

BRINGING STAFF BACK TO THE WORKPLACE SAFELY

As the current 'lockdown' restrictions are gradually reduced and removed, being prepared to respond to the changes appropriately and safely is vital. Organisations will be faced with difficult decisions as to whether or not they can safely bring their staff back to work and the use of risk analysis to facilitate the decision-making process is something businesses are expected to use.

Government Guidance

The guidance provided by the UK Government on 'Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19)' provides specific information for the controls to be considered when working in/on 8 work settings:

- Construction and other outdoor work
- Factories, plants and warehouses
- Labs and research facilities
- Offices and contact centres
- Other people's homes
- Restaurants offering takeaway or delivery
- Shops and branches
- Vehicles

There are useful hints and tips for aspects to be covered by employers on the Government's website: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>.

There is also the opportunity to download and print a poster for display in your premises, to assure staff and other interested parties that you have undertaken a Risk Assessment:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5eb959f5e90e0708370f97f9/staying-covid-19-secure.pdf>.

Introduction to our template

This below guidance should be used alongside our Risk Assessment Spreadsheet as a means for you to consider and capture the risks your business faces and the measures you will put in place to address them. This should be followed in conjunction with the governmental guidelines.

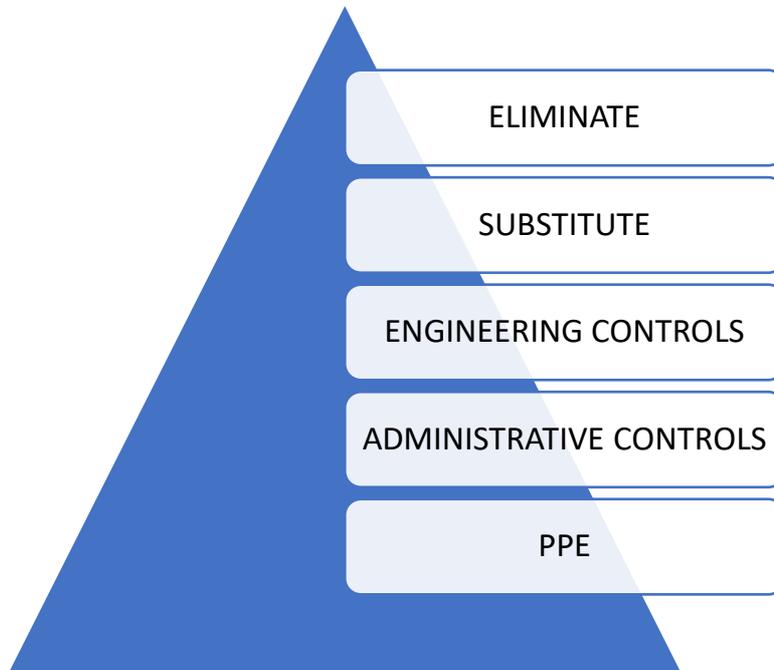
No two businesses operate in the same way and you are encouraged to develop your Risk Assessment further, to cover other issues which are particular to your own business or organisation. The tabs in the Spreadsheet cover generic issues, the 8 specific work settings listed above, and a further tab providing details relating to equipment issues.

In undertaking your Risk Assessment, it is clearly key that you consider how your measures cover issues such as disability, equality, ethnicity, language barriers and other protected characteristics. These are not specifically covered in the sections of the document as these are seen as being relevant across all sectors.

Using the template effectively

CfA’s Risk Assessment template and below guidance are designed to provide you with a resource to use as you consider your back to work arrangements. In drawing the tools together, it became very clear that every organisation operates differently and with different risks and are therefore provided on the basis that you will use them to inform your thinking rather than to cover every aspect of risk.

The Hierarchy of Controls which drives much of our thinking on safety management is worth holding onto at this time. We all need to recognise that eliminating risk is much better than simply providing PPE.



As you use the tool, consider the 5 levels of the Hierarchy of Control – here are some questions which may be appropriate for your business. There will be more!

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Eliminate | <p>Do we need to do this job, in this way, at this time? Can we eliminate the need for the employee to be in the workplace, e.g. can they (continue to) work from home?</p> <p>Many employees have worked from home during the lockdown – has this made you realise it’s a solution that works, or has the experience shown that it doesn’t work for this particular task?</p> <p>Before you rule out extending ‘working from home’ consider what it is about the arrangement that leads you to say it has to change back to being present in the office.</p> |
| Substitute | <p>Can we do the work in a different way, for example home working or making changes to shifts to reduce the number of staff present at any one time?</p> |
| Engineering Controls | <p>Is it feasible to put barriers up between desks or move the desks around to create socially distanced workspaces?</p> |
| Admin controls | <p>What signs and guidance can we use to remind people not to congregate in the kitchen, to remain 2m apart etc.? Hand sanitiser notices and hand sanitiser stations to be put in place? Big signs in reception reminding people to remain apart?</p> |
| PPE | <p>Can we obtain sufficient masks of the right sort and make sure people wear them?</p> |

This is not an easy call, and for most businesses there is going to be a lot of head scratching going on before a reasoned decision can be made on how and when return to work can be implemented safely. Some of the issues are personal to the employee (e.g. they may have underlying health conditions which increase their vulnerability), others are about the work they undertake. For example, the Office Receptionist needs to be based 'front of house' and will, through their work, be exposed to a wide range and number of individuals.

There are 2 fundamental questions which need to be addressed on a personal level for each member of staff, and these may well mean that you cannot allow the individual to return to work:

- Is the individual at increased risk personally, e.g. due to underlying medical conditions?
- Is a close family member of the individual (who they reside with) at increased risk?

