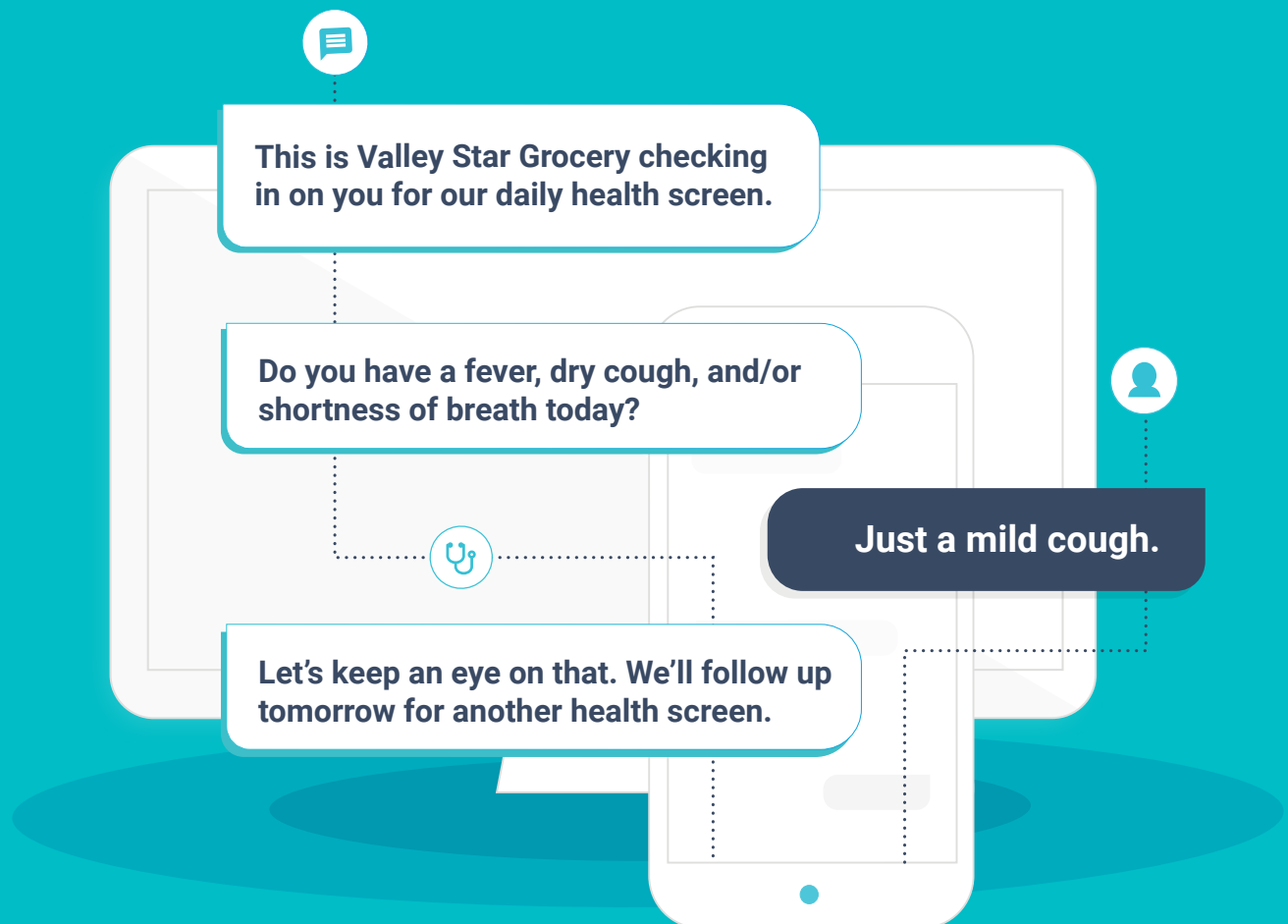


GUIDE

Employee Health Return-to-Work Strategies



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Operational Toolkit for Businesses Considering Reopening or Expanding Operations in COVID-19

- The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security

GET TOOLKIT

The future of work has changed as a result of COVID-19. Every organization is reimagining how they will work knowing full well that this isn't the last wave of infections, or even the last pandemic. Every industry is learning how to protect its people and promote health and safety, all while staying profitable. As Brian Solis, global innovation evangelist at Salesforce, puts it, we all have become "**digital health companies.**"¹

Many employers have little to no experience with a global pandemic, much less navigating the complex and ever-changing demands related to a full return-to-office process. As such, every organization should assemble a task force to introduce a phased approach to reopening and working safely. According to **Mayer Brown**, a global services provider, the task force should include human resources, communications, compensation, information technology, and legal departments.

