

Guidelines of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work on the employees' return to work after lifting the restrictions relating to the Covid-19 infection in terms of adapting the workplace and protecting the employees

Background

The guidelines of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work on the employees' return to work after lifting the restrictions relating to the Covid-19 infection in terms of adapting the workplace and protecting the employees (the "**Guidelines**") include several recommendations for both employers and employees, in order to protect their safety and health once work is resumed after lifting the restrictions relating to the Covid-19 epidemic.

These provisions do not have a generally valid applicability, but indicate certain measures as examples, in order to facilitate the customization of the measures based on the concrete needs in each case.

The guidelines do not include medical advice, this domain being separately regulated.

Business plan

The guidelines include suggestions which will be customized on a case-by-case basis, by gradually following the relevant steps for resuming work in optimal OSH conditions.

Thus, the Guidelines refer to:

- Risk assessment and taking appropriate measures,
- Involving workers,
- Taking care of workers who have been ill,
- Planning and learning for the future,

- Staying well informed, specific information on certain sectors and occupations.

We will hereinafter describe all these issues.

Risk assessment and taking appropriate measures

As a result of the change in the working conditions due to the Covid-19 epidemic, **the identification and assessment of occupational risks** upon resuming work is essential for preventing the situations which may affect the physical and mental health of the employees.

Before establishing any protective measures, the first step to be followed for proper safety and health at the workplace is to assess the potential risks.

Thus, the employers should analyze the risks to which the employees are exposed following their return to the workplace organized by the employer, including the psychological impact.

The importance of the contribution of the employees and their representatives in the risk assessment and resorting to the services of an OSH advisor, if possible, should not be neglected.

For more information and advice on the spread of Covid-19 virus in certain areas, information may be requested from the competent public authorities. In Romania, such information is available on the websites and social media pages of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labor and

Social Protection, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Labor Inspectorate.

At the end of the risk identification and assessment phase, we may consider the following step for taking concrete measures.

Thus, in structuring an action plan, the employers should take into consideration the following principles:

A. Minimizing the exposure to SARD-Cov-2 infection at the workplace

Adapting the working conditions so as to limit the exposure to the new coronavirus requires the implementation of a control structure and hierarchy for compliance with the measures.

In the first phase, it will be attempted to establish collective measures, and to adopt individual measures only additionally, such as providing protective personal equipment.

For illustration purposes, the following measures for risk minimization may be implemented depending on the business nature:

- Carry out only the essential activity at the workplace organized by the employer, with the possibility to postpone the works which are not urgent, encourage the performance of remote work using online or phone means, keep only the essential employees in the unit and limit the access of third parties;
- Reduce, as far as possible, the physical contact between customers by isolating the employees who may work individually, those that do not require a specific equipment or immovable instruments, being possible to arrange separate work spaces, by using rooms such as: meeting rooms, canteens, spare offices.
- Arrange for vulnerable workers (older people and those with chronic conditions, pregnant workers) to have the possibility to work from home / telework for a determined period of time. Furthermore, the employees with close family members who are infected or live in the same house with vulnerable persons may also perform telework;
- Eliminate or, as the case may be, reduce the physical contact between customers by giving them the possibility to place orders online or by phone, ensure deliveries without a direct contact or manage the access ways so as to avoid overcrowding and keep social distancing at the entrance and exit from the premises;

