9 crucial COVID additions to make to your handbooks

Many Human Resources specialists face a common challenge these days – how to address COVID-19 in the workplace. As much of the word returns to work and tries to adjust to the new normal, the question remains: what policies are needed to ensure a safe and compliant return to work? Today, HR departments, managers, and leaders incorporate necessary precautions and proper protocol to keep employees, clients, and visitors safe and comply with orders in their local region. As workers prepare to return to work in more significant numbers, now is the time to adjust policies and employee handbooks to ensure a safe and productive return to work.

New guidelines, policies, and recommendations are necessary to ensure employees' safety and business continuity in the long term. Even temporary policies should be noted in the employee guidelines, so there can be no question of employees' expectations. Consider these areas in your return to work plan:

Communications processes and IT policies

Communications processes and IT policies should be updated to reflect the changes of 2020. One of the most significant changes to come from the pandemic is that many employees are now working remotely or are working in rotating schedules. Communications with employees have had to rapidly change to accommodate remote work and allow employees to stay connected via video, chat functions, or other new ways of working.

Ensuring clear communications with employees despite the changing environment is imperative. Updating your

employee handbook includes the actionable steps the company is taking to ensure health and wellness is a great first step. Also, be sure to outline any new communication processes with managers and leaders. Ensuring that regular updates about COVID-19 continue and that employees have ways to ask questions, even when not on-site, is one way to keep the workplace safe.

You also want to update telecommuting and IT policies. Outlining the requirements for safe use of technology, including security protocols, is essential for business sustainability. Ensure that employees know who is eligible to telecommute and under what circumstances. What technology is required, and who will pay for it? What hours should employees be online while telecommuting and is there any flexibility in scheduling?

COVID-19 testing policies

COVID-19 testing policies weren't on the radar for HR teams at the start of 2020 – and likely left out of employee handbooks altogether. However, now is the time to establish and communicate when, where, and how employees will be tested for the virus. It is also important to outline what will happen if an employee who has been in the office becomes sick. What contract tracing methods will be used? Do other employees need to quarantine? Will a negative test be required to return to the office in person? It would be best if you outlined all of these questions and more in your testing policy.

Employee illness policy

What will you do when an employee becomes ill? Updating employee handbooks to ensure that everyone is aware of the measures taken if employees become sick is essential. The pandemic response is likely, unlike any other sick leave that has been needed in the past. Address what your company will do when employees become ill and how you'll handle sick leave. Will the building be closed and disinfected? Should employees who have had contact stay home? Outbreak management, including managing contact with ill individuals and requirements for quarantining, should also be implemented.

Leave policies may need to be updated to ensure that employees have adequate time off for illness. The CDC recommends that employees who feel sick in any way should stay home, which means employees may need more time off or more flexibility than usual. The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) ensures that employees can take time off if they become ill or take care of a child infected by the virus. Also, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) went into effect on April 1 and requires employees with under 500 employees to offer paid time off for employees affected by COVID-19. Be sure to update leave policies to include this information and any extensions that may happen after December.

Visitor policies

Visitor policies before 2020 and after 2020 will likely look very different. When updating your employee handbook, consider how you will ensure employees' and visitors' safety at your sites. There may be a need to define how many visitors can be in the building in many cases. Detailed identification and contract tracing methods might be needed to contain infections. If visitors will need to pass a screening to enter the building, be sure to outline it in your handbook.

Temperature and symptom screening

Temperature and symptom screening procedures, including questionnaires on recent travel and practices for those in contact with someone with the virus, may also need to be added to the handbook. If you screen employees daily for an increased temperature, be sure to include that as well.

Employee and facility health and sanitary measures

In addition to screenings, your company may want to add policies that explain updated measures for employee and facility health and sanitary standards. This includes hygiene rules for employees from hand washing to social distancing, testing, workstation disinfection, and personal protective equipment (PPE) use. Are masks required? Should employees maintain social distancing? Will there be additional cleaning and disinfecting? Update your handbook to include these details. Particularly if masks or face shields will be required, you may also want to update the dress code in the manual as well.

Communal areas and meeting

Communal areas and meetings probably look a lot different these days. Whether you've banned them entirely or have spread out tables and implemented social distancing measures, be sure employees know the limits for meeting rooms and large gatherings. Will the cafeteria be open if you have one? What will they do to prepare meals safely? What about gathering in break rooms or other communal areas? Holding meetings in open, well-ventilated spaces and following social distancing guidelines is an excellent guideline to follow. Ensure that employees refrain from hugs and handshakes, and mandate that masks be worn if meetings must be face-to-face.

Travel policies

Travel in 2020 and beyond has changed drastically. Many companies encourage employees to travel only if it is urgently required – and move any other in-person meetings or travel to platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Non-essential travel should only take place according to state, local, and country regulations.

Equal Opportunity Employment (EEO) guidelines

Equal Opportunity Employment (EEO) hiring guidelines, including taking the job applicants' temperature as part of a post-offer, pre-employment medical examination, may be necessary in the post-COVID-19 world. Some screenings are allowed as long as all entering employees face the same screening process. The U.S. Equal

Employment Opportunity Commission has published guidance on EEO and ADA laws and COVID-19 specific details [here](). Employers must still make reasonable accommodations for employees, maintain the confidentiality of medical files, and treat employees fairly. Outlining your companies' policies in the employee handbook, including your equal opportunity and ADA compliance, is a good practice.

Despite all of the changes employees and businesses have faced due to the coronavirus pandemic, one thing has not changed - clear communication and policies are imperative to ensure employees are well informed, safe, and healthy. Proactively updating your employee handbook to address all changes and new policies in response to the virus is an integral part of returning to work in the "new normal."