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A Complete Guide to Managing COVID-19 in the Workplace

Steps Smaller Businesses Can – and Must
– Take to Keep Employees Safe at Work

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Managing a workplace in the midst of a pandemic is novel territory for every business owner. Companies now must focus not only on profits and losses, but also on implementing social distancing, sanitization and other new initiatives to reduce the chance that employees and customers will contract COVID-19 at business sites. This white paper compiles several recent Axcet HR Solutions blog posts to provide comprehensive guidance for fighting back against COVID-19 at work.
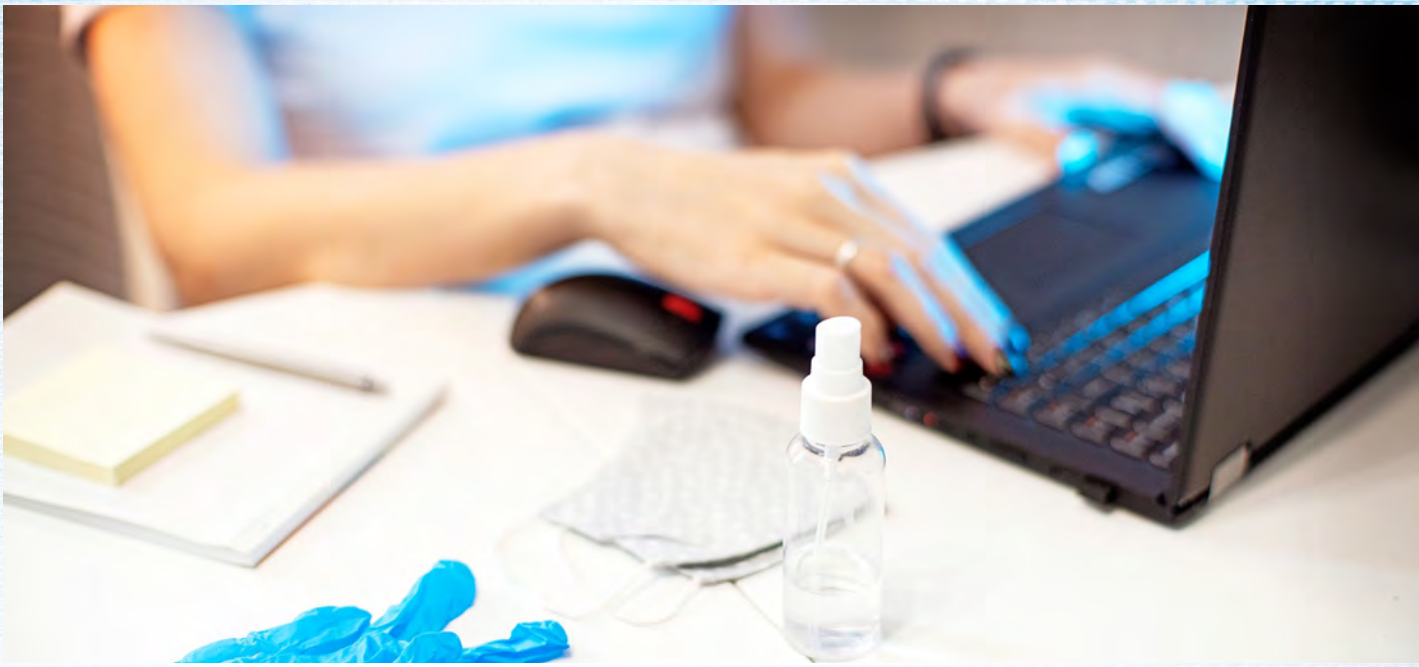
Keeping Employees Safe as Stay-at-Home Orders End
— Jeanette Coleman, SPHR & SHRM-SCP Director of Human Resources

State and local governments have lifted COVID-19 stay-at-home mandates, allowing businesses across the country to reopen their traditional worksites. But even as employees trickle back from their home offices, the post-pandemic workplace will be anything but business as usual.