- Perform deliveries outside the workplace, advice couriers to keep proper hygiene in the transport means and provide them with sanitation gel and wipes. They should use different areas such as toilets, locker rooms, etc. successively and in proper hygiene conditions;
- Place barriers between workers, if they are not able to keep a two-meter distance from each other. Barriers can be purpose-made or improvised using plastic sheeting, mobile drawers or storage units, without using unstable items which may fall or accidentally move. If barriers are not installed, a distance of two desks will be kept;
- If close contact is unavoidable, keep it to less than 15 minutes. Take into consideration reducing contact between employees at the change of shifts, scheduling breaks so as to reduce the number of people sharing the cafeterias, locker rooms, kitchens and ensuring that a single person enters such premises. Place signs on the main access door to toilets for indicating their occupation degree. The cleaning and sanitation tasks may be organized in shifts.
- Supply soap and hand sanitizer (in appropriate quantities) and encourage the employees to use them.
- It is advisable to clean the work premises frequently, in particular doors, door handles, tools and other surfaces touched often and ensure good ventilation of the rooms;
- Avoid excessive workload on cleaning staff and, if necessary, hire additional workers and ask the employees to leave their workplace tidy. Thus, it is advisable to provide the employees with waste bins to allow emptying them without touching the contents.
- If you applied all general protective measures, but such measures are not sufficient, you will have to provide the employees with individual protective equipment, making sure that they have been previously trained on the use of such equipment;
- Place posters that encourage staying home when the employees have a cold, sneeze or cough, and keeping a proper hand hygiene at the entrance to the workplace and in other accessible areas;
- Opt for and facilitate the employee's use of individual rather than collective transport, by making available car parking places or a place for parking bicycles or encouraging them to walk to the office;
- Put in place internal policies for flexible leave time and telework, in order to limit presence at the workplace.

Further information on the measures which should be taken at the workplace and what to do if an infected person came in contact with the work environment, can be found in the **Covid-19 Guidance for the workplace**, available (in English) at https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/COVID-19:guidance_for_the_workplace, which includes particular information on the persons who do not work in their country of residence, but return there regularly, and the measures which should be observed by them.

B. Resuming work after a period of closure

Resuming work after it was suspended due to the spread of the new coronavirus requires a well-designed plan to take into consideration the following issues:

- Update the infection risk assessment as described above and refer to Covid-19 guidance for the workplace;
- Adapt the workplace and the organization of the activity before employees return to work; it is advisable to gradually resume work, in stages, to allow better adaptation to the new conditions;
- The employees should be promptly informed and will benefit from special training, if necessary;
- Contact your occupational health committee / commission and health and safety advisor if you have access to one and discuss your plan with them;
- Pay special attention to workers who are at high risk of infection and are vulnerable, including older people and those with chronic conditions and pregnant workers;
- Provide special support for workers who suffer from anxiety, stress, depression or other psycho-emotional conditions. This could range from managers asking workers more often how they are, facilitating exchanges or buddying between colleagues, changes in work organization or work tasks, implementing an employee assistance program or coaching service.
! Such measures related to the mental health of the employees are especially required if they had serious medical problems or lost a close person, are experiencing financial difficulties or personal problems;
- Workers who are returning to the workplace after a period of isolation, irrespective of the conditions in which they were isolated, are likely to be stressed or have other mental problems, due to the existence of the risk of infection. If social distancing is kept in such cases, these problems will be faced much easier.

- It is understandable if the employees are worried about the risk of infection, and in such cases they should be informed about the measures taken and the support available to them in case of need.

C. Coping with the employees' absence

The number of infection cases is not uniformly spread, and in certain areas it is likely that many employees will be absent from work due to coronavirus.

The guidelines describe a few cases that employers have to cope with after lifting the restrictions:

- In order to avoid tense situations which might occur after resuming work, the employees who will continue to come to work should benefit from a flexible work schedule, keep any additional workload as low as possible and ensure that it does not last too long.
- Line managers should constantly monitor the situation and make sure that the employees are not overburdened. To such end, it is advisable to observe the rules and agreements on working hours, rest periods and disconnection when off work.
- In case of a reduced workforce, changes of roles and responsibilities, consider the need for training and support, so that all employees are competent to carry out their tasks.
- Certain employees will need a cross work schedule so that they do not interpose, and the activity is not affected due to the absence of some of them.
- Interim staff should be very clearly informed and well-trained.

D. Managing work from home

In most Member States, in this period, an increasing number of workers are encouraged to work from home. For some of these workers, it is the first time they telework / work from home, and in such context, they may face a number of problems.

