

Adapting your organisation to return to work safely after coronavirus

When adapting your workplaces to accommodate changes required due to Covid-19, perhaps the area where this will have the greatest impact is the people and the culture of your organisation.

Although Covid-19 has had devastating effects worldwide, it may lead to safer, healthier ways of working. Social distancing, for instance, could see training evolve into new, 'virtual' environments better aligned with modern-day teaching, learning and continuous assessment and professional development.

Attitudes, beliefs and behaviours may also improve as workers become more conscious of risks, gaining 'risk intelligence' and taking extra precautions to stay safe.

So, let's look at where organisations may need to adapt due to this crisis.

Changes in behaviours

Pandemics are more than just tragedies of sickness and death. Mass-scale threats such as Covid-19, and the uncertainty and fear that accompanies them, can lead to new behaviours and beliefs.

People may become either more suspicious or more impressionable. Above all, they will be less willing to engage with anything that seems foreign or strange. Culturally, organisations should be prepared for a shift. Isolation may have caused re-integration issues; remote working will force a push and demand for further remote working.

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the approach of a large proportion of workers globally could be described as 'getting the job done at all costs'. This term implies they were prepared to risk their own health and safety in order to complete certain tasks.

Covid-19 might alter workers' casual safety behaviours. Why is this?

- Workers are becoming accustomed to taking more precautions with their health due to the outbreak of Covid-19.
- Media and official public health messaging is encouraging everybody to 'stay safe' and 'protect themselves', so this may have an influence on workers' attitudes.
- Workers might be worried about an increased chance of infection at the workplace.
- Workers are more aware of hazards which could transfer from viral risk to everyday workplace situations.

All this creates opportunity for businesses to address culture and a platform for a fresh start.

The aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic may affect workers and organisations in different ways, both positive and negative. Here are some of them, outlining risks, opportunities and some mitigations.

Attitudes

Workers may see employers' attitudes change on their return to work, whether a positive or negative switch compared to when they stopped working. Workers attitudes towards certain issues may change too, especially towards illness and contagious disease.

With a more cautious workforce, workers may choose to take more days off due to fear or misconceptions about viruses and new viruses. This, therefore, may see a rise in sickness and absences, especially in the near term.

Should organisations have sickness and absence as a KPI, they may need to account for a steep rise in absence, certainly for the first few months following returns after Covid-19.

With the safety of workforces becoming higher priority for most organisations, a cautious, vigilant, risk-aware workforce should benefit the long-term safety culture of all organisations as they may be less willing to take risks in all situations, avoiding the direct and indirect costs accidents and occupational diseases impose.

Beliefs

Covid-19 alone will not be enough get a small number of people to change their behaviours or beliefs, particularly if they believe the situation was exaggerated.

A worker willing to make sacrifices in their own daily routines to help others inevitably reflects their beliefs about helping others. Covid-19 has caused people to put their own personal agendas to one side for a while for the greater good. This may encourage workers to be more accountable for one another's safety and therefore conduct more thorough safety checks, for example, especially when using machinery.

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Behaviours

Behaviours change as attitudes and beliefs change. Meetings may be conducted remotely more often, as opposed to large group meetings. Social distancing and personal space is already an issue, especially for workers in large factories. Some may be reluctant to interact socially with others, therefore causing issues around the productivity, teamwork and all-round functionality of an organisation.

Workers may feel inclined to clean down any work equipment they are using before use, which may cause delays when starting up/shutting down.

There may be a call for extra PPE (personal protective equipment) as workers look to ensure the safety of themselves and others around them. Seeing workers request PPE would see a huge behavioural shift in some organisations as, before Covid-19, many organisations may have experienced workers reluctant to wear PPE.

Worker protection

Worker protection is always imperative, no more so than when returning from experiencing such a deadly virus.

Safeguards, which should always be determined by a risk assessment and appropriate control processes, need to be in place for returning workers to ensure their workplaces limit the opportunity of further viral spread.

