

COVID19 - RETURN TO WORK GUIDE

2020

ASSESSING THE RISK AND ACTIONS TO MITIGATE THEM

NOLA SHRM

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Contents

Return to Work Guide – Assessing the Risk and Actions to Mitigate Them	2
Consider establishing a COVID-19 Response Team	4
• Sample COVID-19 Crisis Team Roles & Responsibilities	4
Develop communications that inform the employees of their return to work status.	5
• Why Must I return?.....	5
• How Safe is the Workspace going to be?.....	5
Prepare the Facility	6
• Cleaning the Facility:.....	6
• Facilitating Social Distancing by design:.....	6
• Screening Stations:.....	6
Links to Tools and Resources:	6
Establish a COVID-19 Prevention Plan	8
• Prevention Equipment and Supplies.....	8
• Return to Work Training for Returning Employees	8
• Return to Work Schedules	8
• Employee Screening Protocols:	8
• Social Distancing Policy	8
• How to Handle Workplace Detected Illnesses.....	8
• Return to Work After Illness	9
• Visitors and Vendors	9
• Handling Mail	9
• OSHA and CDC tools and resources on their website.....	9
SAMPLE Disinfectant Supplies List	9
SAMPLE Disinfection Protocols.....	10
Prepare for the Psychology of Return to Work.....	11
• Links to Tools and Resources	11
Understand the Employment Law Related to Return to Work.	12
• Links to Tools and Resources:	12
Conclusion.....	13



Return to Work Guide – Assessing the Risk and Actions to Mitigate Them

This document is designed to provide a framework for preparing a company to return employees to work following the pandemic. We will all continue to navigate and learn within the landscape of COVID-19. Our hope is that this resource helps your organization prepare for returning employees in a manner they feel comfortable performing their jobs safely.

Returning to work should be something that the leadership team carefully evaluates and decides. Under the circumstances today, this decision is layered with complexity and should not be taken lightly.

Several questions the leadership team should have clarity on:

- Is the business prepared to take the necessary precautions to protect the employees?
- Is there a financial need or outcome to deliver that is best met if employees return now?
- What's working or not working with telework/remote work as it is today?
- Is the office ready to be re-inhabited? Was it deep cleaned?
- Can the business/leaders reassure employees that they will be safe entering the workspace?
- Is it mandatory to return to the office full time?
- Will telework be allowed for those employees who continue to have constraints for childcare?
- Which departments need to return to the workspace and why?
- Will the company provide training on how to maintain a safe workspace?
- Is the business prepared to conduct screenings and protect confidential employee information?
- What happens if employees come back to work and get sick?

Once the decision is made to bring employees back to work, here are some things to consider or put in place:

- **Consider establishing a COVID-19 Response Team.** Depending on the size of your company, ensure that you have an appropriate representation from all key levels. If your company has separate divisions or brands with different leaders assigned, make sure to include leaders from every part of the business.
- **Develop communications that inform the employees of their return to work status.** It is suggested to follow the communication process used when closing the office to reopen it. The communication plans should not only inform of the business expectations, it must state terms of employment and compensation for each employee. The communication should include steps being taken by the company to ensure employee safety.
- **Prepare the Facility.** Whether you own or rent your office space, the responsibility to ensure the workspace is safe is on the business owner and leadership team. Work with experts who can reassure you that a deep clean has been done and you have eliminated *Sick Building Syndrome* from your list of concerns. OSHA and CDC have guidelines and resources to assist in this area.
- **Establish a COVID-19 Prevention Plan.** This plan should entail all the protocols, tools and resources that will be in effect within your company/office to prevent and manage COVID-19. Execution of this plan should reassure your employees you have thought through their return to work plan. Elements of this plan should include onsite temperature checks, return to work training and training on all the COVID-19 safety protocols, access to preventative supplies and resources and written how-to do procedures. The plan should be designed so that every employee understands their responsibilities for prevention and the implications for not taking prevention seriously.
- **Prepare for the Psychology of Return to Work.** Returning to work may be an escape from the challenges of home life for some employees, but not all employees will be happy or comfortable. Many employees will be dealing with residual affects from this pandemic. Challenges and anxiety may be related to their own preexisting conditions being in an uncontrollable workspace with other colleagues, challenges related to caring for other family members, financial implications of layoffs, furloughs, or salary reductions. Establish EAP options for employees to seek and get help if needed.
- **Understand the Employment Laws related to Return to Work.** FMLA, Expanded FMLA, Emergency Paid Sick Leave, OSHA, DOL, Labor Relations Board, EEOC, etc., will all be at play in your return to work transition. Be informed and advised on what rules, laws or regulations are at play for the decisions being made at every level of the organization. One leader's decision can set off a chain of unfavorable events and place a company in a PR or legal mess.

