

A Practical Guide to a Safe Restart: Best Practices for Organizations

Statement

Returning to the workplace and reshaping a new future of work is key to ensuring the health and wellbeing of workers and a strong economic recovery. The “Safely Back to Work” Alliance initiated by Randstad, The Adecco Group and ManpowerGroup in March 2020 has successfully expanded its reach and network of participating partners and is now being led by our global industry association, the World Employment Confederation (WEC). As leader of this Alliance, WEC will continue to engage country federations, and private sector members, working closely with their local authorities and other relevant stakeholders, to support a safe return to work for workers and organizations globally, reinforcing the critical role of the private employment services sector in driving healthy resilient labor markets and economic recovery for countries, organizations and individuals alike in a post-COVID-19 environment. For more information or to join the growing Alliance, visit wecglobal.org for more information.

Introduction

Many organizations are now at a critical juncture as they navigate a phased shift from remote work to restart operations and support their people to return to the workplace, all within the requirements of the new physical distancing economy

In response to the most serious global health emergency in living memory, and to counter its effect on economies around the world, [the HR services industry formed a unique Alliance in April 2020](#). What started as a global initiative, spearheaded by the three largest global HR service companies – Randstad NV, the Adecco Group and ManpowerGroup - has developed into a movement that includes support from Recruit, ASA and WEC and others.

As the world’s largest private sector employer and labor market expert, the industry is working to facilitate the smooth re-start of businesses around the world by sharing members’ expertise in HR services and by offering input on workplace solutions, underpinned by an unrivalled depth of knowledge in workforce planning across many sectors.

Through its latest research, the Alliance has developed a fact base and source of best practices which it seeks to share freely as a public good. The goal is for organizations of all types and sizes to use this research to identify and apply the practices that will get them up and running in a safe, healthy and productive way.

Employers, trade unions, and NGOs are being invited to collaborate in this effort and at the same time, the Alliance reaches out to governments to support, stimulate and endorse these efforts.

Fast and widespread adoption of these solutions will primarily benefit businesses and the people who work for them. But we are also hopeful that this guidance will contribute to the wider recovery of economies and, as employment returns, may play a part in supporting the resilience of society as a whole.

Key research findings on the return to work

In its first initiative, the Alliance conducted research in 13 countries and across five sectors into specific health, safety and wellbeing initiatives that support a re-commencement of business and commerce. The high-level findings include:

- Health and hygiene protocols will need to be developed or updated to reflect the new reality of the physical distancing economy
 - Develop and clearly communicate key health and wellbeing protocols to enable colleagues to confidently and safely return to the physical workplace,
- Most of the workplace health and hygiene measures identified by the research can be applied across all industries and all countries
 - Specifically, the review identified more than 400 workplace measures, 300 of which are duplicated across countries and sectors. Of the remaining 100, 88 are relevant to all industries, and 66 relevant to all countries
- More than 90 measures were mandated by governments to aid physical distancing, and disease detection and control
 - A mix of physical, administrative and organizational measures will be needed to safely operate in most enterprises
- Preconditions for success: unparalleled collaboration among diverse stakeholder groups to get businesses ready for the ‘temporary normal’ and to prepare, approve and apply protocols; a risk-based approach and an agile and responsive plan to accommodate changing government regulations, and rapid and broad sharing of the best practices identified

* See Box 1

Capturing and sharing good practice for the return to work

This practical guide is designed to summarize the extensive technical guidance drafted by the Alliance to support business recovery and operational continuity efforts around the world.

Businesses, employee representatives and other stakeholders can access [the complete set of measures and best practices identified in the research](#). Here they can find sector- and country-specific best practices for review and fast implementation, bearing in mind many best practices can be applied across countries and sectors

The countries/regions reviewed are Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the Nordic region (Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland). The sectors reviewed are Transport & Logistics, Automotive, Manufacturing & Life Sciences, Construction and Food.

Creating an action plan for going safely back to work in the ‘temporary normal’

At a high level, organizations will benefit from a period of systematic planning and review to be confident the safe return to work plan solves as many of the predictable issues as possible prior to activation on the ground. The planning will fall into three parts: hazard identification and control; assessment and development of a return to work roadmap and plan; and finally, implementation, measurement, evaluation and a feedback loop. As a red thread through all these activities, engaging all stakeholders - and especially people who work in the business - is essential for a successful restart in the physical workplace.

