7 priorities for a safer and healthier return to the workplace.

As employers across the globe begin planning their return to work, a deliberate strategy may help make it a successful transition for everyone.

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From the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, UnitedHealthcare Global has been committed to bringing the full capabilities of our enterprise to helping clients and their globally mobile populations respond. This guide provides an overview of the priorities to consider when building a deliberate strategy for returning to the workplace.

Please contact your UnitedHealthcare Global representative to learn more about the additional resources and information available for transitioning back to the workplace.

Finding your way forward.

7 priorities for transitioning back to work:

There are a number of priorities to consider when building a plan to transition operations back to the workplace — from understanding international and local health policy guidelines to effectively communicating with employees before, during and after the transition.

And, while each worksite is likely to present different challenges, there are 7 priorities to consider that may help create a safer and healthier experience for those involved.

1 Confirm your community is ready.

2 Assess your workspace readiness.

3 Prepare employees for return.

4 Communicate plan to employees.

5 Begin the return-to-work process.

6 Monitor your progress.

7 Support physical and mental health needs.

Confirm your community is ready.

A clear understanding of community conditions is critical as you begin planning.

The coronavirus is affecting various communities in different ways. Check with international, regional and local agencies for resources and guidelines to understand whether your community is ready. Refer to appropriate guidelines from sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO)[1], U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)[1], European Centre for Disease Prevention[2], and International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH)[2] websites for details about business closures/openings. Population and person-level data may confirm flattening curves.

Review key indicators, guidelines and information.

- Key indicators of community stability include, but are not limited to, a continued 10- to 14-day moving average decrease in new cases or maximum threshold number per 100,000 population, testing and contact tracing capacity, and hospital capacity.[3]
- Creating a committee to apply these guidelines and determine how they apply (by location), will help with incorporating changes as they occur.

2 Assess your workspace readiness.

Anticipate potential needs of your building or workspace.

Making the appropriate changes to your work environment can help set organisations for success. From ensuring the availability of proper protective equipment to modifying floor plans, there are a number of items to potentially address.

Prepare your building for the return of operations.

Employees responsible for assessing the physical structure and building systems may refer to all national and local governmental authority guidelines, or International Code Council's (ICC) Model Codes, a nonprofit association that develops model codes and standards used worldwide to construct safe, sustainable, affordable and resilient structures, for guidance.[4] Determine if maintenance is needed for mechanical, HVAC and fire/life safety systems and evaluate the use of HEPA filters when possible. Consider completing inspections, remediation and repairs before reopening.

Prepare proper protective measures for employees, including personal protective equipment as appropriate by occupation. Their physical workspace can be cleaned and stocked with hand sanitiser, alcohol wipes, soap and masks/gloves if appropriate. Sanitiser stations can be placed throughout the building.

Establish frequent and thorough cleaning protocols to ensure that cleaning services adequately and regularly disinfect all workspaces using International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) recommendations. Ensure you have a vendor in place to access support services trained in decontamination in the event of a possible, plausible or known contamination. Confirm their protocols: when they allow crews on site after a report and the time needed to clean based on your building size.

Consider potential work modifications.

Organisations may need to make changes to workspaces to minimise large gatherings, including modifying open floor plans by adding partitions or closing off common areas. Continue to check health care regulatory agency guidelines for physical distancing and transmission guidelines. Reduce touch points by installing sensors for high touch areas such as faucets and lights. Encourage employees/visitors to minimise their use of elevators when possible.

Display signs reminding everyone of your new guidelines such as maintaining a physical distance in accordance with governmental guidelines (most recommend a miminum distance of 1 metre+), frequent hand washing and staying home when sick. Signs can also direct the flow of movement in narrow high traffic areas. You may consider designating an isolation room for anyone who is or becomes symptomatic while at work. Isolation space can be any type of enclosed room with negative air pressure and special ventilation.[6]

For additional information, the following organisations are considered leaders in building safety or cleaning: Building Owners and Managers Association International (**boma.org**), International Facility Management Association (**ifma.org**) and International Sanitary Supply Association (**issa.com**), a cleaning industry association.

