

Infectious Disease Outbreak Plan: Considerations for Employers Preparing for Coronavirus

The recent spread of the coronavirus 2019 (also referred to as COVID-19) has become a cause of concern for many people worldwide. Employers and employees alike may be curious how this could impact the workplace. As global medical officials work to contain the disease, preparedness is key. Employers across the U.S. may have to adjust work and sick-leave policies, and consider the implementation of their infectious disease outbreak plan and/or business continuity plan, or develop one if they don't already have an existing one.

How are businesses responding to coronavirus?

Here is a look at issues employers may have to handle in the wake of coronavirus concerns, as well as actions they may consider taking in an effort to protect both employees and the business.

Know the facts

It's important to find and refer to authoritative sources to help you understand the facts around coronavirus.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for example, published "[Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers](#)" that will likely be updated as more data becomes available. This may be a useful starting point for employers and individuals.

Also, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has compiled a useful guide on [coronavirus information and FAQs](#).

With the understanding that the global as well as national, state and local situation is fluid and circumstances change, and employers should continue to reference reliable sources of information regularly.

Communications & workplace policy changes

Employers can help disseminate information about coronavirus and other infectious diseases to their workforce, again from trusted sources like the CDC.

More importantly, employers should be ready to implement strategies that protect their workforce and to make employees aware of actions designed to keep them safe in the workplace.

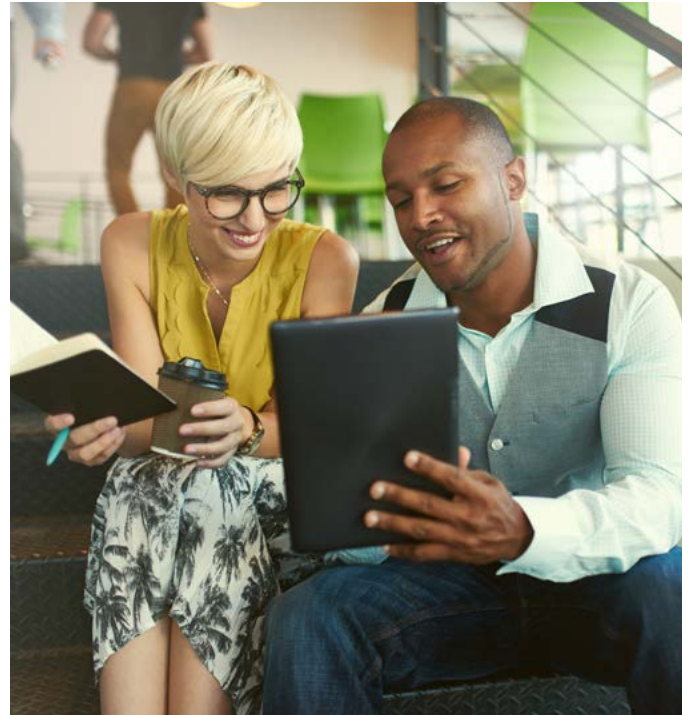
As part of the information-sharing process, consider providing employees with a detailed explanation of your planned or existing sick-leave policy. During this health crisis, take time to reassess company policies such as sick leave allowances. For example, a current policy may outline a cap on the number of sick days employees are permitted to take, but workers may feel obligated to come in when they're still ill, even after reaching the limit.

Before making any changes to your policies, you may first want to review employees' rights to unpaid and paid leave under the FMLA, state and local paid sick leave as well as paid family and medical leave programs. For example, you may have employees who want to self-quarantine to keep themselves away from anyone in the office who may potentially be sick. Can you as an employer cap the number of employees who ask to take time off? The answer will vary depending on the individual state paid sick leave law.

Also, be careful about making any policy decisions that suggest unlawful discrimination against an employee based on their national origin. If you're uncertain about the requirements that apply to your business, you may want to work with an experienced HR professional.

Another important factor to consider is what you, as an employer, choose to do when any type of illness may be going around the office, including respiratory illness such as the coronavirus. For instance, you may encourage employees to stay home during flu season if they're showing symptoms. The same goes for you: showing up to work sick while urging others to behave differently can set a poor example and may lead other workers to follow this example.

