



## COVID-19 – Safe Return to Work and Managing the Hazard

Document No.	Revision	Date	Owner
COV19-003	1	17/07/2020	Mark Tissington

A common phrase at the moment is “We live in strange times.” That’s very true and many people find life worrying, even frightening, as a result. As those terrible numbers climb it’s easy to fall into feelings of helplessness and depression. For businesses, cash flow is disrupted, skilled people are lost temporarily or permanently, and supply chains are unstable. As for workers or contractors, they may feel isolated, jobs may be gone, or prospects insecure.

That sounds very bleak. Here though, is the other side of the coin. Humanity is geared for survival, not by being faster or having sharper teeth than other animals but because we have a highly developed brain. We can use tools, think, reason and communicate - but above all, we are adaptable. What we must now do is play to that strength and adapt to the new situation while empathising with those who may have concerns.

Fine words I hear you say, but how? How do I set about turning an empty office, workshop or shop back into a thriving business in the current situation? I am no business guru, but I feel strongly that the first step is to manage our expectations. Can we realistically expect to ‘get things back to normal quickly’ when the economic impact of the pandemic stacked over existing business uncertainty makes a rapid recovery little more than a dream for most companies? I’m not certain about the answer to that in the medium term but as a small business owner myself what I can do is set a phase 1 plan to stabilise the business and preserve its viability, and a phase 2 plan to identify opportunities and threats in order to move forward. In my view the key to effective planning is understanding risk, basing decisions on sound information and competent execution of the plan with strong leadership.

Before we go on, let’s de-mystify the disease a little. This is by no means the first pandemic that has affected humanity. Do you ever think about HIV/AIDS? It has killed around 32 million people (source: WHO). Spanish influenza killed around 40 million people in 1918/19 (source: WHO). In fact, there have been 31 documented influenza pandemics since 1580 (source: WHO).

The actual virus causing the pandemic is a new type of coronavirus designated SARS-CoV-2 which causes the clinical disease, COVID-19. The coronavirus family includes the common cold, but this novel coronavirus is more dangerous because its coating of protein ‘spikes’ allow invasion of many different types of cell and mutates quickly, preventing immune systems from easily killing it.

The virus is transmitted dominantly by coughs and sneezes but its relatively long life outside the body gives it further advantage; droplets of fluids can infect the membranes of the eyes, nose and mouth if we rub our face after touching a surface with live virus on it. It is believed that SARS-CoV-2 survives for up to 72 hours on untreated hard surfaces (furniture, utensils, tools, handles and so on) and for up to 12 hours on cardboard (it’s assumed that fabrics will be similar to cardboard). I also must mention that there is mounting evidence that the virus may also be transmitted in an aerosol (tiny droplets or particles, often invisible in the air, upon which the virus may travel) so we will need to factor this into our plans if proven.

Being objective, it seems to me that despite the worldwide pandemic title, what we have here is a hazard (something which causes harm) like any other, not some scary monster. Learning about the virus allows us to develop tools to reduce infection rates and slow its spread. This in turn buys time to develop a vaccine and more effective clinical treatments. By taking an analytical and systematic view of the problem we can develop ways to minimise the risk and make workplaces as safe as we can within the constraints that people need income to live and the economy needs businesses to



## Summit Safety and Environmental Limited

contribute. I'd also add that in the UK economy, SMEs represent over 99% of total businesses, 60% of the jobs available and 52% of the turnover (source: Federation of Small Businesses).

Next big question then; how do we deal with this? Where do we start? We are fortunate that the British Standards Institution (BSI) have produced guidance, available at <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/topics/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/covid-19-guidelines/> which provides a PLAN-DO-CHECK-ACT framework for managing the risk. I would recommend that business owners of all sizes download it so that we have a common language between top managers or owners, middle management and supervisory staff, health and safety professionals, human resources professionals and workers (workers are anyone performing work activity under the control of an organisation whether employed by the organisation, external providers, contractors, individuals or agencies).

There are a couple of points worth raising. The first is that the situation is fluid, none of us have done this before! BSI will therefore release updates to the guidance as the situation evolves and new knowledge emerges. The next update is due sometime in August 2020.

The second point is that the framework provided is general, it is based on measures believed common to most businesses. It's therefore important not to use it as a tick list but to really think about where your organisation might differ from the conceptual one upon which the guidance is based. Also the UK government have produced guidance for specific business types here - <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19> and the Health and Safety Executive provide useful details on specific measures, risk assessment and PPE here - <https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/index.htm>. These sources may suggest measures to you.

It's not within the scope of this piece to repeat the BSI guidance but I would like to offer a simple way of thinking which might help to get the most from the framework. This entails the following steps:

- Determine our current situation and likely developments in the short and medium terms;
- Understand our business;
- Understand our people; and
- Make a plan by understanding the risks and how we control them.

### **Determining our situation and likely future developments**

Top management will generally have come to a view on what they can achieve commercially in both near and medium term even though the levels of uncertainty may be considerable (e.g. will there be a second wave? when will a vaccine be created?). Let's call it a business plan. For our plan to be effective we need to dig a little deeper to ensure that it serves the business without harming workers, clients, customers and so on.

### **Understanding our business**

We will want to look carefully at the internal and external issues which affect our ability to create safe systems of work when delivering the business plan. The BSI guidance is useful on this point and hopefully a lot of ideas will be generated when we consider the detail in the guidance. I won't go through them all (because I want you to read the guidance) but as an example, we may want to check our stakeholders to gain insight into the likely demand for our service or product and the ability of our supply chain to meet that demand. We may be concerned about worker travelling arrangements, the number of desks we need or space to relocate them – and so on.