94%

of businesses are enhancing cleaning and disinfection approaches in the workplace.[5] Ensuring a safe, clean environment for your employees will be increasingly important.

3 Prepare employees for return.

The characteristics of your population and business type will help determine the number and nature of workplace policies necessary for your transition.

A key part of your strategy will be determining how many employees each worksite can accommodate to maintain optimal physical distancing. This will help determine whether changes are required in the worksite footprint.

Determine return-to-work approach for your employee population.

It's important to assess positions that need to come back into the office and those that may be able to work from home, or if employees should be phased back to work (and the basis of the phasing). Consider spacing out phases by 14 days. Consider staggering the timing of your employees' return to work, staggered shifts and potential pilots based on your workplace criteria:

Seniority-based return to work

Consider having designated leaders return to work 2 weeks prior to other employees to test policies and ensure environment is safe for others to return.

Critical function return to work

Select roles deemed important return first to accelerate operations and prepare for reintegration. Similar to seniority-based plan and adjust accordingly.

Hybrid approach

This combines seniority based plus critical function approaches to test policies and procedures.

Volunteers return to work

If it makes sense for your situation, consider asking volunteers as the first stage of your plan.

Review and revise work policies.

Before you start, designate individual contacts responsible for overseeing and ensuring implementation of your plan. Consult with your legal, real estate, occupational health and other resources. Check with your local industry or trade association groups to see if any additional recommended practices are available. Evaluate the impact of school closures and child care availability in your community.

When creating a communications plan for employees, it should include what to expect, what will change, when employees should work from home, which employees will remain on assignment and those that will return to their host country and other crucial information. Consider providing information about employee support services.

Details can include education on workplace safety, physical distancing and the use of face masks. Create additional training for management so they understand their responsibility for enforcing these policies. Develop mechanisms to track compliance and communicate with employees regarding protocols. Establish guidelines for limiting in-person interactions and physical contact.

Physical Distancing

62%

of businesses are changing shifts and workgroups to improve physical distancing.[7]
Flexibility in approaches to staffing and shift work are helping employers observe physical distancing guidelines.

Determine screening and testing policies.

Consider implementing healthcare regulatory agency based protocols for screening employees and visitors, including decisions on whether to require temperature checks and/or ask if they have experienced symptoms since their last time at the workplace, and/or excluding anyone from the workplace who has experienced symptoms.

Establish a virus testing policy for diagnosis of active cases and/or surveillance based on testing evidence and the availability of viral tests. Inform employees how you plan to respond to a report of a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 case at work. Determine whether or not to recommend medical follow up for a suspected case and anyone else who may have been in contact with them. Recognise that someone in contact with a symptomatic person may be asymptomatic and therefore presymptomatic.

Other policies that may be warranted.

- When employees request a work accommodation (e.g., long-term work from home, including employees with high-risk conditions, requests to return to home country while on assignment). Also include guidelines for when a symptomatic employee must stay at home.

- Consider liberalising your sick-leave policies for those who are symptomatic and/or diagnosed positive.

- Policies for smoking areas and whether a change is required for a more restrictive smoking policy.

- Business travel restrictions policy for employees.

- Consider approaches to physical distancing in multi-passenger vehicles when work vehicles and/or company transportation is provided, avoiding shared transportation (when possible) and disinfecting shared vehicles between drivers.

- It may be appropriate to set restrictions on the maximum number of employees and members of the public on company premises and in specific areas, and workplace entry restrictions for employees and visitors.

4 Communicate plan to employees.

Clearly sharing your plan will help set employee expectations.

Many employees may be apprehensive to return to the workplace, while others may be eager to do so. Recognising that your employees will have varying degrees of comfort with this transition and clearly communicating your commitment to safety, health, education and training will be important.

