

RETURNING TO WORK

What exactly needs to be done?

The first step in making your workplace 'Covid-19 secure' is to complete a risk assessment and review existing policies, such as your infection control policy.

Covid-19 is a biological hazard, and like any workplace hazard, appropriate control measures will need to be put in place to reduce the risk of someone being infected. Normally, the goal is to eliminate hazards where possible; however, unlike a faulty piece of equipment, the virus cannot simply be removed. Instead, the aim is to introduce suitable and sufficient control measures to reduce the risk of contracting the virus to as low a level as is 'reasonably practicable'. In other words, unless the time, cost and effort involved in implementing a control significantly outweighs the risk posed, you must take the precaution.

The government's new safe working guidance outlines, by sector, what controls are appropriate and how to implement them. Based on these guidelines, your Covid-19 risk assessment should consider the following:

- How can you ensure a two-metre gap is maintained between employees and any other persons that may be affected by the work activity?
- Are screens needed at reception or customer-facing areas?
- How can you better organise seating areas?
- Have you put provisions in place for office, delivery and eating areas?
- How are you going to ensure testing is completed?
- Are handwashing facilities in place, including hot and cold running water, soap and disposable hand towels? If these aren't available, consider providing hand sanitiser.
- Are disposable tissues available to reduce the threat of transmission?
- Is there an effective action plan in place to deal with someone with suspected symptoms?
- How and when will certain areas and hand-contact points be disinfected to prevent spread?
- Can you display education pieces, such as a symptoms chart and handwashing guidance, throughout the workplace to raise awareness and promote safe practices?
- How do you plan to monitor employees' health and ensure you remain up to date with the latest guidance?
- Are contractors and visitors managed appropriately? Potential control measures may include only allowing essential work to take place, providing handwashing facilities and ensuring social distancing is maintained.
- What personal protective equipment, if any, is needed? Employees should be allowed to wear face coverings, along as it does not affect other PPE use and therefore put them at increased risk.

With the government announcing that businesses reopening under current lockdown restrictions will be subject to inspections, and the HSE reminding employees that they can report any genuine concerns to the regulator, it is vital to ensure your workplace is compliant. But it's not all about avoiding enforcement action – by demonstrating to employees that you are taking their safety seriously, you can help to allay concerns and minimise the risk of refusals to work, making for a much smoother transition to the 'new norm', reaffirming your position as a responsible employer, and ultimately saving lives.

Nick Wilson is Director of Health and Safety Services at Ellis Whittam