Safety

Best Practices for Reopening Safely After COVID-19: What Manufacturers Need to Know

Roland Jones | Jun 18, 2020

As your business reopens in the days and weeks ahead, there are certain measures you can take to ensure that you are reopening as safely as possible. Here are some basic steps for reopening your shop.

The prospect of reopening following the COVID-19 outbreak is no doubt a happy thought for many business owners, but it's important to know some of the important steps you should take to ensure you are doing so as safely as possible.

Lockdowns, social distancing rules and other measures have already started to get the coronavirus outbreak under control. Now organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and state and local government agencies are offering a flood of guidance, certifications and regulations for reopening. These steps are designed to help companies adapt to the new normal for facilities maintenance and employee wellness.

> **"I think all of us have experienced wanting to automatically shake a hand and the reality is we all have to get used to this new normal."**
> Michelle Sourie Robinson
> President and CEO, Michigan Minority Supplier Development Council

There are many issues to consider. Reopening means establishing new safety procedures such as the use of thermometers, the wearing of masks and social distancing. New cleaning routines must also be established, and reopening requires the use of specific products and services, most notably *personal protective equipment*, or PPE, which may be in short supply. And many manufacturers have the added challenge of running both office spaces and shop floors.

The following is not meant to be an authoritative or all-encompassing legal or regulatory guidance on reopening, but it contains some common best practices for reopening your shop.

A Five-Point Plan for Reopening

There's a dizzying array of advice out there for companies looking to plan how to bring their operations back online amid the pandemic.

At *a recent webinar on the topic*, held by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Alan Thayer, founder of the Innovative Law Group, offered some clarity with the following **five-point plan** for reopening a business:

1. First, **know the rules**: Understand your state and local guidelines, the guidelines given by federal authorities and the standards for your industry.
2. Once you have examined and understand the guidance, **develop your own protocols** and put them in writing.
3. **Communicate those new protocols** to your employees, to your customers and to your vendors and reinforce them using training and signage.
4. Next, **implement your new protocols** using various steps needed to make your workplace compliant. This might mean physically restructuring the workplace or installing such tools as plexiglass barriers between work areas.
5. Finally, **enforce your rules**. If you know the rules, you develop protocols and you communicate those protocols—and you enforce them—your business should be in a much better shape to reopen, to stay open, and to avoid lawsuits, Thayer says.

Understand the Reopening Guidelines

Many new procedures need to be in place—and monitored constantly—as shops reopen. The task can feel overwhelming, but a methodical approach can lead to a successful return at a time when COVID-19 is part of a new normal for workplaces.

As you plan to reopen, a good first step is to check your state's website for updates and guidance on reopening in your region. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has created *a useful page and interactive map* to help you keep track of developments in your area. There may also be guidance on reopening issued by city governments with local guidelines for you to follow, or from your local or state health authorities.

Looking beyond your state guidance, the CDC maintains *a website* where you can get reopening advice for specific industries or professions. The organization has also released a "*Workplace Decision Tool*" that is designed to help companies make decisions about reopening and protecting vulnerable workers. Another important CDC website helps companies and individuals understand *best practices* for cleaning and disinfecting public places.

Companies who want to understand safely reopening at the national level can look at the online resources offered by the National Safety Council, which has updated a series of *playbooks for businesses* to help them understand how they can reopen and what the standards should be for specific industries. These playbooks are designed to help employers align worker safety with business objectives.

Another good resource is the American Industrial Hygiene Association's *Back to Work Safely* page,

which contains recommendations for limiting the transmission of the virus while operating a wide variety of businesses.

More: Essential Products for Reopening Your Shop

Creating a Safe Environment for Workers

A major concern for businesses is, of course, the legal liability they may face if returning workers become sick on the job, or worse, lose their life, after catching COVID-19 at work.

U.S. business lobbying groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce are asking Congress to ensure they are *protected from coronavirus-related lawsuits* when businesses begin to reopen and workers return to work.

When assessing the risks to your workers, consider doing a job hazard assessment using the four *OSHA risk categories*—lower, medium, high, and very high.