Consider establishing a COVID-19 Response Team

Your COVID-19 Response Team should be comprised of a diverse group of the best and the brightest within your company. It also should provide opportunity for each member to express their opinions without fear. The Team should have an executive sponsor, someone with spending and decision-making authority.



Team members included should understand the risk and be capable of devising a plan of action to minimize the risk to the company. This team should also be given the authority and means to do the work necessary.

- **Sample COVID-19 Crisis Team Roles & Responsibilities**

Site Manager – Site manager who has overall responsibility for the site’s pandemic preparedness & response plan, coordinating and aligning with Executive Team Member or Owner. This role is on the COVID-19 Crisis Team.

Managers and Team Leads – Works with the Site Manager to manage social distancing logistics in regard to arriving and departing employees, as well as visitors and contractors. Will further support the Virus Prevention & Protocol leader by providing site specific options regarding social distancing within the workspace, including potential mitigation measures to manage risk of employees required to work 6-feet from others.

Virus Prevention & Protocols Lead – Works to develop protocols to ensure the wellness of all employees and the overall pandemic preparedness and response plan, ensuring alignment with company protocols and the COVID-19 Crisis Team.

Sanitization & Disinfection Lead – Works to manage daily and periodic disinfection logistics, including routine and deep cleaning, disinfection processes in accordance to the protocols set up by the Virus Prevention & Protocol leader. Drives process continuous improvement of the processes and ensures 100% compliance of the disinfection protocol and any approved regional or site variations.

Communication & Training Lead – Works to manage all pandemic related communications in accordance with Communications and HR departments (if applicable). Manages the training function across the company related to pandemic preparedness and response, including both employee, management and pandemic response team training in accordance with your playbook and COVID-19 Crisis Team’s directive.

PPE & Materials Lead – Works to secure all necessary supplies to implement and sustain the site pandemic preparedness and response plan. If your company has multiple locations, consider coordination of procurement; direct procurement by each location vs. coordination with procurement department or a central control person to manage inventory and purchase supplies. Leverage buying power for supplies from vendors.

Depending on your business you may need to combine, eliminate or add roles that are deemed critical to your plan. Treat this like all other strategic plans, get the right people in the right seat on your bus!

Develop communications that inform the employees of their return to work status.

HR and key decision makers should use the same systems and processes that were used during the work reduction. With all the uncertainty and anxiety related to COVID-19, we suggest consistency. If your style of communicating with employees worked well for the layoffs and furloughs, then maintain that style for the return. Where there are areas for improvement, please take the time to tweak, however radical changes may cause your employees and some leaders to be confused or skeptical.

- [Why Must I return?](#)

In preparation for communicating with employees, key stakeholders should work through some of the following:

- Consider what is needed from the employees returning to the workspace.
- Consider who is returning to work.
- What is the employee's status: Layoff, furlough, re-assignment?
- Will telework be an option? If so, who decides?
- When they return, what will be the terms of their work relationship?

Think of the Return to Work as a new hire or rehire process. Communicate with the employees to demonstrate you are offering comfort and stability. Address questions related to salary, benefits, work location, requirements, and if applicable discuss flex schedules.

Word of caution: Parents and caregivers may have some anxiety related to day care or care support systems. Where possible, we suggest being flexible and negotiate returns based on the needs of the employee and the business. Under the circumstances, rigid, one size return to work stances or policies may result in a drop in engagement or cause resignations.

- [How Safe is the Workspace going to be?](#)

The second critical part of the communication plan should be focused on safety of the workspace. We suggest that you conduct return to work meetings or trainings to share parts of the return to work plan with them. Here are some items you may want to share:

- Building preparation and ongoing disinfection procedures.
- Safety Training: social distancing procedures, sanitation, handwashing, etc.
- Daily or self-testing procedures if applicable
- Employee Assistance offerings if applicable

Remember, for the past weeks since the office closed, managers have been working to increase productivity through remote and telework scenarios. Return to work is another change, that each manager and team will have to adjust to. This change will impact productivity and outcomes.

Prepare the Facility

If your company had any employees who were confirmed positive for COVID-19, there will be some concerns within the employee population regarding the safety of your facility or office. If you lease a space and you have employees who you are requiring to return to work, do your diligence to understand the cleaning protocol for the building and share that with employees.