Just as companies had to navigate uncharted waters when employees began teleworking, they now must take unprecedented measures to keep employees safe at the worksite. And the situation is fluid, so employers should regularly monitor advice from health authorities and build flexibility into their return-to-work plans.

Federal return-to-work guidelines
The federal "Opening Up America Again" plan announced April 16, 2020, recommends that employers develop and implement coronavirus-related workplace safety policies that address:

- Social distancing and protective equipment;
- Temperature checks (to assess whether employees have a fever);

- Testing, isolating and contact tracing;
- Sanitation;
- Use and disinfection of common and high-traffic areas; and
- Business travel (which should be canceled, if possible).

Note that the Opening Up America Again plan encourages employers to decide how they will handle the workplace safety issues listed above. It does not specify the steps employers should take.

{ **For now, public health experts recommend that vulnerable people continue to shelter in place** }

Further, the federal guidelines call for employers to monitor their workforces for "indicative" symptoms and prevent symptomatic employees from physically returning to work until a medical professional clears them. In the event an employee tests positive for COVID-19, employers should implement pre-established procedures for workforce contact tracing while maintaining the infected person's anonymity.

For now, public health experts recommend that vulnerable people continue to shelter in place. Companies who have these individuals – such as those age 65 and older and those with diabetes or chronic lung disease or asthma – among their employment ranks will need to develop a plan for protecting them before asking them to come back to work. Employers should not, however, dictate which employees are considered vulnerable, but should leave the decision up to each employee to self-designate.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified seven groups who may be at high risk for severe illness if they contract COVID-19. These groups are:

- People age 65 years and older
- People who live in nursing homes or long-term care facilities
- People with underlying medical conditions, including:
    - chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
    - serious heart conditions
    - immunocompromised
- People with severe obesity
- People with diabetes
- People with liver disease

The Opening Up America Again plan issued by the White House recommends individuals in these groups continue to shelter in place until the third phase of the plan.

The Centers for Disease Control and prevention released parallel recommendations outlining the following safety actions employers should be prepared to take before reopening:

- Actively encourage sick employees to stay home;

- Mitigate where and how team members could be exposed to COVID-19 at work;

- Provide supplies that support respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene, including tissues, no-touch trashcans, soap and hand sanitizer (containing at least 60% alcohol) in multiple locations;

- Discourage handshaking and office supply sharing;

- Provide employees with resources, such as CDC articles about coughing and sneezing etiquette and the importance of proper handwashing;

- Train all employees on these safety actions; and

- Routinely clean and disinfect the work environment and frequently touched surfaces, such as desktops, keyboards, telephones, handrails and doorknobs. The Environmental Protection Agency lists disinfectants it recommends using against the coronavirus.

Additional CDC tips to help keep employees healthy as they return to work include minimizing face-to-face contact between colleagues and with anyone else who enters the workplace. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommendations mirror those from the federal government and the CDC.

Providing personal protective equipment

The CDC suggests that, with the exception of health care workers, returning employees need not wear N-95 respirators. OSHA has not classified cloth face coverings as personal protective equipment (PPE), but has said they are appropriate for use by low-risk employees. CDC guidelines recommend they be worn to protect others anytime social distancing or guarding cannot be maintained.

Employers who require employees to wear face masks should either provide the masks or cover their cost unless an employee wishes to purchase or make his or her own mask. Employers also should remind workers that they should wash their masks often, be careful not to touch their eyes, nose or mouth when they take their masks off and wash their hands immediately after removing their masks.

While it is important to get people back to work and the economy moving again, workforce health should be every company's highest priority. To keep returning workers safe at work, employers should adopt a multi-pronged approach that includes:

- Consulting emerging counsel from local, state and federal health officials;

- Updating existing employee handbooks and HR policies to reflect new, COVID-19-related workplace safety practices; and

- Staying flexible to accommodate unprecedented employee needs as the novel coronavirus continues to threaten.

