



Navigating a safe transition to the post-COVID-19 workplace

The fundamental challenge in transitioning employees back to the workplace is the ability to reduce risk to a point at which employees feel safe.

As the nation responds to the novel coronavirus, we look forward to the day when we can return to a semblance of normal, pre-COVID-19 life. We want the freedom to once again go out whenever we like – spending time with family and friends, visiting elderly relatives, going shopping, eating in restaurants, and attending movies, concerts and other events. Equally important, we want the ability to return to our workplaces without the limitations and restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

While the explosion in remote working due to COVID-19 will likely forever change how we work, there is no doubt that most employers and employees want the opportunity to return to their traditional workplace settings as one of the core components of a resumption of normal life. While many office workers have found that remote working can be just as productive as sitting at a desk or cubicle, for manufacturers, retailers, hospitality businesses, restaurants and others requiring a physical presence in the community, returning to a fixed workplace is not even a question.

Reducing risk

From a medical and health safety standpoint, the fundamental challenge in transitioning employees back to the workplace is the ability to create an environment that reduces risk to a point at which employees feel safe.

We can take substantive steps to make workplaces safe. Though we can never make it completely secure, there are measures that can be implemented to reduce the chance of exposure. We know that the primary risk of transmission is from person to person. So, the guiding principle is to create an environment that is as safe as we can make it and then educate employees to act safely and responsibly within that environment.

In addition, most experts agree that even when the world has an effective vaccine or treatment for COVID-19, this coronavirus will be with us for a long time, perhaps permanently. But by taking steps grounded in good science, healthcare practices and employment health and safety principles, businesses can reduce the risk of infection to a point at which many employees can return to the workplace without fear.

Reducing risk will include looking at all aspects of an office to gain insights into what physical distancing challenges may exist. Small conference rooms probably can't be reconfigured to accommodate effective physical distancing. Social hubs, breakrooms and cafeterias where large numbers of employees might gather present different challenges to appropriate physical distancing.

Open office configurations favored by many organizations for the collaborative opportunities they provide may have to be reconsidered, with a return of individual cubicles and other types of barriers, such as increased space between desks to reduce the potential for the spread of infection.

Staggering breaks and lunch periods may become a greater priority at many companies to reduce the numbers of people in these spaces at the same times. For businesses with effective remote working capabilities, a viable solution may be rotating schedules to reduce the percentage of employees present onsite at any given time. We will likely see many companies embrace more remote collaboration as they have seen that remote working can be quite successful as well as an employee preference.

The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in the workplace may become widespread, perhaps even mandatory in some settings. Real-time coronavirus testing and associated activities such as temperature checks and contact tracing are also likely to become common practices at many organizations.

Another concern is the potential for cross-contamination of surfaces. Elevator buttons, telephones, desktops and keyboards all represent potential vectors of what medical professionals refer to as fomite transmission: the spread of infectious agents through contact with surfaces. We know that while the coronavirus breaks down in 24 hours or less on cardboard and paper products, it can linger for up to three days on nonporous surfaces like metal, plastic and other hard materials. As a result, any hard surfaces in the workplace environment will require frequent cleaning and sanitizing.

To identify and assess all potential areas of risk, employers may want to have facilities managers or safety officers do walkthroughs of their employees' typical workdays to get a sense of the surfaces that multiple people touch, including desk and washroom facilities. For example, how do employees enter and exit a building? Can doors be opened automatically with motion sensors or must employees and visitors grasp knobs or bars? What other options are available to allow entry and exit without physically touching doorway surfaces?

Changing behaviors

Even with the best safety measures in place, the human element always remains a challenge. If employees do not follow health safety protocols, choosing instead to cut corners that may result in cross-contamination, how do you protect the next person in line trying to do the right thing? One step is helping people understand the ways they may be putting themselves and others at risk, even in an environment where affirmative steps have been taken to minimize risk.

Hence, a key part of the process of transitioning people back to the workplace will be educating employees to better understand how to become more accountable for their own health. Many of the underlying conditions that can influence an individual's risk of contracting a wide range of illnesses, and determine the potential severity of those illnesses, can be affected by lifestyle issues, such as smoking, lack of exercise, obesity and other factors. Many of these issues can be managed and positively affected by employees taking steps to address them, perhaps with the assistance of their companies' Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or various wellness initiatives and incentives. Businesses can play a role in helping employees become more accountable for their own health decisions and behaviors, all of which can have an important, positive impact on their quality of life and susceptibility to diseases.

Indeed, as we look ahead to a post-COVID-19 world, our own individual behaviors may have the most decisive impacts on our personal health and well-being. As shelter-at-home restrictions are lifted around the country, people still need to understand that they must change and monitor their health and self-protective behaviors every day.

Lessons for a “new normal”

As we adapt our personal and business lives to a “new normal,” and as medical science provides a viable vaccine and new treatment options, life should look a lot more like what it was before the novel coronavirus arrived. However, we will have learned a great deal from this experience. We will know much more about effective prevention and mitigation. Even as we prepare for the possibility of future pandemics, we will continue to face common, seasonal outbreaks like the flu. And we do not yet know whether this novel coronavirus might also exhibit a seasonal pattern.

But if we take the right lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, we will be much better prepared for a future public health emergency. Experience has taught us that it is a virtual certainty the world will face outbreaks of new and dangerous pathogens in the future. With concerted, coordinated effort and the right investments in healthcare systems and capabilities, we will be better prepared for what is to come. And with effective planning and mitigation strategies implemented by businesses and tested for efficacy, companies can strengthen the ability to cope with and manage through any future pandemics like COVID-19 and other unanticipated, black swan” events— protecting employees, meeting customer commitments and preserving operational resilience.