COVID-19 and returning to the workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the global economy and continues to present the marine contracting sector with some significant challenges, particularly when in association with the effects of the recent fall in the price of oil.

This Information Note provides members with information intended to help them safely re-establish working arrangements as restrictions on movement and social contact are modified. The information herein is drawn from good practice occupational health and safety guidance provided by our members, by governments, and by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

It is anticipated that the risk of transmission of COVID-19 will remain for some time. Returning to the office environment therefore will not be straightforward. Members should continue to consider how to protect employees, visitors, and others from the risk of infection. Careful planning is required, based on an assessment of the risk of disease transmission in the work environment, and assessment of the way transmission can be eliminated or reduced as far as practicable whilst still enabling business to function.

This guidance does not supersede any local regulatory requirements, which should always be followed. Final decisions and plans should be complemented by a location-specific risk assessment.

Individual behaviours and personal responsibility are considered the key barrier or control measure for interrupting the spread of any viral disease, including COVID-19. An effective barrier may exist when people follow social distancing and hygiene advice, both at work and at home, and self-isolate if they exhibit relevant symptoms.

1   Before starting a return to the office

♦ Is a return to the office necessary at this time? In some countries, government advice remains, that if you can work effectively from home, you should. Before returning to work, a thorough risk assessment should be prepared;

♦ Encourage personnel to assess their own personal level of risk and discuss this with their line manager or with HR. **In the case of any doubt, stay at home!**

♦ Personnel should remain working at home if:

  o They have cold/flu like symptoms and/or have been in close contact with someone confirmed to have COVID-19;

  o They are considered medically vulnerable to COVID-19 or have an pre-existing medical condition that requires them to isolate;

  o They are considered to be more vulnerable. and/or have any underlying chronic diseases, or live with another person who fits this profile.

♦ Staff who are at high risk from the Coronavirus, and those who can fully undertake their job roles remotely, could be left to work from home for longer;

♦ Persons holding certain job functions, and persons with more difficult home situations could receive preference in returning to the office;

♦ Consider the implications and risks associated with commuting.

  o Encourage personnel, so far as reasonably practical, to travel to and from the office on foot or by bike or by private car – avoid public transport where possible.

For more details, please contact: **Issue date:**   **Document reference(s):**

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The information contained herein is given for guidance only and endeavours to reflect best industry practice.
For the avoidance of doubt no legal liability shall attach to any guidance and/or recommendation and/or statement herein contained.

2 Arriving at the office

- Consider using temperature checks at the worksite entry points based upon local practice, health authority guidelines and situation;

- If a person shows a higher temperature than that specified by the local authorities, they should return home immediately and seek medical advice

- Hands should be sanitized immediately upon arrival;

- Consider the use of one-way systems for entering and leaving worksites;

- Consider establishing an appropriate system of personnel attendance monitoring to facilitate effective contact tracing in the event of a work-place infection;

- Consider the possibility of rotation – that is staggered or staged arrivals and departures from the office, to minimise crowds and "rush hour" effects;

3 At the office

- Social distancing

  - Offices and other facilities will need to be re-organised to allow for social distancing at the locally mandated safe distance;

  - Members whose offices are in shared or rented facilities will need to liaise closely with the other stakeholders (landlord, other tenants etc.) as well as employees, with regards to:
    - the management of shared areas such as elevators, stairs, reception and lavatories;
    - fire drills and any other emergency evacuation plans.

  - Emphasise to personnel the requirement to maintain the locally mandated safe distance from other people at all times. Ensure there is suitable, appropriate and correct signage to this effect throughout the office;

  - Encourage limited movement within the office environment; the sharing of rooms or desks will need to be reconsidered, particularly if spaces cannot be reorganised to avoid cross-contamination;

  - Where close interaction is inevitable, transparent plastic screens may be useful to overcome the absence of social distancing;

  - In-person meetings in office meeting rooms should be strongly discouraged and only possible when appropriate social distancing can be maintained. Virtual meetings should continue and should be strongly encouraged, even with colleagues in the same facility;

- Common areas - careful consideration will be required in the use of common areas, meeting rooms and break-out rooms;

  - It may be appropriate for the time being to close or restrict access to certain shared facilities such as showers and gymnasiums;

  - Where possible in office one-way traffic should be established and distance markings and stickers should remind personnel of proper social distancing practices and preferred routes;

  - Use of elevators should be strongly discouraged where practicable. Social distancing requirements will generally limit their use to a single person at a time. If multiple staircases are available, a one-way system may be used;

  - Ensure there is sufficient hand sanitizer available for all personnel. There should be adequate access to hand wash facilities. Hand sanitizer gels and disinfecting wipes should be placed abundantly throughout the facilities;

  - As far as possible, doors should be made suitable for opening without hands; if doors can be left open without compromising the safety of personnel and the integrity of the building, they should be left open;

- o Personnel should be encouraged to avoid touching surfaces in common areas;
- ♦ Breaks and times of refreshment – consider how personnel will take breaks, refreshment and meals such as lunch.
    - o Spread the timings of lunch and other breaks as much as possible;
    - o Consider a policy on shared food consumption (e.g. office fruit and birthday cakes);
    - o Consider a policy on how and when cutlery or other utensils can be shared;
    - o Ensure that break areas are re-organised in line with locally mandated safe distance requirements. It may be necessary to temporarily suspend in-office catering facilities until specific and detailed procedures and food handling protocols are established;
- ♦ If personnel identify any symptoms whilst at work, they should leave immediately and seek medical advice.
- ♦ General courtesy and good personal hygiene:
    - o No shaking hands or physical contact;
    - o Apply good sneezing and coughing etiquette (into elbow or tissue);
    - o Regularly wash hands with warm soapy water for 20 seconds;
    - o Use hand sanitiser provided;
- ♦ Third-party visitors
    - o Strongly discourage or forbid all third party visits to offices and visits to client offices;
    - o Continue to use video conferencing where possible to reduce face-to-face interactions
    - o Continue to limit / seek approval for third party visits

4   Cleaning

- ♦ Ensure that when the office is opened appropriate cleaning is conducted to deal with possible Legionella infection in the water and air conditioning systems;
- ♦ Ensure there are resources and personnel available for increased frequency (daily or more often) of office cleaning, including daily bacterial wipes of all surfaces;
- ♦ Ensure that – in addition to normal regular office cleaning, handrails, door handles and grips, coffee machines, watercoolers, toilet facilities, etc. are regular disinfected during the day;
- ♦ Provide additional cleaning kits for *ad-hoc* cleaning by personnel as appropriate;

5   General considerations

- ♦ Continued active monitoring of WHO, national, and local advice and adapting plans accordingly;
- ♦ Staff should be reminded to respect each other, discuss and address individual opinions and concerns of colleagues in relation to this topic;
- ♦ Ensure personnel or properly informed and understand what expectations for individual behaviours are required of them. Consistent and clear leadership and communication is vital to achieving the right behaviours;
- ♦ Appropriate modification of travel policies and plans taking into account restrictions on travel, quarantine requirements, border closures, and reduced transport schedules;
- ♦ Ensure mental health aspects and associated company provided support services are embedded, and provide frequent communication to reassure workers that the company is doing everything it can to create a safe working environment;
- ♦ Ensure emergency response plans incorporate any additional elements introduced by COVID-19, e.g. social distancing during evacuation and mustering, delivery of First Aid, fire team duties, etc.