✅ Make Room for Employees Returning to Work: Social Distancing Tips for Employers

— Jeanette Coleman, SPHR & SHRM-SCP Director of Human Resources

As some employees prepare to go back to work during the coronavirus pandemic, employers should encourage them to follow recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health officials to keep everyone safe at the worksite. Chief among the guidelines designed to slow the spread of COVID-19 is social distancing – important because even people who show no symptoms can still transmit the highly contagious disease.

Business owners may need to make adjustments to their work environments and institute new policies to help ensure employees avoid gathering and maintain at least 6 feet of physical distance between each other throughout the workday. Taking such social distancing measures can lower the impact COVID-19 has on businesses and entire communities.

According to a UK scientist, the risk of spreading COVID-19 is up to 30 times higher when someone is 1 meter (or about 3 feet), rather than 2 meters away from an infected person. This statistic underscores the importance of social distancing, which businesses can encourage by:

- Rearranging workstations so they are at least 6 feet apart;

- Repositioning tables and chairs in meeting rooms to allow people using them to maintain a distance of 6 feet or more;

- Holding meetings via teleconference or video, even when employees are at the same worksite;

- Limiting access to areas where employees tend to congregate. Kitchens, staff lounges or workrooms, for example, may need to be off-limits for a while. For areas like restrooms or designated smoking areas that need to remain accessible, employers may wish to regulate the number of people who can be in a common area at any one time. Posting signage asking people to stay 6 feet apart while they're in the same room and/or marking 6-foot positions with letter Xs made from brightly colored tape on the floor could serve as visual reminders to maintain appropriate social distance from others;

- Adding partitions or other protective elements;

- Suspending the use of standing desks in open floor plans, unless protective partitions are in place, to reduce the possibility of cough or sneeze droplets traveling into shared spaces;

- Considering phased, flexible or alternating schedules to stagger workforces and reduce the number of employees who work onsite at any given time; and

- Allowing only authorized employees in the office and denying entry to non-essential visitors.

Implementing these and other steps to limit contact, avoid large gatherings and maintain 6 feet of physical space between employees, per CDC and other health authority guidelines, will help employers reduce the transmission of COVID-19 to employees, customers, consultants and suppliers. By taking these measures, companies will be more successful at maintaining healthy work environments, business operations and communities.

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Should You Require Face Masks in Your Workplace?
— Sherri Bennett, SPHR & SHRM-CP Senior Human Resources Consultant

With new information being learned almost weekly about the novel coronavirus, it can be difficult to determine the best way to keep your workforce, customers and business contacts safe. Wearing face masks is becoming a safeguard practice.

CDC and WHO recommendations
While states and cities are communicating differing recommendations and requirements regarding face masks, the Centers for Disease Control and World Health Organization both have recommendations about face masks.

The CDC recommends wearing a face mask to help slow the spread of the coronavirus, especially in social settings where physical distancing is difficult, such as retail stores. Cloth face coverings have been shown to stop respiratory droplets from spreading, although not as completely as surgical masks or N-95 respirators do.

For environments where workers interact with the public, such as restaurants and retail stores, face masks for employees are most likely required for legal business operations. Knowing these requirements will guide employer decisions about requiring employees to wear face masks.

WHO recommends wearing masks that completely cover the nose and mouth and are changed often. The organization further advises that people wash their hands thoroughly before putting on a mask, avoid touching the mask once it's in place, clean their hands with either sanitizer or soap and water if the mask is touched and not re-use single-use masks. Some of these recommendations may not be possible in all work environments.

For environments where workers interact with the public, such as restaurants and retail stores, face masks for employees are most likely required for legal business operations.

Are face masks PPE?
While OSHA requires employers to provide or pay for personal protective equipment (PPE) that employees need for protection from workplace hazards, cloth face coverings that are ordered for all to wear in public settings fall outside of that description. That lessens the employer's responsibility to provide masks and training on how to use them, but doesn't prevent it. Employers can choose to provide masks and instruction on how to use them at work or require employees wear masks at work if it is mandated by state and local municipal authorities.