- **Cleaning the Facility:**

The CDC and OSHA have tools and resources available to assist you with understanding safe protocols for deep cleaning and disinfecting the facility. The CDC has a section on their website with signs for your workspace that are designated to help you with communicating certain elements of COVID-19 to your employees. These can be posted and used throughout the facility/workspaces. <https://www.cdc.gov/>

- **Facilitating Social Distancing by design:**

Your COVID-19 team should examine the workspaces and devise ground rules on Social Distancing as we understand it. This entails establishing how many people can assemble in the various workspaces in your facility and comply with social distancing rules.

- This may mean posting signs in conference rooms or break areas regarding capacity allowed or closing areas that employees congregate; coffee pot, refrigerator, tables/chairs, etc.
- May require repositioning furniture or work areas to facilitate social distancing.
- May require construction of barriers to establish separation between workstations.

- **Screening Stations:**

Your COVID-19 team should examine the protocols that have been established by the CDC and OSHA to develop the company's facility/office screening. Please note this is an area of planning that should involve a cross-functional team to be clear on the processes. If you do not have a cross-functional team, we advise reviewing your plan with legal counsel.



Things to consider; this is not an exhaustive list, just one to get the team thinking through the volume of risks and responsibilities involved:

- Review the various guidelines in play: HIPAA, ADA, OSHA, local fire codes, etc.
- Where will the screening be setup?
- Will there be a screening checkpoint?
- Is there a way physically to get around the screening protocol, 2nd entrance with no screening?
- Who is in charge each day? How long is the station staffed to ensure compliance?
- What training does the staff need to perform the screenings?
- What authority do they have to address any compliance issues?
- Has everyone returning to work been informed of the screening process?

Finally, the work done in this area must be treated as extremely sensitive, private, and confidential if done by employees versus a hired third party. A third-party contractor must commit to and be able to demonstrate the sensitivity, privacy and confidentiality required.

Links to Tools and Resources:

- <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/COVID-19-coronavirus-change-office-work-homeworking-remote-design/>

SAMPLE Office Opening Protocols

#	Topic	Task
1	COVID-19 Response Team (CRT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up the COVID-19 Response Team (CRT) Have a plan in place to adopt this corporate framework and develop site-specific/office location protocols
2	Preventative Material Inventory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confirm adequate supply of soap, disinfectant, hand sanitizer, paper towels and tissues are on site and available when needed Confirm stock of face coverings; masks and/or face shields, gloves, and glasses on-site and on order with lead time, if necessary Have “touchless” thermometers on-site for employee screening Continue to monitor CDC and OSHA for updates to guidelines
3	Personal Protective Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and understand protocol Monitor the CDC and OSHA for guidelines
4	Disinfection Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disinfect facility/workspaces prior to anyone returning to work Replace HVAC air filters or clean/disinfect Implement the General Disinfection Procedures
5	Deep-Cleaning and Disinfection Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review, understand, and prepare for the implementation of the Deep-Cleaning and Disinfection Protocol for your business and/or office Check with building landlord to inquire on their protocols
6	Inbound Parts/Materials/Packages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage incoming supplies in accordance with OSHA/CDC standards Monitor CDC for package handling procedures
7	Audit Checklists/Compliance Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop checklist for critical areas to monitor and ensure compliance to standards Communicate and adhere to consequences for lack of compliance
8	Isolation Protocol & Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and understand CDC protocol Protocol in place to isolate employees if symptomatic on site Print out incident reporting forms and protocol to be available as needed Proper tracking and reporting according to OSHA standards
9	Social Distancing Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and understand social distancing protocol Monitor and continue to adhere to the Social Distancing
10	On-Site Health Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure protocol for pre-shift screening prior to facility/office entry points Ensure barriers are in place to prevent anyone from avoiding screening protocols Ensure that all employees are screened to avoid discrimination issues
11	Daily Self-Screening Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Daily Self-Screening protocol is distributed to all employees for voluntary, home self-screening HR team and leaders are trained to receive inquiries or reports of symptomatic employees prior to shift and what to do if symptomatic
12	Self-Quarantining and Return to Work Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and understand protocol and adjust as necessary for local, legal and cultural environment
13	Visitors & Contractors Self-Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan in place for screening Visitors and Contractors Visitors & Contractor Self-Screening Checklist printed and available as needed
14	Employee Trainings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host Pre-Return to Work Trainings: Review of Safe Work Playbook with all employees Training for Health Screeners & Isolation Coordinators Training for Disinfection Team & HR Team Host First Day Trainings/Orientation Localize playbook presentation & materials to be consistent with facility/office Host first-day training orientation for all returning staff and executives
15	Health & Wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-Screening Checklist Health & Wellness Videos from CDC or other agencies if applicable

