Workplace Safety

Coronavirus and Workplace Safety: How to Manage Employees During a Pandemic

Vanessa Jo Roberts | Mar 26, 2020

For many manufacturing businesses, keeping workers safe and healthy is concern No. 1 during the coronavirus pandemic. Here are recommendations from a safety expert, the president-elect of ASSP.

How can you keep your workers safe during an extremely contagious viral outbreak?

Helping businesses navigate through the coronavirus crisis "will likely be one of the most challenging risks that we, as occupational safety and health professionals, experience in our careers," says Deborah R. Roy, safety consultant.

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> Deborah R. Roy
> ASSP President-Elect

The spread of *COVID-19 is now worldwide* as confirmed cases around the globe have outpaced those in China, where the outbreak began in late 2019, making this a health concern worldwide, points out Roy, the president-elect of the American Society of Safety Professionals.

"The goal of the public health response is to *flatten the curve*," reducing the number of new incidents, she explains. "The idea is to use proactive practices, like we do in safety, to slow the rate of COVID-19 infection" and avoid overwhelming healthcare systems and services.

How Should My Business Talk to Employees During a Pandemic?

Even when a business is firing on all cylinders and managing safety of its employees proactively during a crisis like the coronavirus, it can be a challenge to provide information and consistent messaging to your employees and customers.

In the case of COVID-19, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has created examples and templates that businesses can use and share, or they could adapt to their own needs.

The chamber's *Coronavirus Response Toolkit* covers topics like:

- Keeping commercial establishments safe

- Keeping the workplace safe

- What employees should do if they get sick

- Healthy habits to prevent COVID-19

- COVID-19 business preparedness checklist

Roy spoke this month at a webinar hosted by ASSP to help answer questions the viral outbreak poses for businesses and how to manage the numerous occupational health concerns.

She has experience in manufacturing and warehouse environments at companies with a global footprint—as the president of SafeTech Consultants but also through her 12-year stint overseeing safety, health and wellness at L.L.Bean.

While telework is the preferred strategy for those office workers whose jobs can be done remotely, "not everybody can work from home," Roy notes.

Even when states have shuttered nonessential businesses, "there is still warehousing and manufacturing that need to continue," she says. "If nothing else, some are providing critical supplies in order to address the pandemic."

We share additional information on preparing for and managing amid the coronavirus outbreak in "How to Prepare for Possible Viral Outbreaks Within Your Workforce."

How Safety Teams Can Help Reduce Exposure to COVID-19 in the Workplace

"One of the things to keep in mind is that this particular disease is a droplet disease," she says. What that means is that if an employee is ill and coughing, you want to eliminate the possibility of other employees getting coughed on or for that individual to cough into their hand and touch a surface.

Focus on Workplace Cleanliness

"Cleaning is critical," Roy says. "You have to clean high-touch areas repeatedly." Use of the *cleaners recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency* can "kill this virus fairly quickly," she adds. "Even 70 percent alcohol will kill this virus in about a minute."

Require Social Distancing

In common areas—such as cafeterias and locker areas—where workers congregate, Roy says companies must implement social distancing. "You can stagger your break times so that people are not comingling in a line or in a space that's not large enough for the number of people."

Serve Packaged Foods in the Cafeteria

If your facility has a cafeteria or breakroom that serves food, provide prepackaged foods and eliminate any live food stations or open multiserve containers.

"Plus, only a certain number of people go into the space at a particular time to purchase their food and then they move through to allow for that 6 feet of space in between people," she says.

Stagger Work Shifts and Breaks

Any manufacturing or distribution facility really must think about using or how they use shifts and hours, Roy advises, adding that many companies have shared that they are also separating their shifts.

"There's time in between when one shift comes in and the other goes out so [workers] all don't comingle at the same time," she says. That also allows for cleaning in between shifts and for practicing social distancing as the workers come and go from the workplace.

To learn more from the ASSP webinar and also find additional resources shared by the society, visit the ASSP Coronavirus resources page.

Managing Safety Best Practices During a Viral Outbreak

For any safety manager, risk is always a top concern: What is the level of hazard versus exposure that the business must worry about? "The thing to keep in mind with the novel coronavirus is that it spreads very easily," Roy notes. Plus, *World Health Organization research* now shows asymptomatic transmission of COVID-19 is possible.

Businesses need to take into account as well, Roy says, that there currently is no cure or vaccine. Even though many people only suffer mild symptoms, for others, it's deadly, and that must be a concern in the workplace, she says. "The key with this particular virus is that it may be a high-level risk for some individuals."