Employee refusal to wear a mask

Barring a verified disability or union agreements against it, legal sources say employers can require employees to wear masks. Employers should explain state or local requirements for mask wearing and be careful to have specific conversations with employees who claim any disability that prevents wearing a mask. Refusal without verified disability may enable employers to use disciplinary measures, such as sending employees home or suspending them from work.

The general consensus is that face masks prevent the spread of droplets, protecting others from the wearer's exhalations. They are 100% effective neither at preventing spread nor completely protecting the wearer, but they do provide a measure of prevention. Employers should consider all current information and governing body requirements when deciding whether or not to require face masks in their workplaces.

EEOC Says Employers Can Measure Workers' Temperatures Due to Pandemic, But You'll Want to Read This First

— Jeanette Coleman, SPHR & SHRM-SCP Director of Human Resources

to return as much as possible to business as usual. These businesses also have been tasked with keeping their workplaces healthy — not only protecting against the risk a customer could transmit the illness to an employee, but from the risk an employee could transmit the virus to other employees, customers or vendors.

If you own or manage a workplace that is open to employees, you may be wondering about steps you can take to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in your workplace. Two key questions are whether employers can take employees' temperatures and how much they can ask to help determine if an employee who calls in sick may have COVID-19. Jeanette Coleman, Axcet HR Solutions Director of Human Resources, provides guidance in this blog post.

Taking employees' temperatures

To the first question, the answer, in short, is yes. However, the issue is not that clear cut. Here's why: The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission updated its Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace guidelines, originally established

during the 2009 outbreak of H1N1, to apply to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the EEOC, once a pandemic becomes widespread in the local community, as assessed by state or local health authorities or the CDC, then employers may measure employees' body temperature to determine fever. Since health authorities did, in fact, acknowledge COVID-19 to be community spread as of March 2020, technically, employers may measure their employees' body temperatures. All information obtained from measuring body temperatures is subject to Americans with Disabilities Act confidentiality.

All information obtained from measuring body temperatures is subject to Americans with Disabilities Act confidentiality

But, here's where it's not straightforward and why employers should be careful: Not all individuals with COVID-19 will have a fever and not all individuals with a fever have COVID-19. So, what information do employers really gain from taking their employees' temperatures?

Other things to consider before going down this path include what type of thermometer you will use, whether employees will be paid for time waiting to get their temperatures measured, what you will do if an employee refuses to have his/her temperature taken and – if you send a worker home with a fever – how you will handle employee pay.

On the flip side, if measuring workers' body temperatures slows the spread of COVID-19 and has the ability to save lives, it may well be worth it. In the end, it's best to thoroughly think out the pros and cons and be prepared for situations

that may arise. And remember that, even if all of your employees are fever free, it doesn't mean they are free of the coronavirus. Therefore, all CDC recommendations on sanitizing, social distancing and PPE should still be at the forefront in your pandemic response plan.

Information gathering when an employee calls in sick
According to the EEOC, employers may ask employees about their symptoms to help determine whether or not those individuals may have COVID-19, even if disability-related, because the COVID-19 pandemic poses a direct threat. Questions must directly relate to symptoms of COVID-19, including fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath or sore throat. Employers should be very careful to stay away from open-ended questions that could reveal a longer-lasting condition.

As employees return to the workplace, it is important to show them you are taking necessary steps to protect their health and safety. But, before adopting any new practices, you need to understand their pros and cons. In addition to screening

20 Easy Ways to Maintain a Healthy Workplace During COVID-19
— Lacey Conner, SHRM-CP Human Resources Consultant

Maintaining a healthy workplace is always important, but it isn't always as hard as it is today. The good news is that small- to medium-sized businesses can take a myriad of free, inexpensive and, in many cases, easy steps to protect employees and maintain a healthy workplace. These include:

1. **Ask employees to check their temperature** at home before coming to work and to take the day off if their temperature exceeds 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

2. **Disinfect** doorknobs, time clock buttons, bathroom faucets and other common areas several times per day.

