



## Employers Guide for Returning to Work Amidst Covid



### 1. WORKPLACE SAFETY

Employers have to ensure their workplaces are as safe as they can be. Preparing for and effectively communicating how safety is a top priority will allay fears and increase brand loyalty.

#### **SAFETY MEASURES MIGHT INCLUDE:**

- **Implementing routine employee COVID testing**
- **Developing an exposure-response plan that addresses:**
  - Isolation, containment and contact tracking procedures.
  - Stay-at-home requirements.
  - Exposure communications to affected staff.
- **Providing personal protective equipment (PPE) such as:**
  - Masks
  - Personal hand sanitizer
  - Disinfecting wipes and spray
- **Detailing cleaning procedures and sanitization schedule**
- **Implementing a workforce vaccination strategy to include:**
  - Surveying employees regarding their intentions to receive the vaccine.
  - Developing a voluntary or mandatory vaccination policy.
  - Handling religious or medical accommodation requests.
  - Communicating with employees about the vaccine.
- **Establishing physical distancing measures within the workplace:**
  - Staggered shifts and lunch/rest breaks.
  - Rotating weeks in the office and working remotely.
  - Moving workstations to increase separation distance.
- **Defining visitor contact protocols such as:**
  - Limiting the number of visitors per day
  - No handshake greetings, masks required, remain 6 ft. apart.
  - Using video conferencing instead of in-person client meetings whenever possible
- **Understanding and complying with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) record-keeping and reporting obligations:**
  - Identify positions, if any, with the potential for occupational exposure to the coronavirus.
  - Review OSHA regulation 29 CFR § 1904 to determine work-relatedness of illnesses.



### 2. RECALL PROCEDURES

Plan for how and when employees will return to work or to the worksite to create an organized and controlled approach. All employees returning on the same day at the same time could be overwhelming and possibly unsafe.

#### THINGS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- **Phasing-in employees returning to work:**
  - Use seniority or other nondiscriminatory factors for selection.
  - Determine schedule changes to provide the greatest protection to workers.
- **Creating a plan for employees in high-risk categories for infection to return to work:**
  - Consider allowing them to work from home or remain on leave until they feel comfortable to return.
  - Determine increased measures to protect them when working onsite, including isolated workstations, additional PPE as requested, fewer days in the office, etc.
- **Notifying the state unemployment agency of employees recalled to work. This is a state requirement and will help save on unemployment taxes for those who choose not to return to work.**
- **Determining how to handle employees who are unable or unwilling to return to work.**
  - Employees who are fearful of returning to work.
  - Employees who have family obligations that interfere with the ability to return to work.
  - Employees who remain under quarantine due to exposure to COVID-19.



### 3. COMPENSATION

Many employers may have made compensation changes during the crisis thus far, and others may need to make them in order to reopen. How the disruption has affected compensation policies going forward will also need reviewing and communicating to affected staff.

#### THINGS TO ADDRESS INCLUDE:

- How the employer will handle any missed annual pay increases and if those will be applied retroactively.
- How will bonuses be affected, including eligibility for or continuation of, etc.
- Will hazard pay be offered or revoked?
- Consider a pay equity audit as workers return, as pay may have been reduced or frozen and may have impacted employees differently.



### 4. REMOTE WORK

Telecommuting may have proven to work well during the pandemic for some employers and employees. Using it not only as a short-term emergency tool but also as a permanent work/life balance and cost-saving measure should be considered.

#### ACTIONS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- Continuing to allow remote work where possible to keep employees safe.
- Staggering weeks in office and at home among team members, or part-time remote work on alternate weekdays.
- Responding to employee requests to continue to work from home, including long-term arrangements.
- Consider the long-term cost savings or impact of offering permanent remote work.



### 5. COMMUNICATIONS

Establishing a clear communication plan will allow employees and customers to understand how the organization plans to reopen or reestablish business processes.



#### TOPICS TO COVER MAY INCLUDE:

- How staying home if sick and physical distancing policies are being used to protect workers and customers.
- Detail what training on new workplace safety and disinfection protocols have been implemented.
- Have exposure-response communications ready to go to any affected employees and customers.



## 6. POLICY CHANGES

It is no longer business as usual, and employers will likely need to update or create policies to reflect the new normal.

#### SOME EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- Paid-leave policies adjusted to reflect regulatory requirements and actual business needs.
- Attendance policies relaxed to encourage sick employees to stay home.
- Time-off request procedures clarified to indicate when time off can be required by the employer, should sick employees need to be sent home.
- Flexible scheduling options implemented allowing for compressed workweeks and flexible start and stop times.
- Meal and rest break policies adjusted to stagger times and processes implemented to encourage physical distancing.
- Telecommuting policies detailed to reflect the type of work that can be done remotely and the procedures for requesting telework.
- Information technology policies revised to reflect remote work hardware, software and support.



## 7. BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANS

Employers will have learned valuable lessons regarding their business continuity plans, or lack thereof, during the past months. Now is the time to review and revise the plan to prepare for future emergencies.

#### THINGS TO ADDRESS INCLUDE:

- Implement a business continuity plan, including infectious disease control, if a plan did not exist prior to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Amend existing plans to include the latest emergency information, such as updates on epidemics and workplace considerations or changes in protocols for responding to global disasters.
- Update plan resources and contact information to ensure accuracy.
- Establish a pandemic task force to continuously monitor external and internal data and implement appropriate protocols. Recognize the possibility of additional closings during this current pandemic as COVID-19 infections may rise and fall again, triggering more stay-at-home orders and supply chain disruptions.
- Perform testing and exercises to practice the new or revised emergency plans to make sure employees know what to do and to find any missing parts that need to be addressed before another emergency situation occurs.