For example, jobs that don't require contact with people who are known to be at risk of being infected would be in the lower risk category. That means workers who have minimal occupational contact with the public or other workers—telemarketers, for example, or warehouse workers at isolated facilities.

Jobs falling into the medium category are those that might require frequent and close contact with individuals who may be infected but are not known or suspected patients. Examples of workers potentially in this category are those working in high population work environments, such as high-volume retail settings. Also included: individuals returning from places with widespread COVID-19 infections.

The four exposure risk levels represent probable distribution of risk.

OSHA Occupational Risk Pyramid for COVID-19

Speaking at *a recent webinar* on returning to the workplace after COVID-19, Tom Goeltz, vice president of risk management services at Hays, noted that a good way to manage the safety of workers who fall into the "medium" category is to use physical barriers, such as plastic shields on counters, or by using decals on the floor to show safe distances for spacing out people. You may also want to limit the number of personnel in washrooms to avoid close contact, and keep your customers informed about any COVID-19 infections.

Those in the high and very high risk categories should use the same precautions as those in the medium risk category, says Goeltz, and examples of workers who fall into this category include people who work in healthcare and support services, hospitals or clinical labs, or those who suspect they have been in contact with confirmed COVID-19 patients. Precautions for those in this group include exposure screenings, or providing employees with PPE, face masks or respirators.

Managing Social Distancing in the Workplace

Another important aspect of workplace safety is managing how workers move inside your facility to be compliant with social distancing guidelines.

Companies that have both a manufacturing setting and offices attached to that facility might consider limiting the number of workers who can walk between the two areas, reducing the number of workers who can come into contact with one another.

You may also consider installing hand sanitizer and PPE dispensers at various points in your shop, and a location where each worker's temperature can be checked upon entry, or where those workers can be checked to make sure they are following safety procedures, such as wearing *face masks*. *Floor markings or signage* may also be used to show walking routes for employees to minimize close contact and control potentially congested locations, such as hallways.

Another potentially useful approach to workplace safety is to develop a heat map of your office or shop areas to determine locations of high traffic. This can inform you of the most effective social distancing approaches to ensure a 6-foot distance between workstations and individuals moving through the space. To mitigate problem locations you may then decide to move workstations or stagger workers into multiple shifts and introduce thorough *cleaning* sessions in between those shifts, while asking some employees to work from home in order to ensure there's enough space for workers to circulate at a safe distance.

Read more: COVID-19: Reopening Guidance for the Manufacturing Industry

Some entrepreneurs are developing innovative solutions to help address the challenge of managing social distancing in workplaces, notes Michelle Sourie Robinson, president and CEO of the Michigan Minority Supplier Development Council.

Speaking at a recent *U.S. Chamber of Commerce webinar* on reopening, Robinson noted that some companies in the state are asking workers to wear bracelets that buzz or light up when co-workers are not observing enough social distance with other employees in their workplaces. These devices are one of a series of new technologies intended to help companies modify their workplaces so that employees can be safe amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The wristbands underscore the "new normal" that workers are returning to, and how much companies want to ensure their workers feel—and are—safe in their workplaces, according to Robinson. "I think all of us have experienced wanting to automatically shake a hand and the reality is we all have to get used to this new normal," Robinson told webinar participants.

You might also consider using touchless technology wherever possible—for opening doors, or to operate such facilities as light switches, soap dispensers or *PPE dispensers*.

Another way to manage the reopening process safely and minimize the spread of the virus is to take steps to improve indoor air quality. This can be done by ensuring the appropriate ventilation and air change rates, or by using UV lights integrated into airflow equipment, which can kill a substantial number of airborne viruses and bacteria.

Other air purification technologies include high-efficiency *filters*, air purifiers, or *fan systems* that draw

air away from workers and into areas where it can be treated and purified. Good social distancing policies should also improve air quality around workspaces.

As you reopen, it's also worth considering how prepared you are for another catastrophic event. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical importance of effective planning to mitigate against risky events. Safety professionals at your company may therefore want to prepare for and conduct audits of the organization's disaster response programs.

How have you managed the challenges of reopening your business? Which sources of information have you found most useful?

www.mscdirect.com/betterMRO