5 Ways to Manage Small Business Coronavirus Concerns When Employees Can't Work From Home

While COVID-19 has pushed many companies to adopt remote work practices, here are some ideas to consider for employees who do not have the option to work remotely.

Businesses across the U.S. and the world have swiftly changed their policies to manage the coronavirus crisis, with major corporations, including Google, Facebook and Microsoft, recommending or mandating remote work. While these actions have garnered many headlines, less digital ink has been spilled about the many employees who are unable to work from home.

In industries such as retail, restaurants and manufacturing, workers don't have the luxury of performing their duties from home. Small and medium-sized businesses in this position instead need to manage expectations and develop new strategies to protect both their employees and customers from COVID-19.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has created a Coronavirus Response Toolkit that includes CDC recommendations and sharable graphics for businesses and employees to help keep people safe. These graphics can be shared on social media, websites, and more. But there are other things business owners can do to manage critical employees during this important time.

Here are five ways some companies are managing coronavirus concerns for employees who are unable to work remotely. Some of these ideas may be adopted or adapted by small businesses, too.

Update and enforce sanitary health practices

Many companies are making it a priority to enforce basic hygiene standards to prevent germs from spreading.

These companies are following CDC guidelines for employees, which include mandating that workers wash their hands for 20 seconds frequently, cover their nose and mouth with their inner elbow when sneezing or coughing, avoid touching their face and sanitize surfaces often with EPA-approved disinfectants.

In addition, businesses are offering hand sanitizer (if they can obtain it) around the workplace for employees and customers to use if hand washing is not immediately available.

Encourage social distancing

Some employers are implementing new rules involving social distancing. Effectively, this means that employees and customers need to avoid handshakes, hugs and all close social contact. Instead, employees are encouraged to elbow bump, bow, or wave to acknowledge one another or customers — or maybe even jazz hands if you want to bring a little humor to what feels like a strange situation.

In some cases, social distancing may also include limiting travel if that is in some way part of work. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has recommended that anyone elderly and vulnerable to coronavirus especially needs to lessen travel to protect themselves.

Expand sick leave

The coronavirus crisis has pushed many companies with employees who are unable to work from home to expand sick leave. Corporations including Walmart, Olive Garden parent company Darden Restaurants and others have created new sick leave rules to help stop the spread of coronavirus between employees and between employees and customers.

For example, Walmart — the nation's largest private employer with 1.5 million workers — created an "emergency employee leave program" that was spurred by one of its associates in Kentucky testing positive for COVID-19.

Most small businesses, however, do not have the same financial cushion that a company like Walmart has to provide sick leave. Other options could be explored for small businesses who cannot afford it. Business owners can talk openly and honestly with employees about sick leave to create set expectations.

Communicate with customers

With coronavirus concerns high, this is an ideal time to communicate with customers about what you're doing to keep your business clean, to keep your employees healthy, any hours-of-operation changes and more.

One business communicating frequently with customers is Amtrak, which notified customers about its new enhanced cleaning protocols and other policy changes via email.

Social media also offers a wealth of information on communicating with customers during these uneasy times. One helpful resource for customer communication is Facebook's Business Resource Hub, which has guides and tools for customer support and engagement during the coronavirus crisis.

Close and clean if exposure happens

If a worker has been exposed to the coronavirus or has tested positive for the virus, the next step for businesses is to close for at least a day and thoroughly clean the facility.

For example, a Seattle-based Starbucks location that had an employee test positive for COVID-19, recently closed its doors temporarily in order to perform "a deep clean overnight."