COVID-19: Return-to-Work Strategies

Here are some practical strategies you can use to protect your workforce and the public, as well as some other factors to keep in mind as you plan for bringing people back to your work facilities.

Implement a Phased Approach

To address the physical distancing concerns associated with COVID-19, some employers may opt to bring workers back to the job in phases. For example, in manufacturing, warehousing or other businesses where employees do not interact with the public, the first phase could involve bringing back 25% of the workforce and having physical distancing measures in place. This could then increase to 50% in a second phase, 75% in a third and the full workforce in the fourth. If the manufacturing or warehouse facility is part of a campus, employers could also require that workers stay in the building to which they are assigned.

Establish Staggered Shifts

A similar approach for establishing social distancing in the workplace is staggering the number of employees on the job site at any given time. For example, in office environments, a certain group of workers would be in the office one week, and a different group of workers would be in the office the following week. This method also allows for time in between shifts for further cleaning and disinfecting of the work environment.

The most suitable method for a particular workplace will depend on the facility layout and the type of work being performed. For instance, office environments may have greater flexibility for employees to telework compared to manufacturing facilities where employees need to be on-site, often working near one another.

Furthermore, you also have to consider whether customers are coming to your facility and how you will protect your employees and those customers from exposure. This may involve measures such as limiting the number of customers allowed in the facility at any one time.

Institute Physical Barriers

Along with increasing the distance between workers, establishing physical barriers in the workplace is another method for preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. Such barriers can help reduce physical distancing in the workplace.

In the short-term, you can install materials like polyethylene plastic sheeting as a physical barrier. For a more sound solution more permanent structures made of polycarbonate, plexiglass or tempered glass should be considered to reduce the contact between employees or customers. NOTE: A stringent cleaning schedule should be develop to go along with the installed physical barriers.

Improve Facility Layout

Given that COVID-19 is a droplet disease transmitted through the air, you should think about the breathing zone of each of your workers. For example, if a worker is facing forward and potentially having spray coming out of their mouth, you do not want another worker right across from them within six feet.

For operations which require side-by-side workers or seats, employees should be seated facing away from each other. Or if possible side-by-side seating should be configured so that every other seat is open to allow for social distancing of at least 6 feet.

Along with these engineering controls, it's also important to examine how traffic will move through different work areas to minimize the potential for exposure for workers operating in a fixed location. For example, if possible, you could institute a one-way traffic pattern that will allow for better flow through the facility and increase social distancing.

Monitor Employee Exposure

Employers must also stay vigilant about monitoring workers' health, particularly those who have been exposed to COVID-19. CDC guidance states that exposed employees involved in critical infrastructure can stay at work under the following conditions:

- Pre-screening: Checking the employee's temperature and assessing their symptoms before they enter the facility.
- Regular monitoring: If the employee does not have a temperature and is not exhibiting symptoms, they should self-monitor under the supervision of the occupational health program.
- Wear a mask: The employee should wear a mask at all times while in the workplace for 14 days after the date of their last exposure. Employers can issue facemasks or approve employees' supplied face coverings in the event of shortages.
- Social distance: The employee should maintain a distance of six feet and practice throughout the workplace as work duties permit.
- Clean and disinfect workspaces: Routinely clean and disinfect areas such as bathrooms, offices and common areas, as well as shared equipment.

Ask Employees To Stay Home If Sick

Employees should not report to work and quarantine themselves for 14 days if they believe they have been exposed to COVID-19 or begin showing signs of possible contraction.

The CDC has expanded the list of Covid-19 symptoms since the virus first surfaced. Below is a list of signs and symptoms of potential exposure.

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Chills
- Repeated shaking with chills
- Muscle pain
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Loss of taste or smell

While fever is the most prevalent symptom of COVID-19, not everyone who has the virus has a fever. Furthermore, not everyone is going to have all of these symptoms.