

RESTARTING INDUSTRY WORK AFTER LOCKDOWN

The fourth phase of lockdown will be soon over and everyone is eagerly looking forward to get back to life. But will it be the same life again? Certainly not. Life is going to change and is going to be different after the advent of Covid 19, more so at the workplace.

By now we all know that Covid 19 is caused by new Corona virus and it is transmitted from person to person. Today, our life is global and the whole world is connected by work, by trade and even by leisure. The disease was brought from Wuhan to India by the travellers visiting India and by the Indians visiting other countries. And it was spread further mostly by people travelling within the country. As on 24th May 2020, India has detected more than 131000 cases of Covid19 with about 3900 citizens dying from the disease.

We need to take a look at some important aspects before, during and after restarting the workplace. All stakeholders need to take actions to protect the employees getting infection at workplace and also to protect continuity of business by keeping the workplace running.

Basics of the disease and transmission

Corona has become the most important challenge at the workplace due to its long course of illness, possibility to spread the infection to more individuals, significant morbidity and mortality. The challenge has become formidable due to the presence of carrier stage ie an infected individual who has no symptoms but has ability to infect others. The disease is transmitted by droplets, physical contact and by fomites via contaminated objects and surfaces. The virus can survive for different periods on different surfaces from a few hours in most cases to three days in rare conditions.

Fever, dry cough, exhaustion, shortness of breath, headache, sore throat are common symptoms. New symptoms like loss of smell and loss of taste are reported. It takes anything between 4 to 14 days (average 5 days) to develop the symptoms after getting the infection. Infected persons transmit the infection about two days before the onset of symptoms and up to 10 days after. Almost 50% of the infected persons may never show any symptoms.

Prerequisites to start the work

Guidelines and advisories from various government agencies should be reviewed and followed. They are 'work in progress' and keep getting updated regularly as the situation evolves.

The employers need to conduct a thorough risk assessment before restarting the workplace. Infection levels in the society, transport of employees to and from home to workplace need to be reviewed carefully. A proper communication needs to be sent to employees regarding new ways of work, change in work practices and precautions to be followed. Guidelines and best practices for respective industry, worker hygiene, cleaning and disinfection, physical distancing, and employee wellness should be followed.

Workplace needs to be made ready for work by thorough sanitization, layout changes for social distancing, additional hygiene facilities and health screening at entry to the workplace. Physical barriers to ensure the physical distance within the work floor and dining facilities may be created. Advisories from the local government as well as international agencies like ILO, WHO and other credible organizations should be studied and implemented as applicable.

Risk Communication, sustained training and education and industry specific PPEs need to be ensured before re-opening the workplace in sufficient quantity. Masks are essential for health protection for all employees. Have a plan of action ready if an employee turns Corona positive including quarantine arrangements. It will be a good strategy to start with partial (30% to 40%) occupancy and gradually increase as situation improves. High risk employees (those above 65 years, those with uncontrolled diseases and with respiratory / other comorbidities) should work from home and come in to work last. Also employees residing in containment area and red zone should not report for work till they complete quarantine. Residential accommodation on premises may be provided for critical area employees where possible.

Avoidable practices

Disinfection tunnels were installed at some places. Various government agencies in India as well as international experts have decried the use of such disinfection tunnels. The Health Ministry has strongly advised against spraying of chemical disinfectants on individuals or groups as it could cause physical and mental harm. The advisory said methods such as spraying of disinfectants could lead to a false sense of safety and actually hamper public observance to hand washing and social distancing measures.

Spraying disinfectant on the streets, as practised in some countries, does not eliminate the novel coronavirus and even poses a health risk, the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned.

Workplace entry & exit

Proper arrangements need to be made for smooth entry to ensure social distancing and hygiene norms. Most guidelines mandate a no touch body temperature check before entering the workplace and while exiting. Since there are more chances of interpersonal contact, entry and exit should be separate. Entry / attendance should be made contactless to the extent

possible. It is advisable to avoid public transport and use personal vehicles or company provided transport where possible. Social distancing norms are required not only at workplace but also during travel. In case of company provided transport, mandatory temperature check be done before boarding the transport. Organizations may consider issuing thermometers or motivating employees to procure them.