3. **Give staff the opportunity to work from common areas** if it improves their chances of maintaining social distance. For example, an employee who shares a small office with another might choose to work from the break room, the courtyard or even remotely if their job allows.

4. **Ask employees who feel sick – even if they just have a cold – not to come to work.** Consider allowing them to work remotely, paying them for the day they missed (it's cheaper than work-related exposure for other staff) or allowing them to make up the hours by working longer days later in the week.

5. **Encourage employees to get outside** and get fresh air during their workday.

6. **Consider shutting down water fountains** (or closing them off by wrapping them in cling wrap) and instead providing inexpensive bottled water so employees can stay hydrated without the risk of infection.

7. **Transition from in-person meetings** to teleconferences and webinars.

8. **Keep an eye out for burnout** and have honest conversations with staff who are struggling. Approve time off requests whenever feasible; worn out staff are at higher risk of becoming ill.

9. **Rely on your employee assistance program,** referring staff who are experiencing anxiety related to COVID-19 or balancing work and home during this stressful time.

10. **Consider a physical shutdown of non-essential departments,** closing the doors and directing staff to call, Skype or email for services. This allows internal departments to "work remotely" right in the building without having to buy laptops or install VPN while also limiting person-to-person contact in the workplace.

11. **Educate employees.** A daily or weekly email detailing the CDC's recommendations for staying healthy can promote the right behaviors and calm fears among staff.

12. **Be flexible.** With many schools canceling classes and childcare facilities closed in some states, flexibility can provide workers with the balance they need to manage their personal and professional responsibilities, limiting stress overall. It might be as easy as allowing employees to adjust their work hours so they come in a little later or leave a little earlier.

13. **Strategically place hand sanitizer** throughout the office. A visual cue can help employees remember to keep their hands clean.

14. **Transition away from face-to-face** interviews to telephone and video interviews.

15. **Give your customers alternative ways to seek services,** if feasible, to reduce employee contact with the public and vice versa.

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**16.** **Give employees a private space to change clothes before they go home.** Many workers are worried about bringing the virus home to their families, and the simple task of changing into clean clothes and bagging up the clothes they wore to work can help ease their fears (and reduce the risk of infection). In the health care and other frontline industries, a shower might help, too.

17. **Customize work based on risk level.** If your organization's structure can accommodate it, give employees who are in high-risk categories (e.g., pregnant, over 65, immunocompromised) the opportunity to work in more private spaces, from home or in roles that require less contact with the public.

18. **Move quickly.** If you find out an employee in your organization has tested positive for COVID-19, work (per your state Department of Health's guidelines) to determine who had close contact. Make contact with those potentially exposed people promptly to protect other staff from being exposed.

19. **Ask your staff to disclose travel and/or suspected contact** *prior* to reporting to work so you can make decisions to mitigate risk.

