

COVID-19 considerations for the office: Managing office disputes

Managing employee sensitivities starts with accountability and enforcement of identified control measures to help keep all employees safe.

Just as the first few months of COVID-19 and shelter-in-place took time for adjustment, coming back to the office will pose its own set of challenges. One of the most pressing will be managing potential office disputes by preemptively creating an environment that is favorable to each employee's comfort zone associated with potential risks of COVID.

Understanding employee concerns and sensitivities is the first step in managing these challenges. Areas of focus include establishing office ground rules, providing employees with methods to communicate (both verbally and non-verbally), implementation of physical controls, recognizing the potential for employee disputes, and providing outlets for those employees who may have experienced a loss — whether personal or work-related.



Establish office ground rule

Develop written guidelines. Examples may include:

- Only one employee in a cubicle at a time
- No more than five employees in a huddle room
- Use of online chat (Skype, Teams, Google, etc.) instead of in-person interactions

Daily COVID/health questionnaire

- Consider smartphone or online surveys versus getting responses at the door.
- Restrict office access through badging systems if identified as high-risk.

Additional considerations

- Interaction with contractors/deliveries
- Interaction with guest visitors



Verbal and non-verbal employee communication

- Require completion of virtual modules regarding policies prior to returning.
- Train employees on topics which may be cause for frustration, such as the use of face coverings, face masks and respiratory protection.
- Post policies conspicuously throughout the office.
- Post signs as a reminder of policies (e.g., six-foot social distance, one person per cubicle).
- Lock or cordon off common areas to deter communal gatherings.
- Post colored sticky notes on doors to indicate whether a tight-access area such as an office supply room is already occupied.
- Use an anonymous suggestion box or preferably an electronic weekly survey (e.g., Survey Monkey, office forms) to inform of potential disputes regarding procedures, enforcement or other issues.
- Create a committee with the intention of identifying COVID-related disputes and addressing them.



Physical controls in the office

- Separate employees by seating them at every other desk to help ensure social distancing.
- Implement specific cleaning and disinfection plans focused on commonly touched surfaces and areas.
- Use EPA-recommended cleaning and disinfectant products: [epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-coronavirus-covid-19](https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-coronavirus-covid-19)
- Provide items needed for enhanced personal hygiene (hand sanitizer, masks, etc.).
- Use MERV 13 Filtration Ventilation.
- Use portable HEPA filters.
- Use motion sensors to open common doors.
- Use hands-free door openers — such as a step-and-pull, toe opener, or foot pull — for bathrooms or other doors that typically remain shut.



Managing workplace disputes

- Establish open lines of communication with co-workers and management.
- Train office managers in conflict resolution.
- Train employees on what's considered harassment and how COVID may play a role.
- Identify employee sensitivities, such as increased use of disinfectants, which may trigger asthma and other employee conditions.
- Implement awareness barriers at cubicle entry points, such as makeshift "chains" and ropes at cubicle entries.
- Provide virtual team-building exercises to encourage open communication.



Address simmering frustrations that COVID-19 may exacerbate

- Management should use conflict resolution methods to address immediate or underlying issues (e.g., family, money, schooling).
- Stagger/alternate work schedules.
- Implement Employee Assistance Programs to provide emotional counseling.
- Address employees who do not follow policy.



Loss management

- Provide free enrollment to Loss and Grief Seminars.
- Encourage employees to take time off when needed.
- Develop and promote virtual employee support groups.

Conclusion

Managing employee sensitivities starts with accountability and enforcement of identified control measures to help keep all employees safe. Frustrations can arise out of management's failure to execute, which can quickly arise into a dispute.

It's vital to keep all employees informed of evolving issues that may result in office disputes, recognize signs of conflict, and enforce rules and regulations intended to proactively address employee frustrations.

For more information, please contact your Zurich Risk Engineer:
(800) 982-5964
risk.engineering@zurichna.com

Resources

RiskTopics

[Cleaning and Disinfecting Plans during the COVID 19 Outbreak](#)

[Face Coverings, Face Masks and Respiratory Protection for COVID-19](#)

Zurich

1299 Zurich Way, Schaumburg, IL 60196-1056
800 982 5964 www.zurichna.com

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