### **Understanding our people**

We will need to show effective leadership. Safety performance is directly linked to top-down commitment and the guidance gives detail about things we can do to lead and get our people involved (after all, people are the most important moving part in any business!). In most



## Summit Safety and Environmental Limited

organisations no single level understands the whole picture (e.g. the CEO does not know that the guard design on a machine makes removing the workpiece difficult, and the machine operator does not know the sustainability reporting standards). We must understand that consultation is not telling people what is going to happen but a two-way conversation, held before a decision is reached.

This is time for both the health and safety and human resources teams to step up. The two disciplines are frequently uncomfortable bedfellows but the pandemic, and particularly this phase of cautious easing, is a time when the two professions have come together to deliver a holistic solution. For example, the HR Manager will be in contact with employees who are remote working or furloughed. Working with the HSE Manager under workplace stress processes, the two disciplines can come together to manage this vital aspect of wellbeing. When the risk assessment specifies distinct abilities or competencies the HSE Manager can work with the HR Manager to identify the right person to fulfil that role. As a team the two disciplines are best placed to identify which roles may be designated as remote working when attempting to reduce exposure or preserve distancing.

While on the subject of people I'd like to briefly address something that is often unmentioned. There are people we know, work with, or meet who have suffered the loss of a loved one to the pandemic. We've all been there when we meet a bereaved person; what do I say, will I upset him/her? We end up offering brief regrets or saying nothing. For people who are not close to us, saying nothing is the dominant response but grief is debilitating, all-encompassing, personality altering. So when this situation arises let's use the approach described in a video clip I saw recently; just say in your own words "I am deeply sorry for what has happened to you, I don't know what you are feeling right now but I do care, so let me know what you need".

### **Making our plan**

With some idea of how the business will look and what is likely to happen down the road, we can now make specific provisions for safe working by understanding the risk to which workers and others are exposed and ensuring that control measures are in place. In order to do that, the process is essentially simple (though the detail often is not!).

1. Identify the hazards;
2. Assess the risk;
3. Control the risk;
4. Record the findings;
5. Communicate the results to relevant workers;
6. Monitor and review the controls.

Remember that we identified external and internal issues affecting safe working when we looked at our business? Well this is where we can use that information to determine how workers might be exposed to harm, what that harm might be and who might be harmed. In addition, we know our people, so we know who is competent in each role and which people have safety critical elements in their role. Also, bear in mind that the risk assessment may indicate that additional people are required– extra cleaners might be an example. Please do remember to review existing risk assessments as part of this process – are the controls degraded by current manning levels or a change in the process made as a COVID-19 control for example?

Assess the risk, what do we mean by that? In brief we are looking at the consequence of harm combined with the likelihood of it occurring. This can be done in very many ways and your safety adviser will have recommended an appropriate method for your context. My experience tells me that a risk assessment is subjective, different people will see risk in different ways but one thing I've encountered over and over is that if you have nagging doubt, an uncomfortable feeling, or you are still shaking your head after you've analysed all your thinking again then it's very likely that the assessment isn't quite right or you instinctively know that control measures are not giving enough protection.



## Summit Safety and Environmental Limited

Defining risk controls is really the point where consultation gets very real. The control measures are more realistic and achievable if workers and/or their representatives are involved in setting them.

A word or two on those risk controls is helpful at this point. Traditionally we safety professionals love hierarchies. When deciding on a control measure, we'd look at controls which removed most risk (ideally complete elimination) or reduced the numbers exposed etc. Typically, we would say:

1. Elimination of the hazard (do the job a different way for example);
2. Substitute the process or material with something less harmful;
3. Fit engineering controls (hardware – e.g. a light beam that stops a machine if someone approaches too close);
4. Implement administrative controls (procedures, prohibitions, permits, warnings etc.); and
5. Provide personal protective equipment (the last addition if the risk is still too high when all of the above are implemented or not possible).

To illustrate, in our present context that might transpose as:

1. Someone working from home if possible and the person is suited to this way of working;
2. Orders taken online instead of by a person at the counter;
3. Provision of screens to protect a teller from airborne droplets;
4. Markings on the floor to indicate social distancing and workers trained to remind others to comply; and
5. A mask worn as extra protection where there must be a gap under a screen.

When is enough really enough? The key is to reduce risk to a level where you think 'hang on, that control measure is out of all proportion to the level of risk remaining'.

The HSE have a template risk assessment [here](#) and OSHA an online assessment and reporting tool [here](#).

You should now have a list of practical risk control measures developed with buy-in from your workforce, but you have to make sure that the process isn't just a way of making pieces of paper to be filed. People need to know what to do to work safely so communication is essential. You may also have defined procedures to be followed in order to implement your administrative controls, upon which workers may need instruction or training.

The last item in the risk assessment process above is monitor and review controls. This is vital. If we don't check that controls are in place and working, then we are reducing our risk assessment back to being just a piece of paper, despite all our leadership skills. An assessment is no good if it's standing still. It doesn't respond to change, new technology, nor does it continually improve. We need to review risk assessments periodically (in the present circumstances a short review period would be indicated in my view) but also if we suspect the controls are ineffective or if an incident occurs.

My final point is that all workplaces should have an emergency plan which will consider what might happen, how to raise the alarm if it does, how to evacuate and where to go to once out, when and how to call the emergency services, and so on. Our present situation may add to it however. If someone falls ill can we isolate them and ensure their welfare while we notify the event and seek advice? Do we keep a register of people present? How do we protect first aiders if someone were to collapse even without COVID symptoms? You'll be able to add many more I'm sure.

I hope that this piece gives some food for thought and perhaps gives you a grounding so that you can take in more detail from the BSI guidance and use that to make a safe working space.