The next stage of the task is to consider the jobs that take place within your business and how you can ensure you meet governmental guidance on social distancing. How relevant these questions are will depend on the business, its structure and its physical surroundings.

- Is the job essential? Can it be set aside for a period of time?
- Does the job have to be done in the office/factory or can it be done remotely?
- If it does have to be done 'on the premises' can you put in place suitable measures to ensure that the employee undertaking the work is at least 2m from other employees at all times or is protected by some barrier or screen?
- If this can't be achieved under normal working conditions can you split shifts to reduce the number of staff present and provide the necessary space?
- Can you re-organise work and equipment to provide the necessary space?
- Can you introduce 'one way' systems to reduce the chance of staff inadvertently coming into contact with each other?
- If you use hot desking, how will you ensure appropriate clean down processes are in place post and pre-use?
- If you are going to rely on issue of PPE (e.g. masks) can you source sufficient stock of the right sort of gear to have it available for the start back?
- How can you modify welfare provision to make sure social distancing can be achieved and cross contamination can be avoided?

Moving on from the social distancing aspects associated with work tasks, take time to consider the equipment and systems you have in place and how you can ensure that they are not exposed to risk of cross contamination through touch. Consider how you can eliminate some aspects (for instance, locking off access to heating controls) or change practices to reduce risk. Use of antibacterial cleaning agents and provision of PPE are the last barriers!

Finally, please remember to consider your emergency procedures and identify any changes which you might need to make to them, e.g. changes to muster arrangements to ensure social distancing can be achieved.

Some examples to consider

An organisation works in the manufacturing sector and has had all its office staff working from home during the lockdown, allowing 1 from each department to be present in the offices each day. They have ensured that the individuals who come in only use their own desk and phone, and that social distancing is maintained by employees remaining within their own 'section' or department. They are now considering the opportunity to bring more staff in to work afforded by the change in lockdown rules.

They identify that:

The Receptionist is exposed to risk as visitors need to sign-in at the desk and be handed their visitor badge. There is no space to set up a separate desk for this. The current system uses an iPad which they have to input details into. The firm decides to remove the iPad system from use, and to instead ask the receptionist to manage the system from her computer, asking visitors for their information and inputting it there and then. The business also identifies that the receptionist should be protected by the placement of a barrier (screen) which will shield her from any airborne virus transmission. Visitors will be issued with paper visitor badges which they will be required to dispose of when they leave site.

In considering the office area, it is recognised that the current seating arrangements do not allow sufficient space for social distancing. Staff sit at desks which are 1.5m long and 80cm wide, and are arranged in rows of 2, with a member of staff directly facing another member of staff. Whilst there is some low-level screening between desks (between facing, not adjacent employees) this is not a sufficient barrier. Consideration is given to placement of barriers, but these are judged not to be suitable.

The organisation decides to allow half the staff in at a time, with desking arrangements modified so that alternate desks are occupied.

Team A

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | X | | X | | X |
| X | | X | | X | |

Team B

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| X | | X | | X | |
| | X | | X | | X |

Staff are required to work at their own desk, and not to use desks belonging to other team members. This is designed to reduce transmission. All staff are issued with antibacterial wipes and instructed to clean keyboards, telephones, desks, chairs etc at the end of each shift. In order to minimise use of the kitchen area and the potential for cross contamination, they are all required to bring their own mug to work, to only use that mug, and to take it home each evening with them. Those wishing to eat lunch at the premises are required to bring their own crockery and cutlery and again take this home with them.

The majority of staff use laptops and, in order to further drive down the risk of transmission, the organisation opts to replace the remaining desktop machines with laptops, and each laptop is clearly identified to an owner.

| Aspect | Area | Risk | Score | Mitigation | Score |
|--------|------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Office | Reception | Virus transmission by visitors | 5 | Erection of barrier screen, removal of sign-in system, disposable visitor badges | 3 |
| Office | Main office area | Virus transmission worker to worker | 5 | Split work into 2 teams and operate on shift basis, with staff only occupying their allocated desk, but shift pattern ensuring desks are occupied 'alternately' i.e. a gap between each one | 3 |
| Office | Toilets | Virus transmission by visitors or staff | 5 | Social distancing markers on corridor to toilets. Only 1 person to be in facilities at a time. Anti bac wipe down after each user (by user) | 2 |

In another example, a Gas Engineer needs to undertake maintenance work at a client's premises.

| Aspect | Area | Risk | Score | Mitigation | Score |
|--------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Appointment | Admin. | Virus transmission customer to worker | 5 | Call to communicate safe working measures ahead of visit, including confirmation that the customer has no symptoms | 3 |
| Installation | Customer home | Virus transmission customer to worker | 5 | Request customer leaves property/is restricted to specified rooms/use of baby gates or barriers to define working area and maintain 2m social distancing. Upon completion, electronic sign-off via email by Engineer using tablet (personal issue). Tablet and equipment used to be wiped down after each visit. | 3 |
| Invoicing | Cash | Virus transmission customer to worker | 5 | No cash payments. Use of bank transfers for payment with electronic invoice issued to customer. | 1 |

We recognise that this is not an exact science and can provide support to you as you complete your assessment of risk – if you want to take advantage of coaching as you prepare to undertake your Risk Assessment please find more details at www.centreforassessment.co.uk or email enquiries@centreforassessment.co.uk.

Centre for Assessment is a leading, specialist certification and training provider. We have developed a range of services to help you and your organisation cope with the challenges faced by the Coronavirus pandemic. Browse our website or get in touch to find out more about how we can help.

We hope that you, your colleagues and your families remain safe during this challenging time for us all.