In terms of [hazard identification and control](#), organizations should first categorize the health hazards they can eliminate, like removing the chance of workplace transmission of the virus by having people work remotely. Other hazards may be controlled by substituting the process to reduce the risk, applying engineering controls

(e.g. physically separating people from the risk), administrative or behavioral controls (e.g. changing the way people work to facilitate physical distancing), and finally through the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE). Many hazards may require more than one type of control.

The return to work roadmap and plan should feature the following:

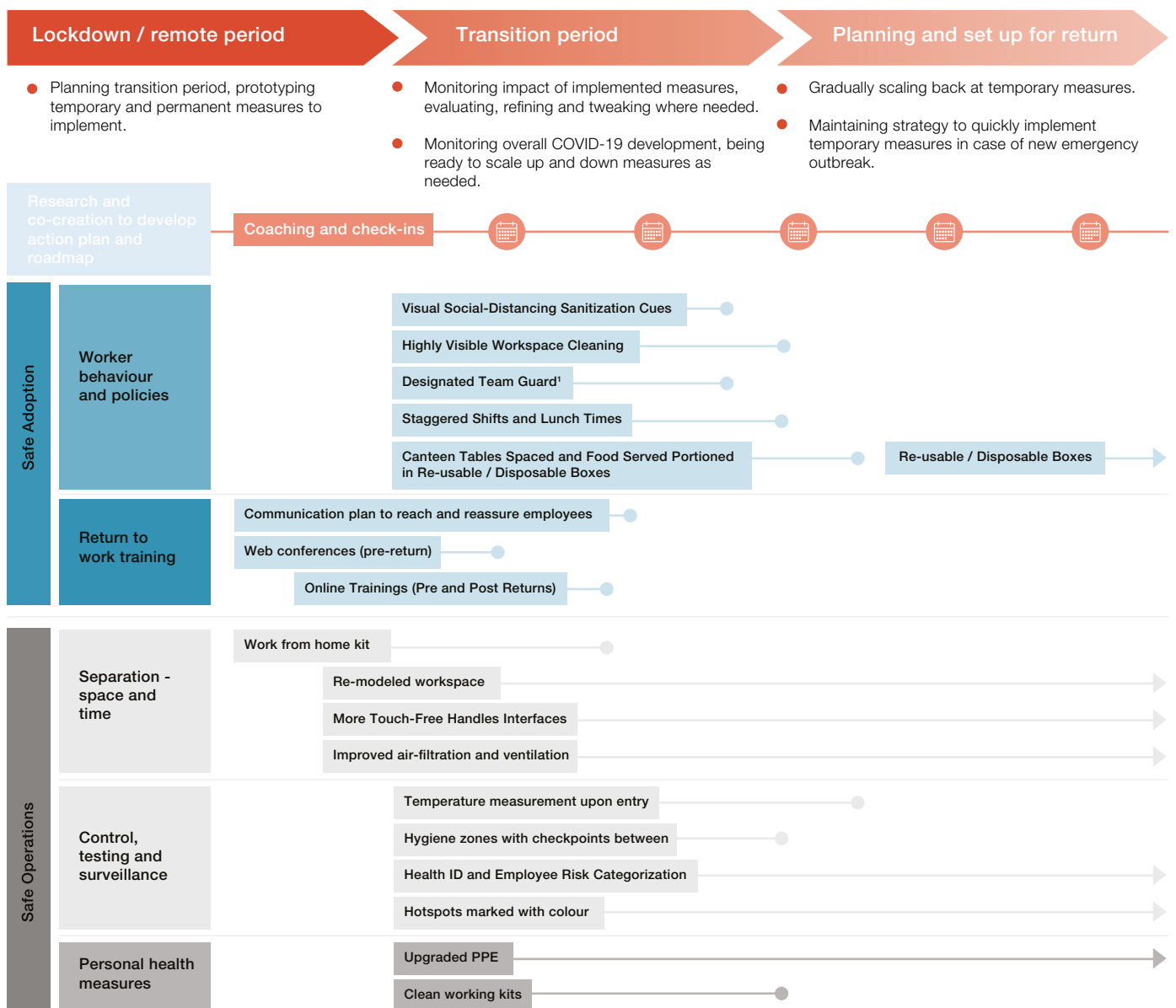
- Involve colleagues and their representatives in return to work planning, as a matter of priority. This recognizes that, following weeks of enforced lockdown, colleagues may be reluctant to return to work, unless they are confident in the healthy working measures in their workplace
- Assess the ‘as was’ and ‘as is’ operations before lockdown and current lockdown operations and identify gaps versus the ‘temporary normal’, physical distancing economy’
- Benchmark best practice across sectors and companies; adopt measures that work for the company to close the gaps
- Use lessons learned and best practices to develop a roadmap back to working safely
- Agree a joined-up approach with all parties on general distancing conduct/working arrangements, together with proposals for physical alterations to premises
- Train managers and their people how to apply the ‘return to work’ and ‘health and hygiene’ protocols; communicate widely and often