Establish a COVID-19 Prevention Plan

Once you've decided it is critical to your business to have employees return to work, the task becomes how to keep them healthy. Handwashing, fever, coughing, temperature checks are now a part of our everyday language. These things will more than likely be a part of your company and office culture for the foreseeable future. Here are a few items that can assist you with prevention:

- **Prevention Equipment and Supplies:** You will not be able to prevent if you do not have the right tools and resources. We have included several sample lists throughout this guide that may assist you with developing your prevention plan.
- **Return to Work Training for Returning Employees:** Maybe call it COVID-19 Orientation, but this should be the opportunity the company takes with every returning employee to explain the rules of engagement while under the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- **Return to Work Schedules:** This is about arrival times and departures times to preserve social distancing protocols.
 - If your office operated on a flexible work schedule or allowed employees to arrive and depart at will, you will have to consider what happens when several employees arrive at the same time.
 - Do they wait in line for prescreening?
- **Employee Screening Protocols:** Lay out the what, when, and how of daily screening. Also include the implications for not following these protocols.
 - **Daily Employer Screenings:**
 - Whatever is in place must be consistently followed by everyone, including owners and senior leaders or it will fall apart quickly and risk your intended goal of preventing an outbreak in your office.
 - Where will the screening be setup? Will there be a screening checkpoint? Is there a way physically to get around the screening protocol, 2nd entrance with no screening?
 - Consider the logistics of getting ample supplies to handle the daily volume of screenings needed to safely operate your office. Work to establish reliable sources of supplies and equipment.
 - PRIVACY and confidentiality is a must. Seek Counsel on how to handle records are kept, how to communicate with employees who are symptomatic and privacy in general.
 - **Employee Self-Screenings:**
 - If possible, establish protocol for self-screening. This could allow for early detection and reporting.
- **Social Distancing Policy:** Employees returning to work should be informed of the new guidelines to achieve social distancing. If done properly, the facility/workspace will look different than before COVID-19. The company should establish a policy on what is social distancing and how to respect social distancing at all times.
- **How to Handle Workplace Detected Illnesses:** What if your employee screening protocol detects an employee with high temp? What will be the company's protocol on how to direct that employee? What is the process to ensure that employee is cleared to return to work?



- **Return to Work After Illness:** The CDC has guidelines for returning to work after a positive COVID-19 test. Review the guidelines and then establish your company protocol. Many people who have positive COVID-19 test are confused about when to start counting the quarantine period and the number of healthy days after the quarantine period. Your return plan should be communicated in a way to clarify these rules and assist the employees with compliance.
- **Visitors and Vendors:** Everyone who enters your office or workspace is a challenge to your prevention plan. Depending on your facility/office layout for deliveries you should establish and post the COVID-19 protocol for visitors and vendors in a visible location.
- **Handling Mail:** The CDC has a statement regarding transmission of COVID-19 by mail. They also have guidelines on how to handle mail coming into your office.
- **OSHA and CDC tools and resources on their website:** We have included several links to tools and resources
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/2019-ncov-factsheet.pdf>
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html>
 - <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>
 - https://www.osha.gov/dts/osta/otm/otm_iii/otm_iii_2.html#2
 - <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3989.pdf>



SAMPLE Disinfectant Supplies List

	Item	Spec	Quantity
1	Mask (surgical)		
2	Nitrile gloves		
3	Infrared thermometer		
4	Disinfectant spray/wipes		
5	Spray bottles		
6	Sanitization floor stand		
7	Hand sanitizer (refills)		
8	Hand soap		
9	Paper towels		
10	Glasses/face shields		
11	Bio-hazard container		
12	Clorox Total 360 (optional)		

SAMPLE Disinfection Protocols

#	Area/Place	Disinfection Content	Disinfectant	Disinfection Method	Frequency
1	Work cell common surfaces	Including control buttons, tools, and other common surfaces	Hospital grade disinfectant or fresh 10% chlorine bleach solution (sodium hypochlorite solution), as appropriate	Spray with handheld sprayer or wipe	Minimum at the end of each shift
2	Offices, desk, and conference rooms	Table and chair surface		Spray with handheld sprayer or wipe	Minimum at the end of each shift
3	Computers, monitors and accessories	Wipe areas of common employee contact		Spray with sprayer	At least once respectively in the morning and afternoon
4	Moveable trays or containers	Handles and other commonly touched areas		Spray with sprayer	Based on use; Once per shift if contacted by 1 person only; otherwise, between users
5	General objects often used or touched	Doors and windows, handles, faucets, sinks, and bathrooms		Spray with handheld sprayer or wipe	At least four times per day
6	Work cell common surfaces	Including control buttons, tools and other common surfaces	Hospital grade disinfectant or fresh 10% chlorine bleach solution (sodium hypochlorite solution), as appropriate	Spray with sprayer	Generally, 3 or more times per shift to include after all breaks and meals
7	Employee break and meal	Disinfection of tables, chairs, tabletop items		Spray with sprayer	Generally, 3 or more times per shift to include after all breaks and meals
8	Vending machines	Contact surfaces (pay, selection and vending surfaces)		Spray with sprayer	Daily
9	Company vehicles	Common surfaces (e.g. seat surfaces rails, belts, door and window controls)		Spray with sprayer	After each use
10	Multi-user safety vest and other PPE	All surfaces		Spray with sprayer	Between use
11	All floors and walls	All general floors and walls at site		Mop	Periodic, where frequently touched; mop hard surfaces daily

