

Getting back to business

Creating and managing a
'COVID-secure' workplace



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COVID-19 has changed the world and how we live our lives. As well as being a public health emergency, it has had huge economic implications. Millions of people around the world were instructed to stay at home, either to work or to remain on the payroll with support from the state.

While the lockdown has successfully reduced the number of COVID-19 cases, business cannot remain on hold forever. Gradually, carefully, workplaces are reopening, and workers are preparing to return to their jobs in offices, shops, schools and construction sites.

Those workplaces are going to be very different from the ones they left.

In this white paper, we look at how the workplace has to change in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper:

- sets out the challenges and legal requirements facing businesses of getting back to work safely and efficiently
- looks at how businesses can prepare for reopening and implement these plans
- provides hints, tips and guidance on reopening facilities to be 'COVID-secure'

We also draw on the experiences of our clients around the world to explain how CAFM Explorer® can help to successfully manage a back to work strategy.

A redefined workplace

Before the pandemic, the workplace landscape was already changing. But now it is being totally redefined. Organisations of all shapes and sizes, in all sectors, are facing hard decisions. And how to reopen their workplaces, in a way that protects the health and wellbeing of their employees, is a key challenge.

In April 2020, the British Council of Offices (BCO)¹ highlighted some of the ways in which workplace design could change as a result of COVID-19. As well as stressing the importance of hygiene and social distancing, the BCO¹ also foresaw the introduction of adaptations to the workplace, including:

- limits on the numbers of people allowed to occupy a workspace or use a meeting room at any one time;
- a ban on communal kitchen items, such as cutlery and kettles;
- pod-based 'super loos' with touchless doors, taps and soap dispensers;
- re-evaluation of ventilation systems.

Facilities managers don't just have to consider the internal space. Over the last few months there has been a massive shift from public transport to both private car use and increased walking and cycling. As workplaces begin to reopen, employers also need to consider how their staff will get to work safely. For example, where employees have concerns about getting to and from work, employers may consider creating or expanding cycle storage facilities and making alternative parking arrangements.

These adaptations are not a vision of the distant future. As organisations, and especially those responsible for facilities management, work to comply with government guidance on making workplaces 'COVID-secure', they will have to rethink the way the workplace works.

¹ http://www.bco.org.uk/Research/Publications/Thoughts_on_Office_Design_and_Operation_After_Covid-19.aspx

The challenges of getting back to work

Employers have a legal responsibility to protect workers and others from risk to their health and safety. This means thinking about the risks they face and doing everything reasonably practicable to minimise them.

COVID-19 is a serious illness that has been contracted by more than six million people around the world and has been the cause of over 375,000 deaths. However, because it is spread in very specific circumstances,² it is possible for organisations to assess and manage the risks of COVID-19 in advance of getting their staff back to work.

There are many different areas for employers to consider when thinking about how to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, but the most important challenges concern:

- social distancing, including areas where this is more difficult, or not possible;
- organising the workplace, including the location of desks and the installation of additional features, such as screens and hand-drying facilities;
- cleaning and sanitising, including what needs cleaning, who will do it and when.

As well as complying with guidance, employers have to make sure their staff are confident in the plans for reopening workplaces. A survey for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development³ in May showed that almost half (44%) of respondents were concerned about catching COVID-19 at work.



How businesses can prepare for reopening

Every organisation needs to introduce sensible measures to control risks. Therefore, before reopening a workplace, it is vital to conduct a COVID-19 risk assessment, in line with guidance⁴ from the Health and Safety Executive.

A risk assessment should:

- identify what work activity or situations might cause transmission of the virus;
- think about who could be at risk – paying attention to whether the people doing the work, or those they live with, are especially vulnerable⁵ to COVID-19;
- decide how likely it is that someone could be exposed;
- act to remove the activity or situation, or if this isn't possible, control the risk.

During the risk assessment, it's important to consult with workers⁶ and afterwards to share the results.

Any organisation with more than 50 employees must post the risk assessment results on their website.

Clear, consistent and regular communication is vital to improve understanding about new procedures in the workplace. This may also involve developing training materials for workers prior to returning.

Different industries and sectors may require specific measures. On construction sites, for example, access between different areas may need to be restricted, and high traffic areas may have to be regulated to maintain social distancing. The UK government has published guidance⁷ covering a range of different types of work in places such as offices, factories, shops and outdoor working environments.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#How-COVID-19-Spreads>

³ <https://www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/anxious-returning-workplace>

⁴ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/news/assets/docs/working-safely-guide.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/>

⁶ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/news/assets/docs/talking-with-your-workers.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

What action should you be taking to be 'COVID-secure'?

Although numbers of cases have been falling due to the nationwide lockdown, COVID-19 continues to pose a dangerous risk. As we move out of lockdown, it is vitally important that organisations can work safely and support their workers' health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UK government⁸ and the Scottish,⁹ Welsh¹⁰ and Northern Ireland¹¹ devolved administrations have provided guidance on how to work safely. This gives practical advice on how the recommendations can be applied in the workplace.

Other sources of advice on creating and managing a safe working environment during the pandemic are the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy,¹² the British Standards Institution,¹³ and the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers.¹⁴ A webinar from the Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management¹⁵ features a discussion by a panel of experts on the practicalities of returning to work.

In planning to reopen their workplaces, every organisation should translate this guidance into the specific actions it needs to take, depending on the nature of their business.

However, in addition to carrying out a risk assessment, there are steps which all organisations need to take; and facilities managers will be at the heart of making these changes happen.

Employers must also ensure that everyone in the workplace continues to be treated equally.

