government distancing) of separation.

### Draft employee return to work plans.

Re-entry of employees will vary by setting depending upon risk factors, lines of business and operational capacities. For some employers, a tiered phase-in plan may initiate with critical staff members who report no COVID-19 symptoms, as well as those who cannot work remotely. This approach may require on-site health screening and/or employee temperature checks before workers are permitted to return as well as requesting that the employee informs the workplace of any symptoms personally or household prior to attending the workplace.

Regardless of the scope of a return to work, re-entry can cause stress potentially leading to increased employee absenteeism, abuse of work-flexibility options and other performance-related issues. Job performance objectives must be consistent with employee well-being. During the critical re-entry period, provide employee assistance programs, ranging from simple one-to-one interactions to structured support groups. These offerings not only stabilize the workforce in the short term, but also contribute to future gains in the areas of company culture, employee satisfaction, engagement, productivity and retention.

### Remain cognisant of employment law compliance standards.

As workers return, employers are obligated to extend employment protections in line with government advice relevant to your country and local laws. Failure to do so may result in unwanted legal challenges, including the following:

#### Discrimination

Do not base decisions regarding returning employees to the workplace on protected characteristics such as an employee's age, disability, gender, race and/or religion, or any other class protected against discrimination laws relevant to your country. Employers may not exclude an employee from returning to work, or take any other adverse action, solely because they may be at a higher risk for serious complications from COVID-19, such as age or certain underlying medical conditions. All employment decisions, including re-entry, should be based upon legitimate, non-discriminatory business reasons and should be documented.

Employers should ensure they comply with the discrimination and equality laws relevant to the country at all times.

Employees may be subject to COVID-19-related discrimination and/or harassment because of their national origin, race, or membership in other protected classes. To mitigate this risk, offer training sessions for managers and employees that reinforce the employer's commitment to promoting equality in the workplace. Attendance at all training sessions needs to be documented.

#### Failure to accommodate

Employers may, for both physical and mental disabilities, in the COVID-19 transition period receive requests for job task alterations such as light works or modified works. If an employee requests this, an employer must acknowledge and determine if a reasonable solution exists which will permit the employee to perform the essential functions of his or her position.

This may include remote working, temporary job transfers, work restructuring and / or flexible work hours.

#### Whistleblower and retaliation claims

Employees may assert complaints regarding health and safety or complaints asserting retaliation, such as for testing positive for COVID-19 or for requesting disability-related job alterations or absence leave. In written policy, strictly prohibit retaliation against employees who raise concerns regarding working conditions or for exercising their rights under laws relevant to your country. Appoint COVID-19 coordinators in the workplace to serve as liaisons between the workforce and management, in an effort to defuse conflicts and disagreements.



### Breach of privacy

Disclosure of information regarding employees who have tested positive for COVID-19, or other identifiable medical data, may violate GDPR or government laws relevant to your country and/or disability laws. Even routine tasks, such as checking employees' temperatures or screening for health conditions, can trigger privacy and recordkeeping requirements, especially as they relate to occupational disease exposure and access to medical records. All medical information, if retained, should be maintained as per GDPR requirements. Consult a legal representative to ensure adequate safeguards are in place to protect the privacy and confidentiality of workers.

### Train employees on COVID-19 precautions and requirements.

Training should include all categories of employees and encompass different workplaces and facility locations. Training sessions should include the basics of COVID-19 exposure and describe the following:

- Public health and safety protocols, as well as control measures such as hand hygiene and respiratory requirements
- Common transmission methods between employees in the work environment
- Essential cleaning and disinfection expectations, including safe work practices to prevent chemical exposures
- Reporting procedures for potential COVID-19 or suspected symptoms as defined by government guidance
- Required personal protective equipment use, and instructions on the disposal or maintenance / washing of contaminated equipment and respirators
- Complaints handling procedure and workplace reporting
- Occupational health practices including mental health
- Absence leave policies and return-to-work procedures for employees who test positive and/or have recovered from COVID-19 illnesses

Document the initial training of all employees, including names of attendees and the dates of the training, as well as annual refreshers.

Employers face unprecedented complexities as they begin to the return to work process in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. In order to establish a safe work environment and ensure business continuity, employers must implement a re-entry plan that is tailored to individual needs, yet compliant to regulatory demands and infection control requirements. The guidance provided in this risk management guide can help employers plan a coordinated and deliberate response to return to work, thereby potentially reducing exposure to worker injury claims, employment-related challenges and disruption in business operations.

### Resource links

- [UK government latest news](#)
- [HSE guidance on health and safety](#)
- [ECDC risk assessments for disease prevention and control](#)
- [EU Science Hub updates](#)
- [BOHS worker health protection advice](#)
- [REHVA guidance for designers and building services engineers](#)

### Risk Control Guides from CNA Hardy

- [Ergonomic tips for working remotely](#)
- [COVID-19 returning to work prep](#)
- [Equipment and systems outage preparation and recover](#)
- [Hygiene controls in the workplace](#)