Prepare for the Psychology of Return to Work.

We are starting to hear terms like post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth, desire for more family time and connection with kids, stress of finding a quality work environment at home. These concerns are in addition to the financial challenges and worries about debt. It is clear we will need to rethink the return to work and in what psychological shape will employees return? Daily routine of life changed dramatically with stay at home orders, people are handling it in different ways. Employers should be prepared to be flexible in taking care of their employee's psychological needs.



A healthy part of a company's return to work plan should include mental and physical health. Consider the following in your plan:

- Employee Assistance program. Many companies have these plans in place for certain levels of employees. Consider expanding to all employees.
- Are there local social or religious organizations in the city that have counseling services available? Post a list of the locations along with contact information in common areas for employees to engage. If possible, post on a company intranet or communication board.
- Contact the company's Broker to get marketing materials for the resources available through the company benefits plan.
- Links to Tools and Resources
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
 - <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-early-april-2020/>
 - <http://ldh.la.gov/coronavirus/>
 - <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

Understand the Employment Law Related to Return to Work.

We have mentioned seeking advice from Legal Counsel on several occasions throughout this guide. This area is one where Legal Counsel and a certified human resources professional can be invaluable. There are numerous online sources available for “do it yourselfers”, however experience and knowledge of laws and regulations will go a long way in helping your company create a great culture.



First step is understanding the federal, state, and local labor laws and then creating company policies to ensure leaders and employees understand each other’s rights. COVID-19 will take companies and employees into new spaces of conflict that could lend themselves to lawsuits. Your team’s job is to get to work understanding the current laws and employee rights, then make the adjustments to adapt to the challenges resulting from COVID-19. Like everything else in this guide, assess and consider the following:

- What is the plan for return to work? Is it mandatory or optional?
- Who makes the decisions about whether it is optional or not? What are the criteria?
- Can telework continue?
 - In which departments or teams?
 - Who decides this?
 - What input the employee have in the process?
 - Are there clear outcomes/KPIs to measure performance?
- What happens if an employee is afraid and does not want to return to the office?
- How does the Employer assure employers the facility is safe to work in?
- Will the employer provide PPE? Is it mandatory to wear face mask while at work? In meetings?

To say the least, Employers will have a much bigger and challenging role in protecting employees. The role should not be taken lightly, especially if the employer mandates a return to work.

- Links to Tools and Resources:
 - https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/posters/FFCRA_Poster_WH1422_Non-Federal.pdf
 - <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/new-shrm-research-on-how-covid-19-is-changing-the-workplace.aspx>
 - <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/pages/communicable-diseases.aspx>

Conclusion

This Return to Work Guide is just that, a guide! Each company has to take on its own discovery to define what is best for their culture. We hope that this Guide is helpful to your team in developing your company's COVID-19 Return to Work Plan of Action!

SHRM has assembled a number of resources that extend beyond what is covered in this Guide for COVID-19. Tools and resources are available for non-members and we have shared some here. There are additional checklists, memos, letter templates, articles and various items available to members only. Consider joining SHRM, it may be a great investment that saves you time. www.shrm.org.

This document and its content were created in collaboration between **NOLA SHRM and Northshore SHRM**.

NOLA SHRM is proud to be the local affiliate of the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), with more than 550+ local members. Since 1949, NOLA SHRM has served as a resource for local human resources professionals and businesses providing a forum for personal and professional development on issues related to human resource management, promoting fellowship, and offering various networking experiences to keep our members engaged and current on industry trends.

NSHRM; Northshore Society for Human Resource Management has been the voice for the Human Resources community located on the Northshore of Lake Pontchartrain in Louisiana since 1999. With more than 150 employers represented contributing to matters related to business, legislative affairs and professional development for Human Resources.