To be certain everyone is on the same page with respect to your company's sick-leave policies, consider a full-scale communications effort to address the topic.



You may want to outline in detail the extent of your current sick-leave policy and, if you are making changes to respond to the coronavirus outbreak, spell out all the information as clearly as possible.

It's a good idea to appoint an HR representative (or similarly informed company representative) to become knowledgeable on the situation and to act as a contact for employees who have questions or concerns.

Evaluate work from home policies

In the wake of coronavirus concerns, companies may consider expanding or adopting a work-from-home or remote working policy for employees, even if it's on a short-term or temporary basis.

Employers should also consider exempt vs. non-exempt employee status and the potential impact on pay for work-at-home employees.

Travel considerations

Many companies have decided to curtail or completely suspend business travel. Businesses

in general are also re-examining the value of business travel to other locations, due to the continuing spread of this infectious disease. Businesses should continue to monitor [travel advisories](#).

Experts recommend paying close attention to national and international travel advisories, as well as any specific concerns issued by reliable public health authorities. Any recommended or proposed business travel restrictions should be carefully reviewed, and employers should make sure that employees are fully informed about any travel-related risks.

Keep in mind that businesses can't restrict an employee's personal travel decisions.

What can you do to help maintain a safe & healthy work environment

Whether it's the current coronavirus outbreak, flu season, or any other time of year, employers can communicate some general best practices to staff members to ensure a safe, healthy work environment. While obvious, the following actions can help reduce the spread of illnesses:



- Wash hands frequently.
- Avoid close contact with others who are ill.
- Scale back on face-to-face meetings in favor of conference calls.
- Consider requesting that employees bring their own utensils and coffee mugs from home (and taking them home every night to clean before using again).

A minimal investment to keep hand sanitizers, antibacterial soap, and other disinfecting agents on hand can pay dividends by improving employee health. You may also want to encourage employees to focus on cleaning often-used surfaces — their office telephone, computer keyboard and mouse, and other commonly used areas.

For more information, be sure to review OSHA's guidelines on [COVID-19](#).

Have a business continuity plan in place

The coronavirus outbreak is only the latest threat to warrant implementation of a business continuity plan (BCP) in your workplace.

Documenting steps to follow in the event of a disruption due to coronavirus (or natural disaster, loss of power, large-scale cybercrime, etc.) can be the key to your company's long-term survival. A BCP involves identifying potential disastrous events that may affect your company and assembling a list of procedures that detail how to respond to, operate during and recover from these specific threats.

Though business continuity plans may appear complex and time-consuming, even a basic set of policies and procedures can be useful. Both large and small companies can be impacted by business interruptions, but smaller companies may not have acquired the necessary financial resources to quickly recover after a period of downtime.

Leaders and all other employees should be informed of the details of your BCP and/or infectious disease outbreak plan. Depending on your business, customers should also be informed of the impact of your BCP plan on service.

For employees:

- Inform them about their roles and give them the opportunity to practice business continuity procedures.
- Document the intended methods of communication in the event of an emergency — via text message, phone, or email. Written instructions included in a small business continuity plan should categorize additional job responsibilities.

Policies and procedures can help guide employees until conditions return to a business-as-usual environment.

Taking the initiative to update customers on a continuity plan demonstrates a proactive and committed approach. To maintain customer relationships through a crisis, plan to communicate with clients in a variety of ways, such as:



- Updated website information
- Communicating via social media channels
- Contact key customers by phone or email.

Assure customers they have ways to stay in touch with your business during a crisis. Providing a range of communication methods before a business interruption occurs may help ease customers' uncertainty if and when a serious situation arises.

People may be concerned about infectious disease control both in and out of the workplace. As an employer, you can take appropriate preventative actions – obtaining and continuing to stay informed of the facts, reviewing company policies including sick-leave policies, work at home policies and business travel plans, and doing everything possible to promote a safe work environment – to help keep your business thriving during difficult times.

Take this opportunity to check your current policies and procedures to ensure you and your business are ready for whatever comes next.

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