Discrimination against anyone because of a protected characteristic, such as age, sex or disability is against the law, and employers also have particular responsibilities concerning disabled workers and new or expectant mothers.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/sector-guidance-for-easing-lockdown/>

¹⁰ <https://gov.wales/taking-all-reasonable-measures-minimise-risk-exposure-coronavirus-workplaces-and-premises-open>

¹¹ <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-workplace-safety-guidelines-and-social-distancing>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

¹³ <https://www.fmj.co.uk/the-british-standards-institute-publishes-uk-safe-working-guidelines/>

¹⁵ <https://www.iwfm.org.uk/resource/watch-navigating-turbulent-times-episode-five-planning-the-return-to-work-what-are-the-practicalities.html?>

Checklist for action

1. Developing cleaning, handwashing and hygiene procedures

In the absence of a vaccine, good hygiene is the strongest weapon we have in tackling COVID-19. Organisations can take a number of measures to ensure effective hygiene at work.

- Encourage people to follow the guidance on hand washing and hygiene
- Provide hand sanitiser around the workplace, in addition to washrooms
- Frequently clean and disinfect objects and surfaces that are touched regularly
- Set clear use and cleaning guidance for toilets
- Provide hand drying facilities – either paper towels or electrical dryers
- Consider potential sites of high use and transmission, such as water coolers, and provide alternative sources of water

2. Helping people to work from home

Where possible, employees should continue to work from home. Employers can facilitate this with a consultative approach.

- Discuss homeworking arrangements
- Ensure employees have the right equipment, including remote access to work systems
- Look after employees' physical and mental wellbeing

3. Maintaining social distancing

In all parts of the UK, the current rules on social distancing say that people should stay two metres apart. This means two metres in all directions – to the left and right, in front of and behind, and applies to all parts of a business, including entrances, exits, kitchens and toilets.

The challenge for businesses is to ensure that all reasonable social distancing measures are put in place.

- Put up signs to remind workers and visitors of social distancing guidance
- Avoid staff sharing workstations
- Use floor tape or paint to mark areas to help people keep apart
- Arrange one-way routes through the workplace
- See visitors by appointment only, if possible
- Limit the numbers of people using lifts at any one time

4. Managing transmission risk where social distancing is not possible

If the two metre rule cannot be observed, organisations should find ways to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

- Keep an activity time as short as possible
- Use screens or barriers to separate workers
- Stagger arrival and departure times
- Reduce the number of people each person has contact with by using 'fixed teams or partnering'

How CAFM Explorer® is helping organisations get back to work

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Facilities managers have always played a pivotal role in overseeing the ‘silent’ services and processes that work behind-the-scenes to keep organisations functioning. But this role has taken on heightened significance in the management of a back to work strategy.

Facilities managers across the world are discovering the value of CAFM Explorer® as a way of gaining better visibility of all facilities tasks, contractors or service providers, associated costs and assets from one central point. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, CAFM Explorer® is proving invaluable in helping organisations meet the challenges of managing a safe return to the workplace.

CAFM Explorer® provides a simple, streamlined and reliable way to manage and consolidate information on the vital elements of a ‘COVID-secure’ workplace.

These include:

- Workspace planning
- Planned maintenance
- Scheduled sanitation
- Desk spacing
- Social distancing
- Asset maintenance
- Resource booking
- Equipment allocation
- Space allocations

The application can also trigger work orders as a result of an action – for example, ensuring a desk is cleaned once it has been booked. Processes to support working at home, such as tracking IT assets, are also supported.

Our clients are finding that CAFM Explorer® provides a simple way to manage the changing work environment, at a time of rapid change. An intuitive online interface gives access to key information, and with CAFM Analytics, reports can be easily generated on all aspects of an organisation’s estates for an up to date overview.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have found new ways of using CAFM Explorer® which have helped us in tracking costs, stock and work requests. We have started to use the CAFM stock control module to log and monitor our Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and hygiene stocks, such as sanitiser, gloves and masks.

This has given us the ability to closely monitor the levels of PPE we are holding at any time, track which of our buildings are using the most products and at all times ensure we are fully aware of the stock value.

In addition, with many of our staff now working at home, we have utilised the asset features to monitor the high volumes of equipment that have left our property, assigning IT equipment or chairs etc. direct to the employees individual record on CAFM Explorer®, so we can track the location of our assets and ensure they are correctly returned when employees come back to the office.

We have also made amendments to some of the features we already use within CAFM Explorer®, such as tracking COVID-19 costs through the invoice/budget facility, ensuring all work requests are logged against a COVID-19 work group so we can track the work we are completing, new standard work orders listed on our CAFM web facility so all employees can make quick requests for PPE/Hygiene supplies and we have also updated our Service Providers list to ensure we have plenty of available contractors or supplies during the lockdown periods.

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Chris Rice
Newbury Building Society

Conclusion

It is too early to say what lasting effects the coronavirus will have on UK society and business, but it's likely we will all be living in the shadow of COVID-19 for the foreseeable future.

Even before the pandemic, the focus for facilities managers was shifting towards a wider role, taking in wellbeing and preventive measures. COVID-19 can only accelerate that trend.

For facilities managers, ensuring a safe return to work presents a staggering array of challenges. Keeping workplaces clean, managing shift patterns, ensuring availability of PPE and creating procedures for inbound and outbound goods are just some of the many considerations to be made. There's no doubt that other complications will arise once employees have returned to the workplace.

As a trusted supplier of digital software and services, Idox is leading the way in helping organisations get their facilities back up and running. Using CAFM Explorer®, we are preparing our own international offices for reopening, and would like to share our experience with clients and prospective customers.

For further information on how CAFM Explorer® can help your organisation manage a safe and effective return to work, please email marketing@idoxgroup.com.