Help employees understand the role they play.

- Communicate basic reminders (such as physical distancing, frequent hand washing and wearing gloves/masks if appropriate for occupation).

- Share local and community resources available to employees.

- Offer clear guidelines for when employees MUST stay at home.

- Provide clear medical evacuation guidelines for employees on assignment.

- Advise employees to use the healthcare regulatory agency websites to understand what they should do if or when they are experiencing symptoms of illness.[8]

Encourage employees to get in the habit of daily symptom checking, so that it becomes a habit by the time they return to the workplace. Employees should consult their medical provider for any other symptoms that are severe or concerning.

5 Begin the return-to-work process.

Further develop your approach to assist employees on and off site.

A key part of your plan will be identifying high-risk employees to allow them to work remotely and comprehensive training for on-site employees to help minimise their risk of exposure.

Accommodate high-risk employees.

Allow people who identify themselves as high-risk to work remotely. Employees are not required to disclose what makes them high-risk, only that they are high-risk. Based on available information and clinical expertise, adults over 65 and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions might be at risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

Such underlying medical conditions include, but are not limited to chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma, serious heart conditions, conditions causing a person to be immunocompromised including cancer treatment, obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 30 or higher), chronic kidney disease and liver disease. Please see healthcare regulatory agency websites for updates and a full list of medical conditions.

Consider training on safer work practices.

- A welcome kit for employees could consist of new policies, washable face masks if appropriate for the occupation and hand sanitiser.

- Physical distancing protocols.

- Hand hygiene: Studies show that adequate hand washing for 20 seconds with soap is important for stopping the spread of community infection. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser when soap isn't available.[9]

- Respiratory hygiene: In addition to typical guidance for respiratory hygiene (cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, use tissues and throw them away, wash your hands or use a hand sanitiser every time you touch your mouth or nose), the various healthcare regulatory agencies recommend wearing cloth face coverings in public settings when physical distancing is difficult to maintain, especially in areas of significant community-based transmission.[10]

Allow people who identify themselves as high-risk to work from home.

Adults over 65 and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions might be at risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

6 Monitor your progress.

Observe closely and be prepared to adjust your strategy if necessary.

Continued monitoring and communication about prevention and safety with employees is critical. Conduct frequent audits for building sanitation and distancing practices. Consider how your policy should change as technological advances such as treatment or a vaccine becomes widely available.

What to do if an employee falls ill.

Employees with symptoms of COVID-19 MUST stay at home and get tested. Frequently refer to the healthcare regulatory agency websites[11] for a current list of symptoms and guidelines. This is an evolving area and the symptom list and guidelines continue to change.

At present, healthcare regulatory agencies recommend at least 3 days (72 hours) have passed since recovery defined as resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications and

improvement in respiratory symptoms; and at least 7 days have passed since symptoms first appeared to stay home. If the employee is able to work from home, they should do so for at least 14 days from the onset of their symptoms.

What to do if you have a work outbreak.

If a work outbreak occurs, have a plan in place to support employees, tighten restrictions and step back employee reintegration.

Steps to take include identify and assess the source and magnitude of the exposure, quickly quarantine those exposed, communicate to those at risk, determine the need for additional site cleaning, employee communications and/or modifications to the workspace.

Consider changing your strategy, such as adjusting seating arrangements, use of common spaces or shifting employees back home. Contact your local health department if an outbreak at work occurs.

Establish plans for an individual case or work outbreak.

Communicate your plan with employees and move quickly to help maintain their health and safety.

7 Support physical and mental health needs.

Avoid underestimating the physical and emotional impact of these events on employees.

Employees need to feel confident in your organisation's strategy to reopen your business after the COVID-19 shutdown. A comprehensive return-to-work plan that includes virtual care solutions for both physical and mental health needs, as well as health monitoring, will assure employees you're taking all the right health and safety measures.

