# Coming back to Work from the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic
# Workplace Reentry Guidelines for General Office Space

As the flattening of the COVID-19 curve has occurred, states are beginning to allow non-essential companies and office spaces to reopen. Property management, facility management, and Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) professionals are now planning for the reentry of the workplace.

There are many factors to consider when reopening an office and it takes preparation, management, communication, and training to anticipate and address the health and safety risks. There is "no one size fits all" approach and a customized company guideline will have to be developed. The success of reopening depends on how much time you allocate to your planning strategy. These three key areas have been identified to help you start the process:

- Reviewing, developing and executing the operations of the office space including the evaluation of the indoor environmental quality (IEQ)
- Providing for and managing the health and wellness of the employees
- Understanding and implementing government and reputable organizations guidelines and policy

**Review, develop, and execute the operations of the office space including the evaluation of the IEQ**

Identify the return to work COVID-19 safety related tasks prior to the reopening of the office. First, a safety audit evaluation of the office building and internal spaces should be conducted. Once this is done, engineering and administrative controls can be designed, installed and/or implemented to reduce the risk of transmission among employees. In addition, an assessment and review of the existing written safety programs should be conducted. Evaluate your risk mitigation strategies and decide if they are sufficient to keep employees healthy and safe. Some strategies may not be economically or technically feasible. An example is an engineering retrofit such as Ultraviolet (non-ionizing) radiation install that may contribute to other safety risks and maintenance costs.

- Create a return to work safety program that incorporates both engineering and administrative controls. Engineering controls isolate workers (such as using sneeze guards or increased outdoor air ventilation) from hazards, whereas administrative controls change the way people work.

  - Engineering Controls
    - Evaluate the space for reconfiguration to include but not limited to entrance and points of egress, elevators, lobbies, reception areas, restrooms, conference rooms, break rooms, cafeteria, office space, and other high traffic areas.

- o Evaluating high risk areas for vulnerable individuals, (i.e. older adults and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions).
- o Include recommendations for adding Plexiglas or Acrylic barrier sheets, "sneeze guards," floor signage, touchless technologies (i.e. motion sensor entry doors), etc.
- o Evaluate the feasibility of increasing the building's ventilation airflow exchange and filtration efficiency in office spaces. This is in addition to common areas such as conference rooms, hallways, dining rooms, and restrooms, etc. This will warrant close collaboration of in-house facilities personnel and/or heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) maintenance contractors.
  - o Identify the ventilated outdoor air exchange percent verse. recirculated air, and determine whether additional outdoor air be introduced without causing discomfort to the occupants (i.e. higher humidity and heat load in the summer).

- – Administrative Controls
  - o Social Distancing protocols and constant communications via verbal and infographic displays.
  - o Staggering administrative office workforce returns.
  - o Creating an action plan when a(n) (unconfirmed COVID-19) sick employee comes to work.
  - o Supplement with thermal temperature readings prior to the employees entering the building using non-contact devices.
  - o Determining cleaning and disinfecting protocols for areas that are high touch points or if an employee is COVID-19 infected or in close contact with a COVID-19 positive person.
  - o Safety protocols for visitors and vendors that are not employees who come to the office.

- Cleaning and Disinfectants: Conduct an assessment of all areas to be "deep" or more intensely (including cracks and crevices, and hard to reach areas) cleaned, and develop cleaning and disinfecting protocol that includes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines and using United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-registered household disinfectants. Collaborate with remediation and cleaning contractors who specialize in COVID-19 disinfection procedures. Disinfection methods may combine fogging and manual cleaning surfaces. Fogging allows for better and more even distribution of disinfection liquid surface contact.

- Ensure touch points are identified for cleaning on a daily or more basis, depending on the frequency of usage. Examples are chairs, telephones, desks/tables, counter tops, door knobs, elevator buttons, handrails, napkin/towel dispensers, vending machines, photocopiers, break room coffee and other common use appliances, sink hardware, etc.

- Evaluate the IEQ of the building which includes but is not limited to:
  - – Ventilation – measure air flow through the supplied air diffusers and/or supplement with velocity and static pressures readings.

- Water damage on ceiling tiles, floor tiles, and carpets
- Mold growth
- Water stagnation from water towers, decorative fountains, and hot water sources that can cause Legionnaire's Disease.
- Indoor and Outdoor waste
- Odors
- Pests

- Be prepared with proper personal protective equipment (PPE) and supplies like face coverings and hand sanitizer for your employees.

## Providing and managing the health and wellness of the employees

Communication and transparency are key for a successful return. Employees want to know that their employers are concerned about their well-being, health, and safety. Communication should be easy to understand and be in preferred languages spoken or read by the employees. Employees need to know what is being done to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (i.e., disinfection routine, health policies for staff, and health and safety measures in place). Employees must understand any new work and health policies and protocols established, and should be made comfortable to ask questions and reach out to management.

Inform and educate employees on a continuous basis. Emphasize and reiterate the indefinite need to wear their facial covering and masks. Inform them on how often to wash their hands, or use hand sanitizers. Too frequent use of hand sanitizer can actually cause skin dryness depending on the concentration of Isopropanol. Other additional training should include hazard communications, PPE usage, respiratory training and fit testing (if required) for in-house custodial staff. Especially since most of the EPA N-listed disinfectants are considered skin and eye irritants, and corrosive.

## Understand and implement government and reputable organization guidelines and policy

Always stay informed with Federal CDC, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), State and City regulations and guidelines to update, and maintain your COVID-19 procedures and plans and to inform your employees. You may also want to refer to your industry association or the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA) guidelines that may provide more detailed and specific information.

## Contact PHASE Associates

PHASE Associates is providing consulting and training services during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are currently working with our clients on disinfecting and cleaning, temperature readings, and back to work best practices, protocols and guidelines following federal agency and industry guidelines. Our staff includes CIH and CSP in addition to expertise in biosafety. We are listed in the AIHA consultants list for CIH, CSP, and Industrial Hygiene, Indoor Air Quality, and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and health and safety related training.

For more information on how PHASE Associates can help you prepare for <u>Coronavirus workplace reentry</u>, please contact <u>Gary Schwartz, President, CIH, CSP</u>; <u>Ken Bickerton, Vice President, CIH, CSP</u> and <u>Adam Schwarzenberg, Director, CIH, CSP</u>.

**References**

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