

27 May 2020

IOGP-IPIECA Health Committee Statement on returning to workplaces

Objective

The objective of this document is to provide IOGP and IPIECA Members with a list of factors to consider as they prepare for their workers to return to offices. Legal regulations from national and local authorities should always be followed, and the final decisions and plans should be complemented by a location-specific risk assessment.

There are reports that the overall pandemic risk has been effectively managed at national levels in some countries, to the point where offices are already open. The overarching challenge when considering a return to office from a risk management perspective is that no individual mitigating measure or control is fully effective, nor is there yet sufficient data to assess the efficacy of any measures taken. Risk management therefore must include a variety of measures and be refined when data and information become available to conclude which measures are most effective for a given setting.

Individual Behaviours

Individual behaviours are considered the key barrier or control measure for interrupting the spread of any viral disease, including COVID-19.

Behaviours are influenced by both societal and company communication and actions.

- An effective barrier may exist when company staff, contractors and the population at large follow social distancing and hygiene advice, both at work and at home, and self-isolate if they exhibit relevant symptoms. A key enabler for this behaviour is a safety net in terms of continued income, medical care, and support during illness along with clarity and understanding of measures to be taken.
- An ineffective barrier will exist where the above factors are not in place.

When assessing the risk of infection, companies need to consider expected individual behaviours in their specific location when deciding on mitigation measures and associated enforcement.

Consistent and clear leadership and communication is vital to achieving the right behaviours.

General preventative measures

It will be incumbent on industry and society to ensure a heightened state of alertness and to implement suitable and sufficient controls to prevent transmission of the virus in their workplaces.

Suggested measures for companies reopening offices include:

- Ensuring active monitoring of WHO, national, and local advice and adapting plans accordingly
- Ensuring that expectations for individual behaviours are clearly communicated
- Ensuring general pandemic awareness is raised and actioned through cleanliness, work-space layouts, and work patterns, for all work locations
- Ensuring travel policies and plans include consideration for national restrictions on travel, quarantine requirements, border closures, and reduced transport schedules

- Ensuring mental health aspects and associated company provided support services are embedded as part of the more general Human Performance imperatives
- Ensuring emergency response plans and drills are practiced regularly and incorporate additional elements introduced by COVID-19, e.g., social distancing during evacuation and mustering, delivery of First Aid, fire team duties, and others.

‘Return to Office’ Risk Assessment

Any company specific plans to return to offices have inputs as mandated by (inter)national and local authorities and on the specific level of risk for a location or work site. A “return to office” risk assessment needs to be carried out per work site or location in addition to compliance with any national and local authority public advice.

1. Triggers for return to offices

Returning to offices starts with a risk assessment at a local level. Inputs include incidence and prevalence rates, rates of positive test results, growth rate, and case doubling rate. A downward trend in new cases over a minimum period of two weeks is considered a good indicator of control. Evaluation of data from different national and international sources when assessing these rates is considered best practice.

Companies will need to take into account location-specific considerations which may include:

- Specific risk level at the relevant location, including considerations for any commute to/from offices.
- Assessments of whether return to offices is needed are based on productivity, criticality activities, timings of phased return, and the need to co-locate. For the latter, this can be part of any overarching company priorities that requires co-location in an office, such as maintenance of corporate identity, critical tools only available in the office, or face to face collaboration.
- Assessment of individual needs and ability to perform work outside of the office location. High vulnerability personnel or those with high vulnerability household members should have optional return to office locations. Options to extend remote working may be provided for all personnel who can fully undertake their job roles remotely.
- Assessment of ability to prepare office facilities for social distancing, taking into account guidance for separation to avoid working in “close contact” to others. This also includes the company’s ability to provide any additional resources to enable safe working, e.g., availability of PPE, cleaning/disinfection services etc.
- Considerations for a phased return are priority-based on business criticality, location, and individual considerations that will inform the order and schedule of such a return.