Each nation and region will have different government guidelines and protocols for organisations to meet to ensure worker safety when returning to work.

Some common methods are listed below:

- **Phased returns** – Not having all the organisation go back to work at once. This minimises the numbers and the chances of viruses spreading. Some organisations have chosen to split numbers into various shifts to cover production requirements. Phased returns will also help to ease workers back into work.
- **Social distancing** – Adhering to local government guidelines (e.g., two metres in the UK) helps contain the spread of the virus but will also assist in easing worker fears around contracting the virus.
- **Monitoring and detection technologies** – Some countries are using temperature scanners at the entrance of workplaces to scan workers before coming in to work, any worker with an abnormal reading will be sent away. One issue with temperature scanning is that asymptomatic workers may not be traced by a temperature scanner and therefore are at risk of spreading the virus.

- **Screens and protection** – Screens/dividers and protectors are being used on production lines, supermarket checkouts to canteens to stop the spread of any virus. The main purpose of the screen is to catch any airborne contaminant passing from worker to worker or customer/consumer to worker.
- **Personal protective equipment (PPE)** – Organisations may see a significant rise in the demand for PPE. Without neglecting workers and refusing PPE, organisations need to be sensitive to workers needs following such a frightening and disruptive period. At the same time organisations need to ensure they are smart following long layoffs, as they will have been generating little to no income in some circumstances. Risk assessments should establish what controls can be used prior to using PPE, if PPE is required the risk assessment should determine what PPE is necessary for the specific job/task. Identifying what PPE is required for roles/tasks will enable organisations to distribute the appropriate equipment to workers.

Training

Training will need to adapt, certainly for the immediate return to work, and control measures will need to be adhered to until a reliable vaccine is found. This requires a need to adapt and update training.

By adapting or creating new policies, procedures and training/re-training will reassure workers that organisations have identified new and emerging risks from Covid-19 and are protecting them, as best they can, from contracting the virus. Training rooms can no longer be packed full to observe the standard PowerPoint slides. Reduced training rooms then affects the productivity of an organisation, who, after such a lengthy layoff, will be in a rush to get back up on their feet quickly.

Below are ways in which training can be adapted to satisfy Covid-19 measures and restrictions:

- Training numbers reduced to accommodate half the capacity of a room.
- Virtual training (online, virtual reality).

Temporary labour will also need to be considered as a consequence of sickness and absence. With more contracted workers taking time off due to the extra precautions and anxiety coronavirus has caused, organisations may need to employ temporary labour to cover to sustain production or working capacity.

Health and wellbeing

Organisations should expect to see a rise, certainly in the immediate term, of sickness and absence – in some cases due to self-isolation. Should organisations have Key Performance Indicators for sickness and absence, they should account for such potential rises in sickness and absence.

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OSH business support

Additional support may be required to help OSH professionals manage risks and assess workers. More staff across organisations should be trained to risk-assess and promote safer, healthier ways of working.

Most OSH professionals will not have additional training or qualifications in such as occupational health. Occupational health is vital when managing health issues of workers which becomes important as some workers maybe returning may have directly suffered from Covid-19 and its implications will need to be managed regularly and consistently.

Workers who have not directly suffered from Covid-19 but have indirectly suffered, whether through the loss of family members or close friends, may also need additional support and regularly assessing. Support for mental health and wellness, tackling psychosocial risks, will become more vital.

Organisations without any occupational health resource may need to plan in for the additional resource.

How IOSH is supporting post-coronavirus returns to work

Business leaders and managers will be scrutinised closely for their return-to-work processes. What they say and do will be viewed critically not only by their competitors, suppliers and customers, but also by their staff and their families. It is a sensitive time, and one in which very important decisions need to be made.

IOSH, with its vast experience and its network of 48,000 occupational safety and health professional worldwide, can offer business the support it needs to put in place the right systems and processes to ensure a safe and healthy return to work.

Our expertise can help establish the parameters for successful organisations in the future.

For more information visit
www.iosh.com/returningsafely/workplaces