

Instilling Trust and Confidence in your Workforce

Do your employees feel safe returning to work? Around the country, state governments are loosening workplace restrictions, some employers are reopening their doors and other businesses will follow in the coming weeks. But are businesses and industries managing the federal, state, local and industry-specific guidelines set out for reopening, namely a decline in COVID-19 cases and an increase in testing and tracing capacities? Reopening during



a pandemic comes with increased risks, but there are measures that can be taken to mitigate the uncertainty of exposure to your employees, customers, and vendors. To gain the trust and confidence of your employees and customers and to promote a healthy and safe workplace, business owners should develop a plan with clear and achievable policies that fit their specific needs and demonstrate commitment to the health and safety of their workforce. Transparent communication and engagement are essential elements for business owners and management to build trust with their employees. Providing and communicating all current and applicable facility, local, state, and federal requirements and compliance guidelines of workplace health and safety is a big part of the transparency. Plans and procedures should be well documented, applicable and accessible to all employees. See https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf

Employers of returning employees should develop guidance and resources that cover effective controls for their specific workspace, tasks, and duties, preferably before employees return. Implementation of new practices to increase workplace safety and increase the trust of your employees ensures a safer and more compliant workplace. By demonstrating awareness of current practices/guidelines, workplace risks, and communication transparency, employers and management can build trust and improve the safety and health of their employees.

As referenced in the article by Jason Lang, CIH, CSP, titled, "[*Preparing Workplaces for Re-Entry*](#)", employers should follow a "hierarchy" of controls to mitigate workplace hazards related to COVID-19. In descending order, the most effective controls are elimination, substitution, engineering controls, administrative controls, and personal protective equipment (PPE). COVID-19 elimination or substitution control options are not possible or severely limited within most current workplaces. Engineering controls involve safeguarding employees from hazards in the workplace by means of redesigning workspaces, maximizing ventilation and circulation of fresh air, or installing barriers for protection. Administrative controls and safe work practices are minimizing exposure to a hazard through behavioral changes such as handwashing stations, antibacterial sanitizing gel, staggered work shifts and breaks, and egress patterns. Good hygiene entails hand washing and/or hand sanitizing regularly or every 60 minutes and after the use of the restroom, cleaning, smoking, returning from a break, and before starting a shift; further good hygiene practices include deep cleaning and daily scheduled cleanings of the facility, communal spaces, and workspaces with EPA approved antimicrobial cleaning/disinfecting products. And lastly PPE, when physical distancing and spacing are not possible, wearing gloves, goggles, and/or face masks/shields can be instrumental prevention techniques in the spread of infectious disease like COVID-19. While PPE does not eliminate the spread of diseases and should not be prioritized over the other control

measures noted above, it is another barrier that can lessen and slow the spread. Company management plans should include each of these controls to the extent they can in continuing operation or reopening a workplace.

Training employees and management of policy elements including office design or modifications, expected behavior changes such as hand washing, workspace disinfection, physical distancing, and expectations of self-certification and health checks of employees are important as reopening occurs. Consider a training session with clear and concise communication of a new or updated infectious disease/COVID-19 plan to employees and request a sign off acknowledging understanding. Display of clear signage, memos, meetings and other demonstrative materials can help keep employees up to date on changes in the policy about workplace health and safety and enable dialogue between employer and employees about the workplace procedures. When employees have a clear understanding of policy changes and observe management and co-workers following new procedures, they will be better able to adapt and adhere to policies. Regulatory recommendations and best practices covering the current pandemic as to workplace safety have been rapidly developing. Hiring a public health professional (e.g. industrial hygienist) to develop a plan specifically designed for your workplace and employees will provide the clearest guidance. Employers should make employees aware of all updates and changes to regulations, that in turn effect policies and procedures, and ensure new information is distributed as it becomes available.

Through procedures and controls such as physical distancing, staggered work shifts and break times, designated entrances/exits, work from home options to lessen the number of individuals in the space, coupled with encouragement and materials to support good hygiene behaviors, deep cleaning and daily scheduled cleanings, and communal space use limitations and redesign, the risks can be lessened. Should an employee become ill at work, or management is notified of an illness, employee confidentiality will be of utmost importance and information will be on an as-needed basis. The ill employee's workspace should be quarantined and deep cleaned, staff in the vicinity of the individual notified and directed to seek medical attention as needed. If after reopening additional infections are observed, more drastic measures may need to be taken. Should infections decrease, a vaccine or effective therapy becomes available, life may gradually revert back to "normal".

There are still many unknowns in this pandemic. Employers should acknowledge uncertainty while communicating planned steps to reduce the risk. Communication and building trust are key. Providing employees any updates or adjustments to the plan and procedures, acknowledging areas of uncertainty, and identifying potential future changes to the workplace will build trust in Employer-Employee relationship and increase overall workplace safety.

Benjamin Heckman, MPH, CIH
Principal
Direct: 717-706-3847 | Mobile: 717-385-8409
bheckman@rhprisk.com

At RHP Risk Management, we help our clients navigate the uncertainties associated with environmental and occupational hazards and risks. OSHA requires employers to provide safe and healthful working conditions. With this mandate in mind, OSHA has the authority to create standards employers must follow and can issue advisory guidance, including for standards applicable to COVID-19 in the workplace. See <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/standards.html> Our staff of public health professionals are experienced and trained in recognizing, anticipating and controlling hazards.

For more information on RHP's services and contact information, please visit <https://rhprisk.com/>.