Build awareness and encourage the use of available resources.

Establish a clear and comprehensive approach to physical, mental and emotional health support and care. Frequent communication with employees should reiterate the availability of virtual care for physical and mental health needs, and a commitment to safety and health. Encourage and participate in a two-way dialogue.

About 50% of employees report their mental well-being was at least somewhat worse.[12] Employers can help by offering support services from health and wellness partners. Consider offering the following resources to employees:

- Employee Assistance Programme.
- Virtual mental health access.
- Access to an assistance line for employees with financial challenges.
- Proactive outreach for employees with mental health conditions.
- Assistance with adherence to medications related to mental health conditions.
- Self-help apps that use clinically validated techniques to address stress, anxiety and depression.
- Medical assistance and evacuation support.
- Substance abuse resources and support.
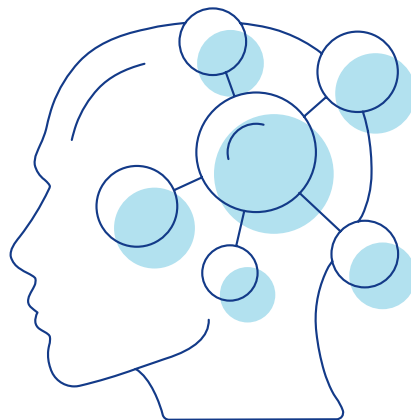
84%
of businesses are reminding their employees about the availability of mental health services and programmes.[13]

For more information and support.

Please contact your UnitedHealthcare Global representative to learn more about the additional resources and support available to support back to work transitions.
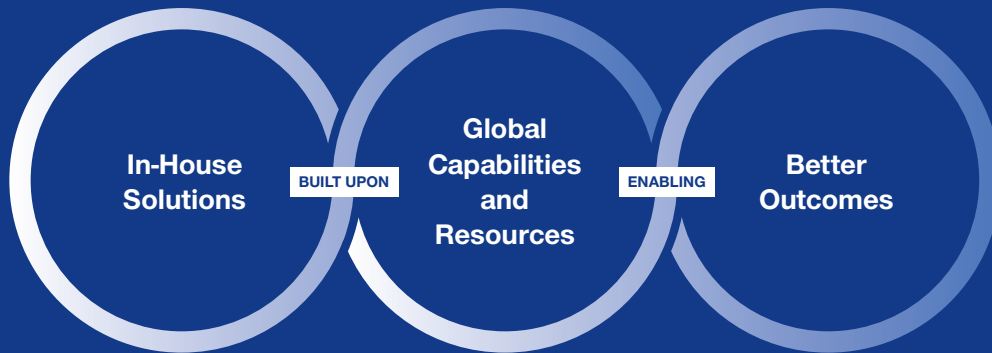
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[1]who.int, cdc.gov
[2]ecdc.europa.eu, icohweb.org
[3]https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/National-Coronavirus-Response-a-Road-Map-to-Recovering-2.pdf, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/32150748
[4]Recovery Readiness: A How-To Guide For Reopening Your Workplace, Cushman & Wakefield 2020
[5]Which of the following measures are companies taking to protect the health of your on-site employees? Mercer survey, April 2020
[6]https://www.gensler.com/research-insight/blog/10-considerations-for-transitioning-back-to-work-in-a-post
[7]Which of the following measures are companies taking to protect the health of your on-site employees? Mercer survey, April 2020
[8]https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html
[9]https://www.the-hospitalist.org/hospitalist/article/219484/aesthetic-dermatology/hand-washing-and-hand-sanitizer-skin-and-covid-19/page/0/1
[10]https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html
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[12]Consumer sentiment during a time of global crisis, Optum survey, March 2020; https://www.optum.com/content/dam/optum3/optum/en/resources/PDFs/2020%20consumer-insights-during-global-crisis.pdf
[13]Which of the following measures are companies taking to protect the health of your on-site employees? Mercer survey, April 2020