

Reopening Your Business in a Post-COVID-19 World

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Lately, there has been a lot of discussion about what businesses need to be thinking about and doing as we all, hopefully, start to emerge from the throes of the global pandemic. On its face, the conversation can seem complicated and multifaceted. For example, how will we interact with one another, what will and won't be acceptable, and will things ever get back to normal? However, when one steps back and looks at the issue from an occupational health and safety perspective, the reality is simple. Businesses eventually will have to reopen. The only question is how can workers and the public be protected when that happens? That is the beginning, the middle and the end of it. It isn't any more complicated than that.

At the same time, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the answer is just as straightforward. Employers have to do what they have always been doing. Namely, identify the hazards, and implement policies and procedures that address those hazards.

What Are the Sources of the Hazards?

Sadly, we are all far too familiar with how COVID-19 spreads. When an infected person coughs, sneezes or exhales, they release droplets of infected fluid. These droplets can be breathed in by and infect others who are standing within two metres, or they can fall on nearby surfaces or objects, exposing others to infection if they touch these contaminated surfaces or objects. Knowing that, it is quite clear that the hazard of COVID-19 lies in its ability to spread when no social distancing or hygienic controls are in place.

Specifically, the hazards lie in people being exposed to one another, and in people being exposed to things that others have handled. As a result, it is these "*touchpoints*" that businesses' policies and procedures have to address.

Policies Designed to Protect Workers From Other People

As I've noted, COVID-19 can spread when people come into contact with one another or, more specifically, when they come into contact with the droplets from others who have breathed, coughed or sneezed. As a result, all businesses should be considering where and how their workers can or may come into contact with other people. For example, do workers interact with the public, with suppliers, with shippers and/or with other workers? If so, employers should be asking what protections make sense and may be needed. Will it be enough to require that masks and gloves be worn, or should shields be installed to protect workers as well? Is there a risk of people congregating in the workplace and, if so, how can social distancing be maintained? Will markers on the ground be needed, should separation barriers be erected, should one-way traffic lanes be considered, and can the number of people in a particular space be limited at any one time by limiting entry, staggering shifts and/or staggering deliveries? These are the types of questions that businesses should be asking themselves as they prepare to reopen.

Hygienic Controls for Surfaces and Objects That May Be Needed to Protect Workers

In addition to aerosol transmission, or other transmission directly between people, COVID-19 can be transmitted when people touch infected surfaces or objects. Accordingly, businesses need to be asking themselves how they can ensure that the threat of transmission posed by the workplace itself, as well as by the items in it, can best be addressed. This may involve implementing procedures whereby workers have to wear appropriate personal protective equipment such as gloves and face shields. It may require an increased cleaning schedule of the facility, as well as limiting who can enter into what areas. As well, if supplies are being delivered, it may involve questions surrounding how packages are to be disinfected and sanitized, and/or whether items need to be segregated. Finally, questions surrounding how payments can

be accepted or how paperwork can be exchanged need to be addressed. In asking these types of questions, employers should be identifying with what surfaces and objects workers are interacting, what risk they pose, and how can that risk be eliminated or, at the very least, minimized.

General Hygienic Controls That Will Be Needed

While employers are looking at how best to protect their workers from the *touchpoints* that pose a hazard of transmission, they have to be careful not to lose sight of the big picture, which in this case hinges on personal hygienic controls. All of the personal protective equipment in the world will not provide workers with complete protection from COVID-19. Gloves won't protect workers if the gloves are infected and workers touch their faces with them. Similarly, cleaning the workplace with increased frequency won't protect workers who happen to come into contact with infected surfaces between cleanings. To address these risks, businesses should always, in their minds and in their procedures, be going back to basics. In this case, that means making sure workers are washing their hands regularly with soap, and that hand sanitizer and cleaning wipes are always readily available. That, in conjunction with keeping surfaces and objects clean, and with limiting people's ability and opportunity to transmit infection from one to the other, will go a long way to protecting the workplace, its workers and anyone who comes in.

Conclusion

The approach that is set out above, namely the identification of hazards and the implementation of policies and procedures to address those hazards, is nothing new. It is a simple truth of occupational health and safety. In this case, that truth can be realized upon if employers develop policies that look to address the ways in which the virus may be transmitted in the workplace, by appropriately training their workers on those policies, and by ensuring that any policies that are implemented are effectively monitored.

This approach is tried and tested, and it works. Employers have used it for decades to keep their workplaces safe, and even though COVID-19 is unprecedented, the way to address it effectively from an occupational health and safety perspective isn't. As Margaret Thatcher said: *"Of course it's the same old story. Truth usually is the same old story."*

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