Authorities have mandated a gap of at least one hour between the shifts wherever possible to avoid overcrowding and reduce the chances of cross infection.

Industry should take extra precautions by limiting visitors to the workplace which is important in reducing exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace. Contact information of all visitors should be preserved in the event COVID-19 later develops in the workplace, and the visitors may have been exposed to it.

Workplace safety and hygiene

Indoor environment quality and ventilation should be monitored meticulously especially with changes in cleaning and housekeeping practices. All machinery, especially contact points, should be regularly sanitized. Provide face protection shields along with masks and PPEs and make their use mandatory.

Workplace Sanitation

Thorough and frequent sanitization of the whole workplace is essential. Special attention should be given to common areas such as meeting rooms, rest rooms, lifts, staircases etc. Frequency of cleaning needs to be increased manifold. Sterilize all boxes, wrappings and machinery brought into the workplace. Similarly, isolate and sanitise finished goods as appropriate. However, a WHO report says that spread of corona virus infection through fomites is uncommon in non-healthcare area.

Surfaces should always be cleaned with soap and water or a detergent to remove organic matter first, followed by disinfection. High-touch surfaces should be identified for priority disinfection. These include door and window handles, kitchen and food preparation areas, counter tops, bathroom surfaces, toilets and taps, and work surfaces. Freshly prepared Sodium hypochlorite (bleach) may be used at a recommended concentration of 0.1% (1000 ppm) for floor and major surfaces. Alternatively, alcohol with 70%-90% concentration may be used for surface disinfection. Follow instructions from the manufacturer for touchscreen personal devices, personal computer keyboards or alcohol spray may be used.

Canteen hygiene

Canteen is a place with high potential of cross infection. Increase the lunch hours and stagger employees' lunch time to reduce the crowd and observe social distancing norms. Food items and serving practices should be improvised to reduce the frequency of contact. Kitchen areas should be cleaned and disinfected frequently at least once before every shift and dining areas before every service.

Work practices

Work practices need to be reviewed and improvised to ensure social distancing norms and reduce risk wherever possible. Personal meetings be avoided or reduced unless essential. Work from home should be allowed and encouraged where feasible.

Teams and zones should be formed at workplace so that workers come in contact with less colleagues who are traceable. In case an employee turns out to be Corona positive, only that particular team / area will get affected and the whole workplace need not be shut down.

Health and Hygiene

All employees should monitor their own health. They should be given sustained education and training to identify ill health and encouraged to stay home if not feeling well. Daily roll call of symptoms is desirable.

In small and medium workplaces without a medical facility, a medical retainer may be engaged if not existing. There should be an isolation room / area where an employee becoming sick can be isolated.

If an employee has fever and cough at home, he/she should come for work but contact his/her family doctor on phone. Most local government bodies are running fever clinics where treatment can be sought. Their advice should be followed for further treatment and testing as required.

The list of nearby medical facilities and governmental health centres should be made accessible to employees and displayed prominently. All employees should be provided medical insurance. Industry should have contact with government or private sector testing facilities for Corona virus disease after doctor's examination and advise.

Personal hygiene

Use of mask, frequent handwashing/hand sanitizers and social distancing is the most important and effective trinity for every employee at all levels. Mask should be changed frequently and cloth mask be washed daily. Workplace and home clothing should be kept separate and washed frequently. Appropriate and sufficient handwashing facilities should be created / hand sanitizers provided to ensure easy access without long waiting period.

Tobacco in any form increases the vulnerability of the individuals and also increases the spread of infection. Therefore, tobacco, gutkha, smoking and other habits should be strictly prohibited.

To conclude, every employee should make oneself aware of all the above factors. Get all doubts clarified from superiors and cooperate by monitoring own health, complying with directions and adopting new practices. Never forget Mask, Hand hygiene/Sanitizer and Social Distancing for a safe and productive workplace.

References:

For detailed information refer to guidelines issued by local Government authorities,

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