20. **Ask staff how they're doing** and thank them for showing up and stepping up.
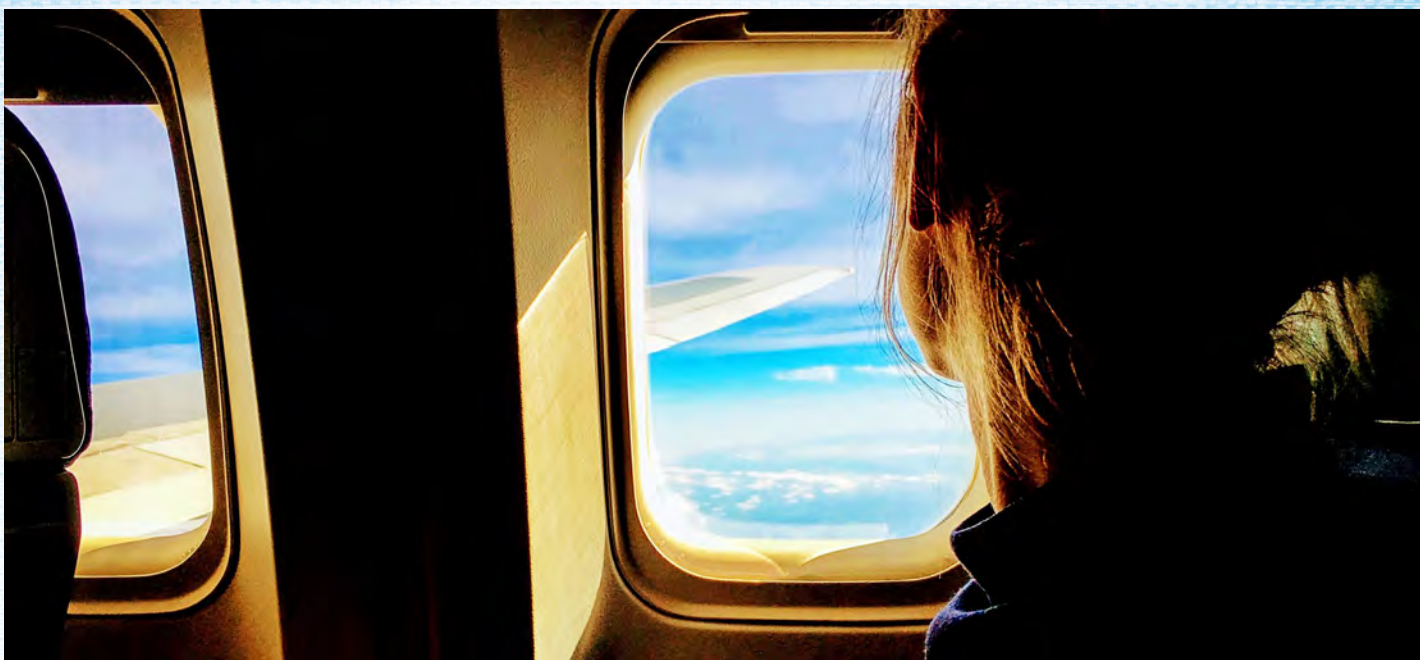
(Not) On the Road Again: Handling Employee Travel in a COVID-19 World
— Lacey Conner, SHRM-CP Human Resources Consultant

The reopening economy forces employers to grapple with how to maintain a safe workplace while the coronavirus continues posing a significant health threat. The equation is even more complicated if people travel and then return to work, potentially bringing the virus with them and increasing coworkers' exposure risk.

Health authorities generally suggest that companies continue avoiding employee business travel, even as workplaces begin reopening. This may not be possible for organizations whose workers are considered essential and must travel to perform their jobs, however. Employers also cannot legally prevent employees from embarking on vacations or other pleasure trips.

To limit COVID-19 exposure risk in the workplace, employers should take precautionary steps that may include requiring employees to self-quarantine after they return from any travel. Before making that ask, however, employers should take their cues from local, state and federal authorities.

For example, the CDC recommends that Americans who travel internationally self-isolate for the suspected COVID-19 incubation period of 14 days after returning to the United States, because, "There is widespread, ongoing transmission of novel coronavirus worldwide." As such, the CDC considers all countries to be high-risk and suggests that Americans returning from cruises and foreign excursions take specific health precautions, including a 14-day self-quarantine. The U.S. Department of State encourages adherence to the CDC travel guidelines, and so should employers.

It is less clear if business owners should or can deny employees entry to workplaces for two weeks after domestic travels, even to destinations with high coronavirus infection rates. The exceptions are when local or state authorities have instituted self-quarantine mandates, when an employee was knowingly exposed to the virus or when an employee is exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms.

Businesses that require post-travel quarantines in the absence of such guidance from public health agencies could be violating protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act, medical privacy laws and state wage and hour laws. These employers should consult legal counsel or HR experts at Axcet to avoid infringing on the law or employee rights.

Nearly every authoritative body concurs that non-essential travel should be avoided amid the coronavirus outbreak. In the case of travel businesses deem necessary or employees choose for personal reasons, employers should encourage workers to follow the CDC's considerations for travelers.