In this white paper guide, we summarize the areas that your task force will need to address. While every business has its own unique challenges, there are key considerations for all when it comes to promoting employee health:

- Physical Safety
- Facility Safety
- Communication
- Employee Support

Prior to addressing these core focus areas, your task force should first undertake a risk assessment to drive planning and implementation efforts. Johns Hopkins has a **toolkit for businesses** to leverage to calculate risk and understand their risk level with example risk-mitigation strategies.²

Physical Safety

Create a plan for a safe work environment that protects employees from exposure and transmission of COVID-19. Every workplace is unique. Cleveland Clinic has created [general guidelines](#)³ for COVID-19 workplace preparedness with specific recommendations for [Manufacturing](#)⁴, [Restaurants](#)⁵, [Retail](#)⁶, [Hotels](#)⁷, and [Healthcare Providers](#)⁸.

Here are general exposure minimization strategies to optimize employee safety:

Reduce onsite capacity.

- Remote work: Adopt a “remote by default” policy and recall only workers who cannot perform their positions remotely.
- Add shifts with less people: Initiate one shift and then add shifts, modifying operations to stagger workers.
- Cohorts: Establish worker cohorts to minimize the number of different individuals who come into contact with each other.
- Stagger schedules: Stagger arrival, break, and departure times to avoid congregations of workers in your facility.
- Restrict visitors and vendors: Restrict all but essential visitors. Essential visitors should be unaccompanied and required to wear face masks. Implement these measures:
 - i. Require all visitors to undergo the same types of screenings as employees.
 - ii. Assign a particular space for meetings with visitors.
 - iii. Designate a delivery area where deliveries are accepted.

Cleveland Clinic offers [general guidelines](#) for COVID-19 workplace preparedness with specific recommendations for different areas:

[Manufacturing](#)

[Restaurants](#)

[Retail](#)

[Hotels](#)

[Healthcare Providers](#)

There are at least four types of health screenings to consider, including screeners (such as automated virtual assistants) that survey employees regarding symptoms prior to entering the workplace each day or each shift - such as the Orbita [Employee Health Manager](#).

iv. Require visitors and vendors to sign in and provide contact information so if they are exposed to COVID-19, the employer can notify them. If the employer becomes aware that a visitor or vendor has contracted COVID-19, the employer should conduct contact tracing to identify employees with whom the visitor or vendor came into contact.

Reduce risk for on-premise workers.

- Health screenings: There are at least four types of health screenings to consider:
 - i.** Symptom questionnaires: Screeners (e.g. automated virtual assistants) survey employees regarding symptoms prior to entering the workplace each day or each shift.
 - ii.** Temperature checks: The EEOC confirms that employers may measure employees' body temperatures before allowing them to enter the workplace.
 - iii.** Molecular diagnostic testing: As COVID-19 testing becomes more available, test employees who return to work or new hires. The EEOC recently added that employers may **take steps to determine** if employees have COVID-19 because infected employees pose a "direct threat" to others.⁹
 - iv.** Antibody testing: An antibody test may detect whether the body is immune to the infection. The FDA has cautioned against reliance on antibody testing because of their current lack of reliability and the lack of research on whether antibodies confer immunity and for how long.

Reinforce good hygiene: Remind returning employees to take basic preventive measures like hand washing, avoiding touching face, covering sneezes or coughs, staying home if sick, etc. Maintain adequate supplies, including tissues, soap, hand sanitizer, and hand wipes.

- Quarantine employees: If an employee exhibits **symptoms**¹⁰ the CDC advises sending them home until the employee has satisfied the **criteria to discontinue home isolation**¹¹ and has consulted with a healthcare provider and local health department. Have a policy in place regarding contact tracing and notifying employees of potential exposure.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): Provide the PPE needed for a workers' specific job duties and train workers on its correct use. The CDC **recommends**¹² face masks, but has **cautioned**¹³ that they are not a substitute for social distancing.
- Re-assess nonessential business travel: The CDC **recommends**¹⁴ that travelers avoid all nonessential international travel.

Facility Safety

Employers should make sure the facility is fully designed and equipped with a plan for maintaining safe conditions and mitigating risk. Strategies include:

- Hazard assessments: First, identify where and how workers might be exposed to COVID-19 in the workplace by conducting a thorough **hazard assessment**¹⁵, in accordance with OSHA standards.
- Redesign with social distancing in mind:
 - i. Enable distancing: Establish policies and practices for social distancing (at least six feet between individuals). Reconfigure communal spaces. Install signage or other visual cues to remind employees. Assess the feasibility of physical barriers between employees.

