



CoreNet Global Report

PREPARING THE WORKPLACE IN A POST-COVID WORLD

As workers return to offices, employers can take proactive steps to ensure their safety while preparing for the next health crisis.

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Since March of 2020, our lives have seen significant disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This virus forced massive lockdowns on most nations and caused turmoil for the global economy. However, through all that chaos, contact centers showed what a vital service they provide. Suddenly, thousands of airline customers needed to cancel trips or reschedule trips. Millions called health agencies to get the latest information on the disease, restrictions and where to go for a COVID test. Retailers across the spectrum fielded calls from customers looking for products or services, dealing with orders and returns. And this all happened while lockdowns forced most contact center employees to work from home.

Now, as vaccination rates increase, we are slowly returning to pre-pandemic normal. But for contact center employees, after more than a year of working from home, returning to the office can raise all sorts of anxieties about being in close contact with co-workers, both masked and unmasked. For those required to work in the contact center throughout the pandemic, will they start to worry about dropping the strict protocols that effectively prevented the spread of the virus or other illnesses? Most contact centers utilize open-office concepts; employees tend to sit in close contact, which further raises concerns about passing on sicknesses. Since it is common knowledge that viruses can

be spread by aerosol droplets, having a focus on improving the air quality in an office should be deemed essential. A Harvard Business Review study revealed that a top demand of employees was better air quality in the office. For that reason, it is even more imperative that companies do all they can to protect the health of their employees.

We learned many important lessons about dealing with the virus that virtually all workplaces have or should implement. As more people become fully vaccinated, public health officials will eventually announce that wearing a mask in public and indoors will no longer be necessary. While the risk of COVID-19 has diminished, many of these protocols should remain in place. They can help protect employees from seasonal illnesses like colds and the flu and help prevent the next major health crisis.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEAN AIR

Breathing is so natural that people usually aren't even aware they are doing it. It is something our bodies do automatically without any thought. We only become aware of it when we labor to breathe or if something else affects it, like colds, allergies or odors (both pleasant and unpleasant). But, because COVID is a respiratory illness, many people are now hyper-aware when something might impact their breathing. For this

reason, the quality of the air also plays a vitally important role in health and safety in an office environment. A contact center with good ventilation can help mitigate the risk of spreading airborne illnesses.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has several recommendations on improving ventilation in an office setting, though not all will work in every office. Some ideas include opening windows and doors to increase airflow when the weather permits. However, this is not advised if it raises a health risk like asthma or a safety risk like falling. Alternatively, where possible, the building's heating, venting and air conditioning (HVAC) system can be rebalanced or adjusted to increase the airflow to occupied areas of a building.

One thing that can positively impact an office is adding air purification devices to the existing HVAC systems or a stand-alone unit. These machines help filter out a variety of airborne particles while pushing out clean, refreshed air. The CDC recommends devices that include HEPA filters, which effectively capture viruses, and machines that incorporate ultraviolet germicidal irradiation (UVGI), which can inactivate viruses. Besides killing or capturing viruses, these purifiers with HEPA filters and UVGI lights remove other things that can make employees sick, like allergens, dust, mould, fungus and other toxins. Another benefit from this is that several studies show cleaner air can positively impact productivity and employee alertness.

HAND-LING THE PROBLEM

One of the easiest and most effective ways to prevent illnesses is through good hand hygiene. The CDC recommends people wash their hands often using soap and water for at least 20 seconds. The soap does not need to be anti-bacterial. Regular soap, when used correctly, removes virtually all the harmful viruses, toxins, dirt and bacteria that can make people sick. People should be encouraged to wash their hands before, during and after food preparation, before eating, after using the toilet, touching garbage, coming into contact with chemicals, or blowing their nose or coughing. It is also helpful to remind people not to touch their eyes or mouth with dirty hands.

Hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol) can kill germs but will not remove dirt or any harmful chemical residue. However, in an office setting, it can be helpful to have dispensers at individual desks, at entrances, kitchens, outside washrooms and other areas where people congregate.

A CLEAN OFFICE IS A SAFE OFFICE

Another tool in the arsenal to keep employees safe is to have a clean office. The CDC recommends cleaning at least once a day and more frequently in areas with a lot of traffic, like kitchens, break rooms and washrooms. Offices and workstations should have a thorough, deep cleaning twice a year. However, janitorial service professionals should also do deep cleaning if multiple employees catch the flu or other contagious illnesses. In places that utilize a hot desk system, providing sanitizing wipes to clean surfaces like a desk, keyboards, phones, headsets, and mouses can reduce anxieties while also helping to kill germs. For any contact center that does not already give personal headsets, now is the time to implement that system.

SAFETY STARTS AT HOME

One thing COVID taught a lot of companies is that an outbreak can cause havoc with any business. Losing multiple employees for a few days or weeks can cause staffing issues at best or force the temporary closure of the company at worst. Most contact centers cannot quickly train temporary staff to fill the void if there is an outbreak, so it is essential to encourage workers to stay home if they or a family member are ill to reduce their chance of spreading it to their colleagues. Having a sick person sneezing or coughing will increase the odds that other workers will catch something. On the plus side, workers who stay home and look after themselves could return to the office sooner.

GIVING SPACE WHERE NEEDED

Where possible, contact center managers can try spreading employees around, so there is some distance between workstations. They can also work to limit the times when a large number of workers could congregate in places like the kitchen or entrance by staggering breaks, start and end times and lunches. To simplify this, managers can divide workers into teams with consistent start and break times to avoid bottlenecks and crowds.

EDUCATE THE WORKFORCE

Most people will be aware of COVID protocols and how they can help prevent the spread of the disease and other illnesses. However, it is imperative that employees are reminded of the rules and their own responsibilities in the contact center. Managers must let workers know they shouldn't come into work when ill and possibly contagious (be it COVID, the flu or even pink eye). They need to know they must clean their desks before they begin and end their days. Managers must stay on top of this

and ensure the employees follow protocols and take corrective action when they are not followed closely enough.

DEALING WITH THE NEW NORMAL

As the vaccination rollout effort continues, millions of workers will be returning to contact centers across the United States and Canada. Some employers will want to have all workers in the office all the time. Others might be willing to give employees the flexibility to work from home a few days a week. To ensure the office setting remains safe in a post-COVID world, adopting these methods will help mitigate the spread of any illnesses. It can also give returning employees some peace of mind knowing that their workplace is serious about their safety. Not only can

these protocols help reduce the number of employees' sick days, but they can also have a positive effect on morale. Happy workers are more productive, which is worth the investment in their well-being.



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