2. Pre-screening

The priority remains to reduce the risk of infected parties entering the workplace, even in low risk office environments. In general, screening is not an effective barrier. There are several reasons why infected personnel may come to work. An employee may be infected and contagious yet asymptomatic; or they may have financial drivers for returning to work, and may accept a different risk level than that that acceptable to the organization. Individual behaviours will remain key factors both for company personnel and contracted parties. Depending on location specific conditions, the barriers to stop the spread of the virus due to aforementioned conditions may include the following:

- The underlying key consideration is availability of **sick pay** for workers and those on a day rate, enabling them to isolate themselves if they or anyone in their household are experiencing

symptoms. This removes any financial considerations for returning to the office/worksite and is viewed as a strong barrier to pandemic spread in any environment.

- Self-monitoring for COVID-19 or other symptoms is viewed as a moderately effective mitigation barrier and should be encouraged.
- Formal screening through a questionnaire or a medical assessment is considered a moderately strong mitigation barrier when doubt exist on self-monitoring measures.
- Quarantine, in combination with PCR testing, is considered a strong barrier to prevent spread of the virus in high risk environments and may help reduce quarantine duration.
- Temperature screening is considered a less effective barrier at the workplace, even if there are cases where it has identified infected parties. It may be stronger if personnel self-monitor over a period of time. Implementing temperature screening at the workplace has the benefit that individuals may more actively self-monitor and act on any symptoms before travelling and may strengthen other barriers. Regardless, cost/effort versus value of temperature screening must be considered in low risk office environments.
- Antigen/Antibody testing is considered an ineffective barrier to control the spread of the virus as currently there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the presence of antibodies are proof of immunity, as well as the high rate of false negatives associated with these tests. It may be useful to map larger scale populations (please see the IOGP-IPIECA Health Committee statement on COVID-19 testing in workplaces). The science is, however, rapidly evolving both in terms of the testing technology and whether positive tests give rise to immunity. It is expected this barrier may strengthen with time.
- Various track and trace “apps” are encouraged in support of health authorities and is believed to be a strong barrier to prevent community spread. Concerns do exist around data protection and that a high proportion of communities needs to use it to be effective. Companies need to take guidance at the national level for this.

3. Office arrangements and social distancing

The key relevant term used by the WHO and others is “close contact”, understood as being within a 2 m/6ft radius of an infected person for 15 minutes or more. Workplace layouts and whether employees can maintain distance while at work must also be considered. In some areas, lower minimum distances for short term or casual contacts (lifts, passing in street, shopping) has been communicated as low risk, but clearly movement within offices are factors that need consideration. While planning for social distancing in the office environment, it is useful to categorize employees into three categories:

- Individuals critical to business continuity or those with a particularly externally facing role. They need more active consideration of close contacts and could be managed as a specific entity with due consideration for PPE, face coverings, phased returns, or other physical/practical measures.
- Vulnerable individuals or those who live with individuals who may be at higher risk in case of infection. Privacy laws and diversity priorities are clearly factors to be taken into account and voluntary declaration is encouraged. Measures may include delayed return to office, including enhancing home working arrangements through IT support and PPE.
- Remaining population. Key factors to be considered include office layouts, phased returns, and PPE for specific settings.

Individual behaviours remain a key barrier and it is important that measures implemented in the workplace, also continues outside the office environment.

Learning for the Prevention of Future Pandemics

There is an opportunity to structurally update various company policies with a view to generally reducing the impact of any future pandemics. Further, response plans for both a COVID-19 Wave 2 and/or similar situations in the future will need to be redrawn with new learnings. At this point, it is clear that particular focus needs to be placed on early trigger of actions as first reports of possible pandemics arise from the WHO, and more efficient harmonization between global and national responses. It is expected that also national authorities/bodies will recognize these issues as critical.

Medium/Long term considerations for companies include:

- Ensuring infectious disease outbreaks are included as a key corporate-level risk
- Ensuring crisis management and business continuity plans are continually updated to reflect the latest pandemic learnings and to highlight key national/international stakeholders
- Ensuring crisis management and business continuity plans are practiced regularly
- Ensuring active global monitoring of any WHO or national authority advice related to COVID-19 return to work
- Ensuring business continuity response plans are considered during ongoing Contracting and Procurement efforts
- Placement of offices/work locations in relation to key pandemic transmission hot spots such as public transport infrastructure
- Consider mental effects of extended Working from Home, including ensuing factors of isolation
- Organise office space to facilitate social distancing