The final stage is implementation, measurement and evaluation, and a feedback loop:

- Once the plan and a clear timetable are agreed, implementation will be more successful if it is genuinely a team effort across the whole organization with high levels of involvement at every level
- As with planning, the implementation effort should also be holistic. Facilitate collaboration between internal stakeholders and departments to, for example, to develop engineering controls (e.g. construction of physical barriers etc.) that are implemented in coordination with administrative controls (e.g. changes to shift patterns and work schedules)
- Measure and evaluate the effectiveness of controls and schedule regular sessions to gather input from colleagues on improvement suggestions. Implement corrections as needed
- Sustaining the journey: constantly evaluate whether the measures are fit for purpose and can be quickly adjusted for a tightening or relaxation of pandemic regulations and physical distancing rules

Example of the journey to implement a “Safely Back to Work” Action plan

Illustrative example



1. To ensure any new hygiene standards are maintained and to provide workers with a voice in maintaining these standards

Source: McKinsey article: Europe needs to prepare now to get back to work - safety, team analysis and press search

Practical guidance and good practice

As a first step, where organizations have an existing health and safety function, they will play a pivotal role as they adapt existing health and wellbeing measures – and define new controls – to address the emerging challenges of COVID-19. More than ever, it is important that senior management engages early with these specialists to brief them on the company's objectives, strategy and re-opening timetable so both health and business responses are joined-up and coordinated.

In the absence of a health and safety function, the following guidance will help managers review the major issues. They can be assured that many of the measures highlighted below, which are designed to avoid the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace, are fit for purpose. Many of the activities continue to form the basis of the pandemic response in key businesses that were permitted to operate throughout the initial outbreak and lockdown.

'Avoiding the health hazard' in the workplace. Where remote working has proved possible, successful and productive, organizations should consider extending this approach to lighten the pressures on transport, services and to drive social impact in communities, where more onsite working maybe required by other organizations. It is likely that remote work will become part of the temporary normal, subject to addressing cyber security and employee engagement considerations. With teams working from home, it's also useful to schedule regular informal check-ins with colleagues to keep an eye on their wellbeing and to get their feedback, rather than just schedule a succession of formal work meetings. It won't replicate the 'my door is always open' offer or the collegiate atmosphere of the break room, but the effort will be appreciated.

Communicating internally and externally is critically important. As a rule, people will be hungry for information insight and advice, so over- rather than under-communicate. Select the most appropriate channels and tools to communicate on topics that are health-related, address behavioral expectations and inform on regulations. The measures to communicate on range from online training on worker safety and health, posters on hand-washing and other critical hygiene rules, (physically distanced) face-to-face or video briefing on the need for shift patterns and teams to change; internal newsletters on health-related updates, rules and regulations. Interactive apps can also play a part as a tool and a channel in pandemic communications and engagement. Any site or office induction for customers or other third parties entering the site for the first time to include a specific COVID-19 health and safety briefing prior to being issued with PPE, if appropriate.

Provision of sufficient quantities of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment and sanitary products/facilities.

Organizations define their own standards of protection and are responsible for compliance with local or national government rules, like providing the correct PPE and sanitizers before re-starting operations. These items are in extremely high demand and are normally 'consumables' intended for one-off use, so the business will want to assure a continuing supply of this equipment. Integrate hygiene and wellbeing into the daily schedule by encouraging hand-washing breaks and, as the new rules may feel all-pervading, organize periods for people to go outside the premises for fresh air. People working off-site should have access to decent and appropriate PPE, toilet and hygiene facilities, as any contrast between offices and operations in the field is to be avoided.