An employer should be communicating openly and often so employees have the information they need to stay educated, trained, and updated.

**Employee Health & COVID-19:
Virtual Assistants for Employee
Health and Worksite Wellness**

WATCH WEBINAR

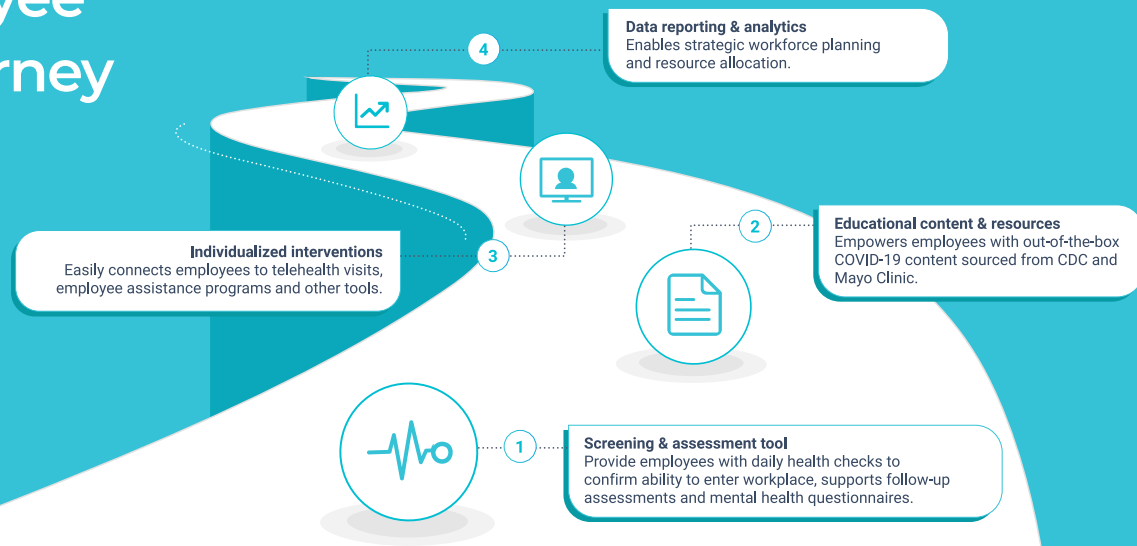
- ii. Disallow communal eating and gyms.
 - iii. Change crowd flow: Designate one-way entrances/exits and corridors.
 - iv. Restrict access: Restrict access between employees on different floors of a building or in different departments.
- Develop sanitation and hygiene measures:
 - i. Enhance cleaning: Set up a regular deep-cleaning program. Ensure that frequently touched surfaces are disinfected frequently. The CDC has issued recommendations: [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#).¹⁶
 - ii. Air filters: Given that COVID-19 is airborne, have your heating, ventilating and air-conditioning (HVAC) system inspected and its filters changed.
 - iii. Reinforce good hygiene: Remind returning employees to take basic preventive measures like hand washing, avoiding touching face, covering sneezes or coughs, staying home if sick, etc. Maintain adequate supplies, including tissues, soap, hand sanitizer, and hand wipes.

Communication

An employer should be communicating openly and often so employees have the information they need to stay educated, trained, and updated. Communication is also key to ensuring your workforce understands relevant benefits. As employers are looking to adopt benefits to meet evolving needs, it's important to have mechanisms to distribute that information, especially with a more remote workforce.

Accelerating your digital strategy to minimize the burden on your people operations team while connecting your employees with information and answers is critical.

The Employee Health Journey



Communication Tips:

- Consider using targeted communications and training. For example, office staff will need different information than retail staff, and so on.
- Make it easy for employees to find answers to their questions. Establish an employee portal that clarifies assistance programs and resources (childcare, financial planning, mental health).
- Make it easy for employees to give feedback through low-friction channels. Feedback may reduce the risk of transmission in unanticipated ways.

A virtual assistant offers a conversational experience for employees to ask about potentially sensitive topics such as leave policies and navigate complicated, new benefit programs.