Illustrative risk visual:

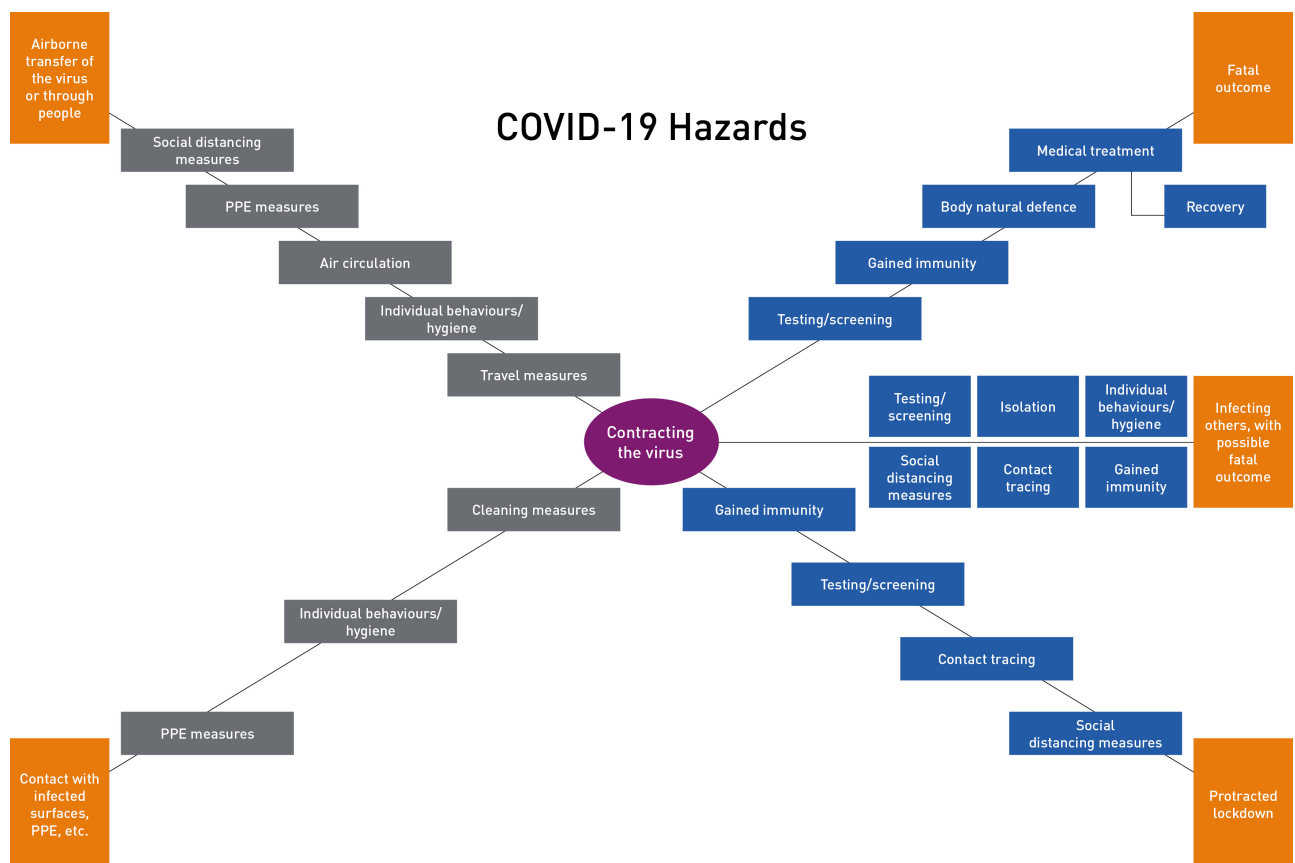


Image intended for illustrative purposes only. Publicly available materials from Energy Institute and others have been consulted in creating above image.

Note:

This position statement has been prepared using collective insights from the IOGP-IPIECA Health Committee, with due regard to the positions and information from international health bodies such as the WHO, CDC, and others.

The need to urgently address issues in the rapidly moving COVID-19 situation means it has not gone through the usual approval/review cycles for such documents, and will be under regular review as the situation evolves.