Physical distancing. Establish and apply a rule of physical distancing that conforms with government requirements. Support compliance via communications (as above) and with physical markers on floors, walls, work areas and chevrons in walkways – all as a reminder of the physical distancing rules. This is especially important at 'pinch points' like on stairs and in passageways where clear rules and possibly a one-way system would aid distancing. Elevators also present a challenge and it is good practice to explain and signpost their safe use. In low-rise buildings, elevators should prioritize people with disabilities. In addition to physical distancing, separating people by time can also achieve the same objective. For example, defining breaks and meal times for certain departments or shifts, and limiting time spent in the canteen, while extending the overall time during which food will be served will eliminate 'busy times' and facilitate physical distancing. Wearable physical distancing 'alarms' that alert workers when they are less than the safe distance from a colleague can also be helpful.

Physical barriers to reduce infection. In addition to physical distancing, physical barriers to reduce or prevent the spread of the virus are vital. They are equally important for the smooth-running of the business though reducing absenteeism through ill-health. But it's crucial that a company is seen to be first and foremost focused on preventing the risk of virus transmission, and secondary to business considerations, to avoid any criticism that business comes before health. In terms of specifics, physical barriers like transparent screens and taped-off areas to separate personnel from each other and from customers are all helpful.

Cleaning. Cleaning of all ‘touch points’ – door handles, bannisters, elevator buttons, taps and break areas – is important and it is recommended that it is scheduled, systematic and very visible to the whole workforce. The regular cleaning of premises will give colleagues confidence that their well-being is being taken seriously by their employer. Sharing of pens, phones, workstations, tools etc. should be avoided. Where this is unavoidable, the use of gloves should be mandated, e.g. in control centers for utilities and major process industries with both central and distributed touch-screen monitors and keyboards.

Health monitoring, testing and surveillance. A company will need to ensure its health monitoring, testing and surveillance protocols adhere to government workplace and privacy rules and any activities should preferably be in response to government requirements to monitor employee health. Protocols should be agreed internally and worker representatives and once published, should be accessible to all everyone, regardless of their location. As a first step in setting up the protocol, the company may want to seek the advice of a qualified occupational health physician.

Infection reporting and control. Companies should follow and apply procedures and advice published by either local or national government. If someone at work does become infected with COVID-19 or is symptomatic, or if a family member is infected, a period at home in quarantine will almost certainly be required for a designated period. Testing may play a part in determining a safe return to work.

Travel and logistics. Companies should plan on the basis that alternative working arrangements to compensate for travel will be in place for some time to come, and may be extended. A company sending or receiving goods via these couriers or freight companies should also develop complementary protocols, in coordination with the logistics companies. The objective of the protocol is to maintain the maximum physical distancing between delivery personnel and customers/company staff (e.g. Bluetooth or apps to confirm delivery, calling ahead to agree drop-off points, email confirmation to be added to usual delivery information). Also define acceptable forms of transport for use by key on-site staff to, from and during work. This may include encouraging and incentivizing single occupancy car use, bikes or use of company shuttle buses with reduced occupancy.

Business continuity. Organization should maintain a multi-disciplinary team approach to manage day-to-day and month-to-month business continuity, and to update contingency plans for the safe and efficient running of the workplace as the COVID-19 threat evolves. The team’s main area of focus will be: how to maintain business operations by identifying and managing issues that could bring the business to a halt. This might be caused by an interruption in the supply of PPE which can be solved by maintaining a reasonable quantity in reserve. Another threat to business continuity may be absences due to ill health, which may be anticipated and solved, by training more than one team member to do a critical role. In this context, a ‘key worker’ can be a cleaner, receptionist or a security guard whose absence could stop or delay business operations. Overall, the team should be on constant alert for a recurrence of lockdowns, and ready to activate mitigation plans to manage future peaks in infection.

The role of management and leadership. A company’s most senior leaders need to own the pandemic response effort and lead from the front. Delegating the execution of the plan to health and safety colleagues, without giving them 100% backing and visible support, may lead to failure. The importance of leadership engagement and communication with their people, customers and other stakeholders on the company’s pandemic response should not be underestimated. In doing so, they should set the tone from the top, be clear about their expectations on behavior and compliance around physical distancing, hygiene and the other crucial elements of disease prevention. They should communicate clearly and regularly - and most important - they should ‘walk the talk’, for example, by wearing the correct PPE, observing physical distancing, working remotely where possible and observing other health and hygiene protocols.

