

HR Insights

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Navigating the Surge of COVID-19 Cases

Even as stay-at-home orders and restrictions are lifted, daily operations won't be business-as-usual. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is still going on, despite businesses reopening. With case counts increasing substantially, businesses need to be prepared.

Review Federal, State and Local Guidance

As was the case at the onset of the pandemic, governmental guidance will play a large role in how your organization should respond to a surge in COVID-19 cases.

This means that businesses in one region may be able to remain open, while businesses in other regions may need to close or adjust for a second time. As such, it's critical to understand and continually review all relevant state and local orders to determine if your business needs to take action in the face of a surge in COVID-19 cases.

Review Your Organizational Risks

Even if there aren't current federal, state or local mandates to close your business or make changes to prevent the spread of COVID-19 cases, that doesn't mean your organization is safe. What's more, some businesses may have greater exposures than others, underscoring the importance of performing a thorough risk assessment to determine how you should respond.

While the complexity of risk assessments will differ from business to business, they typically involve the following steps:

1. **Identifying the hazards**—When identifying hazards, it's a good idea to perform a walkthrough of the premises and consider high-risk areas. It's also important to consider what tasks employees are performing and whether or not they are especially exposed to COVID-19 risks when performing their duties.

2. **Deciding who may be affected by the virus and how**—When performing this evaluation, make note of high-risk individuals (e.g., staff members who meet with customers or individuals with preexisting medical conditions).

3. **Assessing risks**—For each risk facing your business, determine:
 - How likely is this particular risk to occur?
 - What are the ramifications should this risk occur?

When analyzing your risks, consider potential financial losses, compliance requirements, employee safety, customer conflict, business disruptions, reputational harm and other consequences.

4. **Controlling risks**—There are a variety of methods businesses can use to manage their risks, including:
 - Risk avoidance—Risk avoidance is when a business eliminates certain hazards, activities and exposures from their operations altogether.

- Risk control—Risk control involves preventive action.
- Risk transfer—Risk transfer is when a business transfers their exposures to a third party.

Control measures during the surge of COVID-19 cases could include cleaning protocols, work-from-home arrangements and mandated personal protective equipment (PPE) usage.

5. **Monitoring the results**— Once you've implemented a risk management solution, you'll want to monitor its effectiveness and then periodically reassess.

Remember, the COVID-19 pandemic has been rapidly evolving, and guidance can change quickly. Your business should be prepared to take action at short notice.

Maintain Workplace Safety

There are a number of OSHA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) workplace controls to consider if your risk assessment determines that COVID-19 poses a threat to your employees or customers. For instance, you should:

- **Implement administrative controls**— An example would



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be establishing alternating days or extra shifts that reduce the total number of employees in a facility at a given time.

- **Utilize PPE**—Businesses should focus on training workers on proper PPE best practices. Training material should be easy to understand and must be available in the appropriate language for all workers.
- **Consider engineering controls**—For COVID-19, engineering controls can include:
 - Installing high-efficiency air filters;
 - Increasing ventilation rates in the work environment; and
 - Installing physical barriers, such as clear plastic cough/sneeze guards.
- **Screen employees before they enter the building**— To keep employees safe, consider conducting screening procedures to identify potentially ill employees before they enter the workplace. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission permits employers to measure employees’ body temperatures and to ask certain questions regarding employees’ COVID-19 symptoms before allowing them to enter the worksite. Any employee screening should be implemented on a nondiscriminatory basis, and all information gleaned should be treated as confidential medical information under the Americans with Disabilities Act—specifically, the identity of workers exhibiting a fever or other COVID-19 symptoms should only be shared with members of company management with a true need to know. Be sure to notify employees of screening procedures prior to implementation in order to avoid catching them off guard.
- **Be adaptable**—You should be prepared to change your business practices if needed to maintain critical operations. This could involve identifying alternative suppliers, prioritizing existing customers or suspending portions of your operations.
- **Create a dialogue with vendors and partners**—Talk with business partners about your response plans. Share best practices with other businesses in your communities, and especially those in your supply chain.
- **Encourage social distancing**— In terms of COVID-19, social distancing best practices for businesses can include:
 - Instructing workers to maintain at least 6 feet of distance from other people;
 - Hosting meetings virtually when possible;
 - Limiting the number of people on the job site to essential personnel only; and
 - Discouraging people from shaking hands.
- **Encourage employees to stay home if possible**—To minimize person-to-person contact, employers are using the following strategies to encourage employees to stay home:
 - Expanding telecommuting policies to ensure as many employees as possible can work from home;
 - Highlighting benefits offerings that employees might not know about, including short-term disability;
 - Expanding leave policies; and
 - Offering incentives for employees to stay home and not come into the office.
- **Manage the different risk levels of their employees**—It’s important to be aware that some employees may be at higher risk for serious illness, such as older adults and those with chronic medical conditions. Be aware that protections under the ADA or similar protections may apply to these higher risk employees.
- **Separate sick employees**—Employees who appear to have symptoms (e.g., fever, cough or shortness of breath) upon arrival at work or who become sick during the day should immediately be separated from other employees, customers and visitors, and sent home. If an employee is confirmed to have COVID-19, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to COVID-19. The employer should instruct fellow employees how to proceed based on the CDC Public Health Recommendations for Community-Related Exposure, and applicable local guidance. **The employer should not reveal the identity of the infected employee to coworkers.** Be aware that the availability of COVID-19 testing may become even more strained and the wait time to receive test results may increase, so quarantining for a specified period of time based on COVID-19 symptoms may become necessary. In addition, some healthcare providers are charging employees an additional office fee for an office visit to get tested, and that office fee is not required to be covered by the employer’s health plan.
- **Support respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene**— Businesses should encourage good hygiene to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. This can involve:
 - Providing disinfectant wipes and no-touch disposal receptacles; and
 - Placing hand sanitizers in multiple locations to encourage hand hygiene.

- **Perform routine environmental cleaning and disinfection**—Some best practices include:
 - Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, keyboards, telephones, handrails and doorknobs.
 - Discouraging workers from using other workers' phones, desks, offices, or other tools and equipment, when possible. If necessary, clean and disinfect them before and after use.
 - Providing disposable wipes so that commonly used surfaces can be wiped down by employees before each use.
 - Be sure to consider the needs of your business and implement strategies that are specific to controlling and promoting workplace safety at your organization.

Communicate With Employees

The past few months have caused immense change for your business and your employees. A poll from Ginger, a mental health provider, revealed that 88% of U.S. workers have been moderately to extremely stressed during the past 4-6 weeks, with more than two-thirds reporting these times are the most stressful in their career.

It's not possible for you to control the pandemic, but it is possible for you to help ease the stress your employees are experiencing. In these uncertain times, it's imperative that you clearly communicate your business's plans as frequently as

possible. Here are some tips for effective employee communications:

- Be open with employees about management decisions and ask for suggestions to rectify problems.
- Provide as much information as possible about the pandemic.
- Communicate the future of the business with employees often—in meetings, on the company intranet site, in newsletters and in blogs.
- Be empathetic in your communications, as every employee's situation may be different.

Additionally, try to give as much notice as possible if your organization plans to make significant workplace changes, including shutting down operations or requiring employees to work from home.

Prepare Now to Stay Safe Later

Due to the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, rules and regulations are constantly changing. You should be prepared to change your business practices if needed to maintain critical operations. For more information on how to keep your business, employees and customers safe, contact Murray Group.