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After the COVID-19 surge...getting back to business

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Through April this year, flattening the curve has been one of the main goals of response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S. The strategy of reducing the number and severity of cases that threaten to overwhelm our health care system, primarily by social distancing, seems to be working.

As states reopen businesses, employers need to start thinking now about how to prepare their worksites and workforce. The pathway and timing of reopening will be different for each business, part of the country and workforce. But more useful and relevant information is becoming available to help figure this out.

This article describes the evolving science on reducing spread of the virus, and some of the important questions employers will need to address in order to develop a plan for getting back to business. The focus is on sectors of the economy outside of health care that have been closed, and are now contemplating re-opening.

Overview

Several experts have developed proposals for the timing and public health dimensions of restarting our economy.[1] Once infection rates decrease significantly, and reliable testing is more widely available, states will be in a better place to start reopening nonessential businesses.

Many essential businesses never closed, and other countries have already reopened their economies—providing experience on how to maintain safety for employees.[2] [3] And, businesses that failed to adequately protect employees (or were perceived as not responding adequately) also offer valuable lessons.[4]

Emerging scientific studies continue to inform strategies to limit viral spread at work with better knowledge about virus transmission, effectiveness of facial coverings and tests for virus infection and immunity.[5][6][7] As all of this knowledge evolves, the CDC, OSHA, the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine and others are continually refining their recommendations for reopening workplaces.

Things to Think About

Employers need to start thinking now about some of the challenges and questions they will likely face. The framework of questions below is not meant to be comprehensive, but is a starting point for organizing internal discussions, identifying relevant guidelines and external resources. It is intended to improve development and execution of a return-to-business plan—and ultimately a safer and successful return to business.

The most successful businesses established worker safety as their #1 priority in reopening, and demonstrate this through effective communication and actions. They recognize that successful operations require employees who are willing to come to work, knowing that their employer is focused on maintaining their safety from viral infection. Engaging employees across the organization in developing and refining the plan can be key to effectiveness and credibility.

10 Key Areas to Focus On

Developing, revising and communicating the return to business plan

Developing a plan

Who should be involved in developing, reviewing and implementing the plan? How will they incorporate guidelines, recommendations, experience elsewhere and expertise specific to the business, a risk assessment, and input from employees? How will they achieve consensus and broad-based support? [8] What modifications are needed to existing workplace policies and procedures, talent management and other aspects? What will be the sequence of gradual business restarting that minimizes exposure but also maintains business viability? Who will serve as points of contact for employees, health care providers and others?

Revising the plan

How will employee, customer and other inputs, new recommendations and workplace experience be monitored? What are the best indicators of how well current procedures are working, and when some requirements can be relaxed? What if a resurgence of the virus occurs in the community? How will all this be incorporated to revise the plan and related communications in a timely manner?

Communication

What are the most effective ways to communicate priorities, important plan details, practices and procedures to employees before reopening? Who should deliver these messages? How can you insure the credibility, impact, consistency and timeliness of communication? How will information be communicated to contractors, customers, and the public? What training, signage, supervision and education is needed to maximize compliance with guidelines to prevent viral transmission at work, at home and in the community? How can senior leadership stay informed about, and rapidly respond to employee concerns? What additional resources are needed to support managers and supervisors to help maintain everyone's mental health, rebuild morale, resolve conflicts and support employees?

Keeping employees safe

Coming and going to work

How do employees get to work and what are their risks of contracting the virus using personal or public transportation? What level of actual risk is tolerable, especially if public transportation is involved, and can the risks be minimized? How well do current measures (face coverings, hand hygiene) prevent transmission?

Physical distancing at work

What strategies are needed to maintain adequate physical distancing between employees, such as work at home, staggering shifts, limiting shared vehicles, barriers and distance between workers, new traffic patterns, closing meeting rooms, separate breaks and meals and restricting in-person meetings? What other opportunities for separation are possible by changes in processes, layout and work procedures? How can you maintain physical separation and reduce close interactions with customers and others who enter the workplace, or when making deliveries or off-site visits?

Environmental management and personal hygiene

Prior to reopening, what type of cleaning and disinfection is necessary? What procedures will keep surfaces adequately clean, minimize multiple people touching the same surface, and prevent virus introduction through mail or deliveries? How should hand sanitizer, extra wash areas and other protective equipment be supplied? And what training on personal hygiene, use and storage is needed?[9] Are there ways to increase fresh air and effectiveness of air filtration?