Legal and HR best practices dictate that employers treat employees equally – for example, asking all employees about upcoming travel plans, not just management or other segments of the workforce – and defer to official sources when sharing information about or informing virus-related workplace policies.

Ask the Expert: What to Do When an Employee Tests Positive for COVID-19

— Randy Clayton, Health and Safety Consultant

If you haven't already dealt with an employee who has informed you he/she tested positive for COVID-19, you still may. With businesses across the country gradually reopening their traditional workplaces, employers need to know how quickly they need to act and what steps to take should a confirmed COVID-19 case be reported in their workforce. Randy Clayton, Axcet HR Solutions Safety and Health Consultant, provides guidance in this Ask the Expert post.

Answer: It's important to take prompt action to protect your employees and clients:

1. First, focus on removing the employee from the workplace and mitigating risk of transmission per CDC recommendations.

   • Send the sick employee home or ask them not to report to work.

   • Close off any area of your building that was used by the sick employee for extended periods of time. Wait 24 hours before you begin the process of cleaning and disinfection to prevent those performing that work from

being exposed. Open windows and outside doors during the waiting period to help ventilate the area. Follow the CDC's guidelines for cleaning and disinfection.

2. Then, work on contact tracing.

- Contact the employee diagnosed with COVID-19 (if possible) to gather more information about their activities in the days leading up to the diagnosis. Start tracing contact beginning 48 hours prior to onset of symptoms, and ask about proximity (how far apart were you?), duration (for how long were you in close contact with this person?), and protection (were either of you wearing a face mask?).

  These guidelines can help you determine the appropriate course of action based on the duration and proximity of contact. Once you've determined the safest course of action for each employee or customer who was potentially exposed, begin contacting those people to notify them of the exposure and the recommendation (quarantine, self-monitoring, etc.). Again, be sure to partner with your local Department of Health in your efforts.

  In some cases, the course of action is different for critical infrastructure workers than it is with non-essential workers. Reference the guidelines that are relevant in your industry.

These guidelines can help you determine the appropriate course of action based on the duration and proximity of contact.

3. Comply with FFCRA.

- The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) applies to both public and private employers who have fewer than 500 employees and extends emergency paid sick leave and extended FMLA to those required to quarantine (as well as those who miss work for other reasons during the pandemic).

4. Facilitate a safe return to work for the COVID-positive employee based on the CDC's guidelines:

- Persons with COVID-19 who were directed to care for themselves at home may discontinue isolation and return to work under the following conditions:

  - At least 10 days* have passed since symptom onset or since an initial positive test if they had no symptoms **and**

  - At least 24 hours have passed fever-free without the use of fever-reducing medications **and**

  - All other COVID-relatedsymptoms have improved.

- **Persons infected with SARS-CoV-2 who never develop COVID-19 symptoms** may discontinue isolation and other precautions 10 days after the date of their first positive RT-PCR test for SARS-CoV-2 RNA.

Most importantly, continue the measures recommended by your professional employer organization (PEO) to promote social distancing and prevent the spread of transmission in the workplace. If you don't have a PEO and have been navigating these uncertain waters on your own, reach out to Axcet HR Solutions today. We're standing by and ready to help.

* A limited number of persons with severe illness may produce replication-competent virus beyond 10 days. These cases may warrant extending the length of isolation for up to 20 days after symptom onset. For more information, see the CDC's Discontinuation of Transmission-Based Precautions and Disposition of Patients with COVID-19 in Healthcare Settings (Interim Guidance).

About Axcet HR Solutions

Axcet HR Solutions is a certified PEO (professional employer organization), headquartered in Overland Park, Kansas and serving the Greater Kansas City Metro area. We provide professional Human Resources, benefits, payroll, safety, and workers' compensation services to small- to medium-sized businesses. Our mission is to empower business owners with the time, confidence, and security to focus on what matters most – their business.

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