

**Questions that Companies Should ask as they Prepare for and Respond to the Spread of the corona virus COVID-19**

1. **How can we best protect our employees from exposure in the workplace?**

The coronavirus that causes Covid-19 (as the disease is called) is thought to spread largely through respiratory droplets from coughing and sneezing, and it seems to spread easily. It may also be possible to become infected by touching a contaminated surface or object and then touching one’s nose or mouth. Employees should: Stay home if they have respiratory symptoms (coughing, sneezing, shortness of breath) and/or a temperature above 100.4 F. Employees should leave work if they develop these symptoms while at the workplace. Shield coughs and sneezes with a tissue, elbow, or shoulder (not the bare hands). Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol based hand sanitizer. Avoid shaking hands entirely to reduce the risk of spreading infection. Though that might be awkward at times, it’s an increasingly common practice. As hand washing is one of the most effective defenses, employers need to make sure that employees have ready access to washing facilities and that those are kept well stocked with soap and (ideally) paper towels; there is some evidence that paper towel drying is less likely to spread viruses than jet dryers. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers and sanitizing wipes should be distributed throughout the workplace, and all frequently touched surfaces such as workstations, countertops and doorknobs should be routinely cleaned. Increased cleaning of common areas using standard cleaning agents can also reduce risk of spread of respiratory disease.

There’s no need for organizations to stockpile face masks, as these are in short supply and authorities don’t recommend their use by healthy people to protect against infection. In North America where Covid-19 is now starting to emerge, companies are being proactive: many have already or plan to increase communications, and more than half have or plan to increase access to hand sanitizers.

1. **When should we exclude workers or visitors from the workspace?**

Employees should stay home or go home if they have symptoms of coronavirus infection. But dedicated staff often resist taking sick days, instead dragging themselves into work where they may infect others. Given the threat this epidemic presents, managers shouldn’t hesitate to send employees who present with Covid-19 symptoms home. Likewise, employees or visitors who are symptomatic or at high risk for Covid-19 should be kept separate from staff and helped with arrangements to leave the workplace and obtain medical evaluation while minimizing their public exposure. For example, they should avoid public places and public transportation, and, ideally, should stay six feet away from others unless they are wearing a mask. If Covid-19 becomes widespread in the community, companies can check temperatures using hand-held thermal scanners and consider excluding staff or visitors with temperatures over 100.4 F. Temperature is not an exceptionally accurate way to assess risk, though, as some with the coronavirus will be contagious but have no fever, and others will have higher temperatures not related to this virus. Thus, an elevated temperature in combination with respiratory symptoms is the best indicator of possible infection. Public health organizations recommend that companies bar employees or visitors from coming to the workplace for a period 14 days after a “medium” or “high-risk” exposure to the virus — generally meaning having been in close contact with someone who is known to be infected, or having traveled from a high-risk region. Almost half of North American employers now bar employees or visitors who have recently traveled from China or other infected countries for a period of 14 days after return. Visits or return to the workplace can resume after 14 days if no symptoms emerge.

1. **Should we revise our benefits policies in cases where employees are barred from the worksite or we close it?**

The likelihood that increasing numbers of employees will be unable to work either because they are sick or must care for others means that companies should review their paid time off and sick leave policies now. Be aware of existing and new Government legislation related to new sick time provisions for employees. Policies that give employees confidence that they will not be penalized and can afford to take sick leave are an important tool in encouraging self-reporting and reducing potential exposure. Company closures will likely become more common outside of Asia as the epidemic continues on its current course.

Most firms will treat Covid-19 in their policies as they would any other illness, and sick leave or short-term disability insurance would be applicable. However, exclusion from the workplace might not be covered by disability policies, and prolonged absence could last longer than available sick leave. 90% of employers in China paid their workers in full and maintained full benefits during furloughs. Companies should promulgate clear policies on this now and communicate about this with employees. Most will want to offer protections to their workforce to the extent this is financially feasible. It is time for companies to step up in this regard.

1. **Have we maximized employees’ ability to work remotely?**

While many jobs (retail, manufacturing, health care) require people to be physically present, work, including meetings, that can be done remotely should be encouraged if coming to work or traveling risks exposure to the virus. Videoconferencing, for instance, is a good alternative to risky face-to-face meetings.

1. **Do we have reliable systems for real-time public health communication with employees?**

Dangerous rumors, misinformation and worker fears can spread as quickly as a virus. It is imperative for companies to be able to reach all workers, including those not at the worksite, with regular, internally coordinated, factual updates about infection control, symptoms, and company policy regarding remote work and circumstances in which employees might be excluded from or allowed to return to the workplace. These communications should come from or be vetted by the emergency response team, and they should be carefully coordinated to avoid inconsistent policies being communicated by different managers or functions. Clearly this requires organizations to maintain current phone/text and email contact information for all employees and test organization-wide communication periodically. If you don’t have a current, universal contact capability already, now is a good time to create this.

1. **Should we revise our policies around international and domestic business travel?**

Yes, most companies are now restricting travel to and from effected countries. It is prudent to cancel employee business travel from areas where Covid-19 is most prevalent — both to prevent illness and to prevent loss of productivity due to quarantine or employee exclusion from the workplace after travel. Employees should be especially careful not to travel if they feel unwell, as they might face quarantine on return if they have a fever even without significant risk of coronavirus infection.

1. **Should we postpone or cancel scheduled conferences or meetings?**

Companies have already experienced canceled in-person conferences and meetings, especially those with international attendees, and we expect more in the coming months: Many employers will cancel planned conferences for North American employees in selected countries. Governments and local health departments will issue guidance about whether events should be canceled in a specific area. All conference organizers should provide information on reducing the chance of infection (including discouraging hand-shaking) and to assure that proper handwashing facilities (and/or hand sanitizers) are easily available.

1. **Are supervisors adequately trained?**

Supervisors should have ready access to appropriate information (such as on infection control and company policies) and should know who to contact within the firm to report exposures. Supervisors or other designated persons in the company should promptly notify local public health authorities about any suspected exposure.

Diligent planning for global health emergencies can help protect employees, customers, and the business. But plans are only as good as their execution. Companies should use the current situation to optimize and battle-test their plans. As Covid-19 becomes a full-blown pandemic, these capabilities will prove invaluable.