Preparing for the Return to On-Site Work:
A Guide to Implementing a Successful Transition

By Rosie Sandoval | Jun 17, 2020 | HR Daily Advisor

Most companies impacted by COVID-19 are anxious to return to normal business operations. With the proper protocols in place to ensure the health and safety of employees and customers, returning to on-site work can be the right decision for many businesses.

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However, to successfully transition back to the workplace, employers must develop a strategy that addresses a host of new variables and requires carefully coordinated decisions. Here are recommendations for how to begin building a blueprint to get your business moving forward again.

Coordinate Employee Return to On-Site Operations

Developing a plan to phase employees back to the workplace requires proper preparation and communication. First and foremost, determine who can return to the office, and be sure to communicate with all employees about the new return-to-work arrangements.

Keep in mind that before implementing changes, employers must first consider the nature of each job and its function and ability to restart safely and calculate the minimum number of staff members needed to sustain on-site operations in case of absenteeism. Accommodations for employees in vulnerable populations such as those with compromised immune systems, working parents, and other caregivers must be considered, as well.

Once employees know who will be coming back on-site, establish whether modifications should be made to paid-time-off, sick leave, and attendance policies to ensure employees only report on-site if they are healthy.

Public health and safety recommendations (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)) should also be monitored, and official state and local guidelines should be met. Lastly, develop a written protocol for confirmed or suspected COVID cases in order to keep all employees safe.

Implement Worksite Logistics for the Return to Work

A smooth, organized transition back to the workplace will help employees feel comfortable and safe and avoid unnecessary disruption. Start by identifying the personal protective equipment needs of those returning on-site, and work with employees to transfer computers or other equipment from home back into the office while supplying proper disinfectants to clean items.

Next, focus on details such as reactivating badge access to buildings or worksites and reinstating any local systems access necessary.

Prioritize Workplace Safety

Health and safety should be top priorities as employers prepare to bring workers back on-site. To alleviate anxiety and help employees feel safe, they'll need assurance that every precaution to reduce risk has been taken.

The goal is to implement changes that limit any virus spread, and as an employer, any safety-related concerns or reported cases should be responded to as quickly as possible. To ensure maximum safety, appropriately ask workers about their exposure to the virus upon their return, increase sanitization procedures for workstations and common areas such as more frequent deep cleanings, and remind employees about hand-washing and other best practices via e-mail or office posters.

Other best practices include implementing social distancing requirements such as staggered work shifts and breaks, modifications to the physical office space, and the continuation of virtual meetings even when in the office. Additionally, slow the pace at which people (workers and visitors) enter facilities, and restrict access to common areas to minimize contact among workers.

Bottom Line

Returning to work on-site will not mean a return to operations exactly as they were pre-COVID. However, to manage the complex process of resuming on-site operations, employers need to make important decisions, coordinate many moving pieces, and remain sensitive to employee needs.

Companies should consider how to help frontline managers lead with empathy, communicate transparently, and make decisions quickly so employees understand where they stand, have access to the resources available to them, and feel comfortable sharing feedback so they feel safe and accommodated.