Re-opening Healthily & Safely During COVID-19

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As Barbados and other Caribbean islands relax their curfew restrictions and begin re-opening businesses, employers and employees must be prepared to manage the hazard of infectious viruses like COVID-19 in the workplace. This reality is further compounded by the fact that the official start of the Atlantic Hurricane Season (June 1 – November 30, 2020) is about three (3) weeks away. Weather experts have determined that this year could be one of the worst hurricane seasons on record, with potentially 20 named storms.

Control measures that have been instrumental in slowing the spread of the COVID-19, include stay-at-home orders and business closures. We know these actions are not sustainable and Coronaviruses cannot be eradicated from our population. It is therefore critical that we adjust our behaviours to minimise the risk of an outbreak in our population.

Risk Assessment

Employers should ask the question … "Is this the right time to return to the physical workplace, and who should return?" The Return to Work Strategy should evaluate the potential for the virus to spread and consider where working environments and activities may need to be restricted, reduced or altered. Control must consider vulnerable persons (employee and third parties) and special measures for their protection.

Cleaning and inspections of the facilities and equipment must be conducted prior to reopening. Ventilation systems and indoor air quality issues must be evaluated.

Engage, Educate and Communicate

All employees should attend a mandatory sensitisation session before returning to work. Policy changes and protection measures should be discussed with employees and other key stakeholders as appropriate (e.g. Trade Union, customers, clients etc.).

Administrative controls

Most of the actions related to COVID-19 are addressed by administrative controls; these include cleaning requirements and schedules and physical distancing.

Restrict outside visitors, vendors, and non-essential persons from entering the facility. Employees should bring food and beverages to work. The requirement for all persons entering the facility to wear a face cover and continue to use it for the duration of time on site is recommended for indoor environments. Arrangements for hand-washing upon arrival and when leaving should be made available. Floor markings and posters could also be used in hallways, stairs, and elevators to remind persons about maintaining the 6 feet physical distance.

Before returning to work, some companies have implemented the use of Self-Declaration Forms to identify possible illness and exposure of employees to COVID-19. Supervisors must continuously reiterate that persons are not allowed to come to work if they are ill. Staggering shifts (times) should be used to minimise possible exposure. Screening employees by checking their temperatures before entry to work and at least once during the day is also recommended. For large workplaces like construction sites, supermarkets and manufacturing plants or call centres this should be done by a nurse. If that is not possible, a competent person (e.g. trained first aider or other suitable person) should be identified and instructed on the temperature reading process. Temperature logs must be maintained. Persons with elevated temperatures should be restricted from entering the workplace until they are declared fit to work by a medical professional.

A frequent hand-washing policy must be communicated to employees and supported by providing adequate arrangements and cleaning supplies. This is especially important for remote and delivery workers. Access to clean water, hand soap and hand sanitiser should be provided.

Avoid sharing of tools, equipment and workspaces; mandate and enforce cleaning between users. If the removal of communal areas (e.g. lunchroom) is not an option for your workplace increasing the frequency of cleaning and sanitising of shared spaces.

Implement physical distancing via virtual (e.g. Skype or Zoom) or outdoor meetings. Remove excess furniture and designate specific seating arrangements for use of communal areas. Post signage as reminders.

Workplace controls

The layout of the workplace may also need to be reviewed and altered before persons return to work.

Conduct a walk-through of the workplace while referring to floor plans to determine the logistics of persons getting into and out of the workplace as well as their workspaces.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

PPE selected must be based on the hazards and the work environment. In a non-medical workplace this may include gloves, face shields, eye protection, respiratory protection (cloth face covers).

The use of respiratory protection could create a new hazard, such as restricted airflow. For medical personnel and those required to wear a respirator (e.g. N95) a Respiratory Protection Programme must be implemented. The respiratory fitness of the user, as well as the fit of the equipment, must be evaluated. Now that cloth face covers are recommended as PPE to reduce the spread of COVID-19, employers should provide cloth face covers to their employees free for charge. It would be wise to consider the respiratory health of the user by completing a screening questionnaire. Finally, instructions should be given to the users to ensure the face cover is safely worn, cleaned, and stored appropriately.

Planning Ahead

Review your emergency response plans to consider issues that may be related to a suspected COVID-19 Case at work and notification of possible exposure of employees to Covid-19 at your workplace. Employers are urged to plan for other emergencies such as non-COVID-19 related illness, hurricane, flooding etc. Good service and effective communication are likely to minimise issues with irate customers and clients, however, the security risks (e.g. violence and robbery) should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

Strong leadership and commitment are essential to navigating the ongoing COVID-19 response. Both employers and employees share the responsibility for ensuring a safe workplace. The threat of this disease will linger for several months and we must also be prepared for other types of emergencies such as security events and hurricanes. Top Management must stay current with credible news and Emergency Directives and engage competent professionals assist them to adequately manage risks. This situation is still fluid, so we need to monitor, review and adjust as required to ensure everyone's safety.

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