The guidelines include a description of the safety and health measures which may be taken in case of work from home and provides suggestions to minimize the risks to workers who have not been able to prepare their home workplace properly:

- Carry out a risk assessment involving workers who telework;

- Allow workers to take equipment at home, such as a laptop, computer, monitor, keyboard, printer, chair or lamp. Keep a record of the items taken at home;
- Provide workers with guidance on setting up a workstation at home, by identifying solutions for good posture and frequent movement, as far as possible;
- Encourage workers to take regular breaks to stand up, move or stretch;
- Give the necessary support in the use of the work equipment. Tele and video conferencing may be problematic for workers not used to such remote communication means;
- Ensure good communication at all organizational levels, for issues related to the activity carried out and social interaction between colleagues. While business coordination can be addressed in scheduled meetings, the personal interaction can be encouraged through 'virtual coffee' meetings.
- Do not underestimate the impact that work in isolation and under pressure may have upon the employees. It is important to keep an informal contact between colleagues through online meetings or rotate which employees can be present at the workplace, if possible;
- Be aware that many employees have children who do not go to school in this period, or need to care for elderly or chronically ill people. In these circumstances, employers should be understanding and flexible in terms of working hours and productivity, by making the employees aware of their understanding;
- Work time should be delimited from rest time and a clear communication line should be established for the periods when they are expected to be working and can work.

Involve workers

The participation of workers in business organization during the current Covid-19 epidemic is a key to success and a legal obligation.

It is extremely important that you **consult** your workers and their representatives about planned changes and how work will be temporarily performed. Thus, an agreement should be reached between the employee and the employer for undertaking risks and establishing responsibilities. OSH representatives and committees are in a position which allows them to properly implement preventive measures.

Care for infected persons

The data of the World Health Organisation reveal that although most persons infected with SARS-Cov-2 recover from the disease without needing special treatment, around one out of every six people develop serious illness.

However, even if certain persons have been declared fit for resuming work, you should monitor certain indicators showing whether the employee lost the work capacity or needs psychological adaptation after returning to the workplace.

To such end, the patient's doctor or the occupational health physician should assess the following issues:

- **Muscle weakness.** This symptom happens to 30 to 50% of people admitted to IC and reduces the muscle functional capacity, including through breathing difficulties;
- **Problems with memory and concentration.** This symptom is not obvious, and may be noted over time if the employee has memory loss, cannot focus on simple issues or fails to have certain performance. It is important if the patient was previously admitted to IC because he/she may need guidance;
- **Long time for resuming work.** Data show that approximately half of patients need at least a year to resume work and a third may never return.

Plan and learn for the future

Coping with the Covid-19 virus may result in **drawing up new policies and procedures for telework / work from home** or may help to improve the existing policies and procedures.

After this experience it is advisable to draw up **contingency plans** or to update the existing plans, even in case of small businesses.

Telework / work from home may become a long-term modern practice, even for companies that used it for the first time in this period.

Stay well informed

The amount of information on the infection with the new coronavirus may rather result in misinformation in certain cases, making it almost impossible to differentiate the reliable and accurate from the vague and misleading. It

is advisable to always check the source of the information and the qualification of the providers of such information. In this regard, the Guidelines indicate a few official sources which may be used to get well informed in relation to SARS-Cov-2 and Covid-19 epidemic:

- World Health Organization;
- European Center for Disease Prevention and Control;
- European Commission;
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work.

The information will be updated once the states begin to relax the restrictions.

Sectors and occupations

People whose work involves a direct physical contact and who are thus exposed to an extremely high risk of infection include, along with the healthcare personnel, those involved in food supply, waste collection, police and public transportation.

Considering that the activity in certain countries has not been restricted at the same time for all sectors, it is advisable to resume work in the same manner, by successively returning to work, but in reverse order, i.e. the first ones closed will be reopened last.

Local legislation

In Romania, the legal framework regulating the rights and obligations of employers and employees in terms of safety and health at work is **Law no. 319/2006**. The rules and principles under this Law are consistent with the recommendations at a European level included in the Guidelines. According to Law 319/2006 the employer has the obligation to take all measures required to:

- Ensure the employees' safety and health;
- Prevent occupational risks;
- Properly inform and train the employees;
- Provide proper protective equipment (masks, gloves etc.)

Considering the risk of spread and infection with the new coronavirus, employers should mainly:

- determine if the activity carried out is likely to present a risk of exposure to SARS-Cov-2;
- determine the exposure type and extent;
- establish concrete measures which should be taken to limit the exposure;
- establish an emergency measure plan with the occupational health physician and, if possible, with the OSH advisor.

Contact:

Anca Zegrean
azegrean@birisgoran.ro