Summary

While governments define the country-wide preconditions for progressively lifting their lockdowns, businesses, their staff, contractors, employee representatives, health and safety experts and regulators are expected to put in place practical protocols to support the safe reopening of businesses and economies

worldwide. The transition from life-saving response to regenerating the economy is rapid, dynamic and unprecedented. This guide is therefore intended to share the lessons that have already been learned and to provide practical guidance on managing a sustainable restart for businesses around the world.

Good practice case studies

Country responses to COVID-19

Netherlands case example: protocol development

- Safe working protocols covering 50 sectors have been developed through a partnership of industry associations, businesses and government
- Sectors themselves developed the protocols that were coordinated by the Employers' Federation and sent for approval to the Ministry of Economic Affairs with guidance of the Public Health Department
- Alliance member (Randstad) supported and advised on protocol development and coordination
- Employers and trade-unions brought parties together and provided support to sectors

South Korea – test and trace

- Government mounted an early, comprehensive, country-wide test and trace regime
- No stay at home lockdown was imposed
- Of the 10,804 cases confirmed by early May, 254 people had died, as reported on May 5, 2020 Rate: 5 deaths per million population
- Rapid activation of crisis management plans developed in light of experiences with previous outbreaks of respiratory infection (SARS and MERS)
- Integrated national, regional and city government response
- Business sector is a key stakeholder in testing, tracing, individual workplace lockdowns and ensuring compliance, by their work colleagues, with quarantine measures
- Open, honest, regular and clear communication with the public about the response to COVID-19.

Italy – lockdown and phased return to the temporary normal

- Government announced nationwide lockdown on March 9 when the new virus had already killed more than 460 people
- Two weeks later, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced the closure of nonessential businesses, including car, clothing and furniture production
- Of the 211,938 confirmed cases, nearly 29,079 people had died as reported on May 5, 2020. Rate: 481 deaths per million population
- In early May, the government partially lifted the near two month lockdown and 4.5 million people returned to work
- The construction sector, wholesale and certain manufacturing companies were the first to reopen, along with restaurants, but for takeout only.
- The retail sector will reopen on May 18 and restaurants and bars will open fully on June 1, physical distancing rules in place, limiting table occupancy to just 30% of capacity
- The government is monitoring the effectiveness of the phased lifting of the lockdown and has warned it may have to reintroduce lockdown measures in case of a further wave of infection.

DISCLAIMER: This document is a summary of relevant provisions which we believe have been implemented and have not been independently verified. Care should be taken with how the content is to be implemented in each case to ensure that all applicable laws and regulations and (local) government guidance are observed.

Country COVID-19 cases and fatality data source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, accessed May 6, 2020.

Food services sector, examples of responses to COVID-19

Looking after the workforce, maintaining business continuity

- Suite of measures are in place, for example, to control and assure travel to and from work, entry to worksite, health and wellbeing policy, PPE provision and use, physical distancing and barriers, no-touch equipment, cleaning, ventilation and reinforcing the need for hand-washing.
- In a cafeteria context, staff are briefed on facilitating physical distancing from and by customers, and managing flow and maximum numbers of people within the facility
- In a food delivery context, some companies undertake daily temperature tests for delivery staff and provide them with appropriate PPE and work instructions, e.g. adopting curbside deliveries to avoid contact with customers
- Two-way communication channels and tools: used to brief people down the line on policies and reminders on protocols. Also used to collect input from colleagues, for example, who may have experienced new situations in their day-to-day work and on which they may welcome guidance.

Next steps

The HR services industry is issuing a call to action and reaching out to all relevant stakeholders and asking them to play their part. To start with, the initiators of the alliance will ask more players in the HR industry to get on board. Employers, trade unions, and NGOs invited to collaborate. At the same time, the alliance reaches out to governments to support, stimulate and endorse these efforts.

The initial focus will be on companies in five sectors and ten countries/regions. The coalition will liaise with stakeholders on a country-by-country level in the coming weeks.

Sectors:	Countries/regions:
Transport & Logistics	Belgium
Automotive	France
Manufacturing & Life Sciences	Germany
Construction	Italy
Food	Japan
	Netherlands
	Nordics; Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark
	Spain
	United Kingdom
	United States

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