Face coverings

Can and should face coverings be worn by everyone at work, including customers and visitors, based on current regulations and recommendations? Should the employer supply or store and maintain face coverings, and provide training on their use? [10] Is a formal respirator program needed? Should workers bring face coverings from home?

Meeting etiquette, business travel and off-site work

Can web-based meetings replace travel and in-person meetings? What procedures would make travel and off-site work safer, enabling employees to avoid unsafe situations during service calls, deliveries and other activities? For example, should employees be instructed about shaking hands and safe use of shared electronic devices with touch screens?

Specific strategies for workers and others who may have infection

Keeping sick people out of the workplace

What's the best way to keep people out of the workplace who might be infected, while maintaining appropriate privacy and avoidance of non-reporting for fear of retribution? Are self-monitoring, temperature screening and/or questionnaires reasonable strategies, along with confidential evaluation if concerns of illness or exposure arise? What is the role of testing for presence of the virus, and antibody testing to identify immune employees? How will the accuracy of these tests be considered? What procedure makes sense for customers, contractors and others?

If someone has a cough or other symptoms, will a doctor's note be required to allow them to enter the workplace? Are evaluation procedures, sick leave benefits, worker education and work-at-home options adequate to ensure that employees will not come to work sick, or soon after exposure to a sick person? Do they reflect current Federal and State regulations? Is a different policy needed for persons with immune suppression, older age or chronic disease? What are the potential regulatory concerns about selective return-to-work policies? How should the employer manage workers who decline to return to work until the epidemic has completely passed, but cannot work at home? Will all employees know in advance what to expect if an employee or family member develops the virus or tests positive, including quarantine, contact tracing, paid leave and worksite cleaning? What other scenarios should be planned for in advance?

Returning to work after infection

What is the procedure at work if an employee develops COVID-19 infection or tests positive for the virus? What is the policy for return to work after recovering from COVID infection, or exposure to an infected person? Should the employee wait until 7-10 days after symptoms have subsided or since the last exposure, medical clearance and/or some form of virus testing? Is there a role for partnership with local or regional public health professionals to respond to issues as they arise?

New information is being developed daily on these topics, so we encourage readers to stay as up-to-date as possible and check for more recent information. But a thoughtful, thorough and evidence-based approach can succeed in keeping everyone as safe as possible.

Resources:

Public health guidance on reopening business in general:
https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/national-coronavirus-response-a-road-map-to-reopening/

CDC guidance for reopening business:
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html

OSHA guidance for reopening business:
https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf

American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine guidance for business, focus on needed expertise for evaluating infection measures:
https://acoem.org/acoem/media/PDF-Library/Position-Statement-RTW-COVID-19-4-27-2020.pdf

Canadian guidance for business strategy development:
https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/risk-informed-decision-making-workplaces-businesses-covid-19-pandemic.html

Business safety and health measures:
https://www.littler.com/publication-press/publication/next-normal-littler-insight-returning-work-safety-and-health

Large international auto parts manufacturer developed, tested, and refined an internal policy based largely on CDC recommendations, now sharing it on line:
https://www.lear.com/Site/Company/Safe-Work-Playbook.aspx

Updated lists of state by state regulations on return to business guidelines, face coverings and screening employees for illness:
https://www.littler.com/publication-press/publication/facing-your-face-mask-duties-list-statewide-orders

https://www.littler.com/publication-press/publication/wont-hurt-bit-employee-temperature-and-health-screenings-list

Leadership communication during challenging times:
https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Leadership_Communication_Anticipating_Responding_to_Stressful_Events.pdf

[1] https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/national-coronavirus-response-a-road-map-to-reopening

[2] https://www.economist.com/briefing/2020/04/08/how-to-reopen-factories-after-covid-19

[3] https://drive.google.com/open?id=1_0oc59tQLjltC150d53DVCx5_bHm6f0a

[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/us/coronavirus-chicken-meat-processing-plants-immigrants.html?referringSource=articleShare

[5] https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/keeping-the-coronavirus-from-infecting-health-care-workers

[8] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-0843-2

[7] https://www.marketwatch.com/story/testing-for-covid-19-antibodies-could-be-a-game-changer-for-the-economy-but-its-still-too-early-to-tell-2020-04-08

[8] https://www.bhfs.com/insights/alerts-articles/2020/how-will-state-and-local-governments-reopen-businesses-after-covid-19-

[9] https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6916e1.htm

[10] https://acoem.org/acoem/media/PDF-Library/COVID-19-ACOEM-Recommendations-Regarding-Use-of-Face-Coverings-in-the-Workplace-4-10-2020.pdf

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