While the highest number of deaths have been associated with older individuals and those with underlying conditions, there are some younger individuals who have gotten critically ill and died. "We don't know why," and that makes the need of proactive safety actions important because "we don't know who would have a low level of symptoms versus a high level," Roy says.

She recommends new COVID-19 guidance from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. It addresses the risk of exposure and talks specifically to the *levels of risk*.

"They do a nice job outlining that," Roy says. "I really like the OSHA document. They give good suggestions on social distancing too."

PPE Considerations for Virus Protection

During her presentation, Roy also addressed the need for personal protective equipment, and in particular N95 respirators.

Her recommendation is that businesses should apply the Hierarchy of Controls. "We really want to start at the top and not start at the bottom" with PPE, she says. Instead, safety teams should look at how to avoid the risks and hazards rather than use PPE to mitigate them.

Review this safety prioritization methodology from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in our Hierarchy of Controls primer.

"The focus often in a situation that's uncertain is to just go to PPE," she says. "The fact is that we have to back up and go to 'How does the virus transmit?' "

Typically, in a traditional warehouse or manufacturing situation, Roy explains, the scientific thinking is that the droplets spread by a cough will travel no more than 6 feet. "In that particular context, if you think about N95 masks, if you have people moving around a warehouse, or sitting in a call center, and they have space around them, the potential for exposure is relatively low."

This is not to say that certain PPE would not or should not be deployed. But Roy suggests that safety teams evaluate the risks in their particular workplaces "based on the severity of the risks. Then, based on that, you use the appropriate PPE accordingly."

In a warehouse or manufacturing situation, "most people are using gloves," Roy notes. Using masks is not necessarily needed in circumstances in these facilities if hygiene and social distancing are being well implemented, she says.

It's absolutely critical that people use proper hand-washing hygiene and also to clean all high-touch surfaces often. She recommends that businesses use the *National Institutes of Health's initial research on how long COVID-19 droplets can survive on surfaces*. NIH found that on plastic and stainless-steel surfaces, the virus can live for as long as three days, and on cardboard for up to 24 hours.

As information changes, she added, the recommendations from health officials could change. And, because safety teams must manage a risk that is a virus, CDC guidance would take precedence over *OSHA's PPE standard*.

COVID-19 and OSHA Compliance

What are the compliance issues that businesses need to manage during a viral outbreak? In the *OSHA coronavirus guidance*, the agency raises the *general duty clause*, Roy notes, adding that "the expectation is that you do more and that you protect people from this" virus.

She recommends using the *bloodborne pathogens standard* as a good framework to apply, though it does not technically require anything of a business with regard to the coronavirus because the standard

does not address sputum. Roy finds it helpful as a planning tool because it has approaches that businesses can apply to the current needs related to COVID-19.

On recordkeeping, OSHA has changed the guidance.

"When you have an outbreak at a workplace, you do have to look at that differently than the usual cold and flu," which are exempted from the OSHA reporting rules, Roy says.

OSHA clarified that "you first have to do the same thing you always do with recordability for OSHA. You want to determine if it's a confirmed case."

Roy lays out the three steps that are required:

- **First:** "Confirm that the case is COVID-19." Your employee should be able to provide that documentation from their healthcare provider.

- **Second:** Next, you must determine if the case is work-related. "This is where I think a lot of people get concerned because they're not sure whether or not it's work-related," she says. "If you have another known case in your workplace and that person was a close contact in that workplace [typically, 15 minutes or more of contact within 6 feet], then you would need to consider it to be a work-related case." She adds, "You have to really do an assessment of that case, just like you would any other case as whether it should go into the OSHA log for being work-related."

- **Third:** "You have to consider whether the case involves one or more general recording criteria." The most obvious is medical treatment, which immediately makes it a recordable incident. The other that's likely to be involved during a viral outbreak like coronavirus is days away from work.

Learn more about federal safety reporting rules in our "OSHA Recordable vs. Reportable Incidents: How to Tell the Difference."

COVID-19: A Moving Management Target for Businesses

"Data on COVID-19 is changing every day," Roy points out. "We will learn more as research is available, but it will take time. That is the challenge for safety professionals."

From a practicality and usefulness perspective, providing leadership to senior management is critical during these types of crises, whether driven by a viral outbreak or a natural disaster, she advises.

"We have the opportunity to sift through the information and address things from a scientific perspective and to give leadership appropriate advice based on a scientific methodology," Roy says. "That will go a long way to helping to support your companies and your employees."

How are you managing during COVID-19? What practices have you established to keep your workers safe?