OPINION | COMMENTARY

How to Keep Workers Healthy on the Job

Employers can stagger breaks, deep-clean surfaces, limit meetings and offer on-site testing.

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April 19, 2020 11:44 am ET

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The threat from Covid-19 won't end when the epidemic subsides. The recent upsurge in cases in Singapore and Japan shows how easily the virus can re-emerge. It will be a constant threat until an effective vaccine is on the market. So how does America function? What happens at work sites could be the difference between relative safety and constant disruption from new outbreaks.

The virus will have fresh opportunities to spread as workers return to the job. But businesses can take steps to minimize risk and make the country safer. Employers need to start crafting plans for safe, healthy and productive work environments in an age of Covid risk.

The first step is reducing the risks of commuting. The virus can spread from person to person in crowded spaces and through shared surfaces that become contaminated. Mass transit systems in New York, San Francisco and Chicago probably contributed to early spread. Cities have stepped up cleaning protocols, but workers should limit their use of mass transit when possible, and be aware that surfaces can spread infection. Businesses can encourage carpooling or deploy corporate vans or other forms of transport

where hygiene and social distancing are easier to control.

Companies can also continue to encourage telework, and Zoom calls aren't only for employees stuck at home. Technology can allow for collaboration, even on the job site. Not all meetings based in the office need to happen in person.

Employers should also reduce density, which may be easier in offices than on shop floors. Employers can, say, split workers into groups and alternate who shows up in person and who works from home. Companies can allow staggered schedules, especially to avoid rush hours on crowded trains and buses. Employers might also consider redesigning open office plans or manufacturing plants to allow for more distance between workers, so that one sick person can't take down an entire workforce.

Another consideration is meals. Companies should encourage workers to bring food to the office or have lunch delivered in prepackaged containers. Employers that operate a cafeteria can continue to do so with added measures for safety: more supervision of the health of food handlers, for example. Businesses ought to continue to run safe food services instead of letting employees wander to the corner deli, where precautions may be uncertain and spaces more crowded.

Then there's cleaning. Employees will need reassurance that surfaces are disinfected regularly. Give disinfecting wipes to all employees and ask them to clean surfaces they often touch, such as keyboards and telephones, regularly. Businesses can also establish routine deep cleaning of factory floors and retail establishments. Allow employees to wear masks if they wish, and pass out hand sanitizer liberally.

Businesses should limit gatherings to a modest size, perhaps five people safely distanced from one another. At least for now, employers should keep settings such as break rooms or kitchen areas closed or limit the number of people who can share the space. On shop floors, employees can take breaks in staggered groups throughout the day to avoid crowding break areas.

Travel should be discouraged unless absolutely essential, and even then, companies should make sure virus levels are low in both the home city and the destination. Businesses can probably resume domestic travel sooner than trips abroad. They won't want employees getting caught in 14-day international quarantines.

Frequent communication with workforces is essential, especially when there are changes in protocols. This can be done electronically via video or email rather than face to face. Consider designating a company point person whom employees can contact when they have Covid-19 concerns.

Office buildings, factories and retail sites have to adhere to containment rules set by local governments. For businesses that operate in multiple jurisdictions, that could mean different measures in different places. Businesses should try to create a plan that can be instituted across locations.

Finally, it's essential to provide access to rapid diagnostic testing if an employee becomes ill. Testing can be brought to work to facilitate screening for those who might have mild symptoms that wouldn't necessarily trigger a trip to the doctor, or for those who think they were exposed. Employers should make sure a positive diagnosis doesn't become punitive: Maintain pay when someone agrees to self-isolate or stays home while awaiting a test result.

There will be more Covid cases. Businesses need plans for how to address infections, including tracing workplace contacts and engaging local health authorities. It sounds daunting, but Covid-19 doesn't need to seize our social activities or commandeer work lives.

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