- Update on-boarding and training materials based on new ways of working, updated products, services, and offerings. OSHA [guidance](#)¹⁷ includes training regarding COVID-19.
- Introduce new 1:1 check-in processes and employee surveys to monitor wellness and engagement. A conversational AI virtual health assistant can help to engage and protect the health of your employees with 24/7 on-demand information, resources, and assistance programs. The convenience of a chatbot along with organization-specific information improves employee awareness and adoption of resources, allowing an individual to get answers and access information at the right time and right place.

Employee Support

Set up a support system for employees as they return to work and adjust to new realities and emotional challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some employees may be reluctant to return to work for fear of exposure to the virus, particularly if they or their family members are in [high-risk groups](#).¹⁸ The EEOC has identified working from home as acceptable in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, assuming it does not impose undue hardship on the employer.

Employers should also anticipate that other employees may be unable to return to work unless they find child care. As Lorna Friedman, Global Health Leader Multinational Client Group at Mercer, put it in a recent webinar, “Employers have to look at not just whether or not an environment is safe, but whether or not it’s actually feasible. Certainly childcare is a major feasibility issue.”

“Most companies are, at least for the near term, three to five years thinking that they're going to bring back maybe 40 or 50% of their work force. So employers are investing in digital capacity.”

- Dr. Nimisha Kalia MD, MPH, MBA
North American Medical Lead,
Procter & Gamble

In addition, other employees may request to work from home in order to care for family members impacted by COVID-19 under the FMLA, FFCRA and/or related state laws.

Be prepared to help employees navigate employee assistance program benefits, programs, and policies. Equip your workforce with a one-stop-shop conversational resource, like a virtual health assistant. For example, offering a mental health questionnaire through a virtual assistant can help employees find resources and access care. The assistant can reach employees with an omni channel or multimodal approach across the spectrum of technology. A virtual assistant offers a conversational experience for employees to ask about potentially sensitive topics such as leave policies and navigate complicated, new benefit programs.

Key Takeaways

- Clear communication from the top is crucial for navigating employee benefits and implementing employee safety.
- See all of the risk factors behind an employee, not just their symptoms. Do they live with someone who is more vulnerable to COVID-19? Do they take public transport to work?
- We are digging deeply into people's lives, including potentially tracking their health status and location. We must be mindful of privacy concerns while still fighting the disease. If not, the pandemic will leave us with a more sinister legacy than just a horrific death toll.

A virtual assistant navigates the employee into care if they're symptomatic. It takes into account individual risk factors to help the employer and employee establish a strategy.

- Using multiple prevention methods is the best prevention method. There are many safety measures central to a COVID-19 response and none are perfect. When put together, they add layers of protection because they address a variety of risk points.
- Virtual health assistants save time and resources. A virtual assistant navigates the employee into care if they're symptomatic. It takes into account individual risk factors to help the employer and employee establish a strategy. For example, the employer may not know to ask if an employee lives with someone who is in a vulnerable population but a screener can pick that up.
- **Remote work “by default” is growing.**¹⁹ Employees like working from home and employers have seen the value. According to Dr. Nimisha Kalia MD, MPH, MBA North American Medical Lead, Procter & Gamble, “Most companies are, at least for the near term (three to five years), thinking that they're going to bring back maybe 40 or 50% of their work force. So employers are investing in digital capacity.”
- Mental health treatment is becoming de-stigmatized. As Bryony Winn, Senior Vice President and Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer at Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina, put it in a recent webinar, “We can all talk about mental health, and what it means to feel anxious or isolated, much more openly. We should take advantage of that and start instituting that as part of our cultural conversations at work.”

The biggest silver lining brought by the coronavirus pandemic is that health of all employees—from the fast food fry cook to the CEO of a Fortune 500—is now a priority. This crisis highlights that no one is expendable: **we are all essential.**

About Orbita

Orbita provides market-proven voice and chat solutions for healthcare and life sciences sectors, and the most powerful conversational AI platform enabling entities to cost-effectively create and manage HIPAA-compliant virtual health assistants for the enterprise. Organizations tap the power of Orbita's voice search-enabled technologies for consumer marketing, customer service, patient engagement, outcomes improvement and cost reduction initiatives. Customers include Amgen, Brigham and Women's Hospital, ERT, Libertana Home Health, Mayo Clinic, Merck and University of Chicago Medicine. Partners included Amazon, Cognizant, Deloitte, Pariveda, and ServiceNow.

Promote safer workplaces with health screening, assessment, and educational tools for employees with Orbita Employee Health Manager. [Learn how your organization can screen, check on and manage employee populations, direct them to educational resources and provide work clearance.](#)

See Orbita Employee Health Manager in action

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