

Covid-19 What We Have Learned as our Workplaces Transform

BY SUZANNE WILDE, PRINCIPAL,
IH/HSSE CONSULTING SERVICES
PROGRAM MANAGER, STANTEC
AND CRAIG MAUNDER M.SC., CIH,
SENIOR OCCUPATIONAL HYGIENIST



To minimize the spread of COVID-19, businesses must properly prepare for the return of all those who work, visit, interact with, and provide services to their facilities. This includes creating protocols, information, and amenities that encourage and facilitate new behaviours required for proper social distancing, hygiene, and safety.

During the early months of the pandemic, Stantec conducted a “Workplace Transformation Survey” to gain insights into what the workplace may look like in a post-pandemic world. Armed with this information, companies can design, build, and implement forward-thinking solutions as the workforce is re-introduced to the communal workplace.

Key findings of the survey included:

- Working remotely is expected to increase after the pandemic
- People miss their colleagues and realize the benefits of working together in-person
- Employees and managers are deeply concerned about health and safety
- 81% agreed that working from home will have a lasting impact on the workplace. However, collaboration, belonging, and brand will draw us back to the office.

Although people yearn for in-person collaboration, there may be fewer people at the office at any given time. Many offices are shifting away from being centres of individual focused work to collaborative hubs, and corresponding changes in workplace design may be required.

While short- to mid-term solutions are used to reinforce current social interaction restrictions and safety measures, long-term considerations for improving health and safety in the workplace, such as workplace layout, alterations to the work environment, and safety and building management protocols require careful thought during design, development, and implementation.

When planning for return to work, consider the following proposed strategies for returning to the workplace in a way that will strengthen the long-term resiliency of your workforce.

Planning

- Create a Response Team – Should any COVID-related issues arise, this is the group to engage. Include management, HR, safety specialists, operations and maintenance staff, and communications specialists.
- Communicate with Clarity – Clear, concise and timely communication is critical to ease employee concerns.
- Design for All – One-size-fits-all design will not be successful since everyone will react differently and have different risk tolerances. Mental well-being and emotional support start with providing choice – some may be reluctant to begin socializing, while others may be craving social interaction.

Risk Assessment

Begin the planning process with a holistic risk assessment that considers everything and everyone, including possible interactions between people, surfaces and chemicals and locally-applicable regulatory orders. Consider known risks (e.g., underlying medical conditions) as some staff may be at higher risk of complications and severe disease. Identify common touch points such as photocopiers, breakroom appliances, and washroom surfaces for increased cleaning.

Controls

Next, implement controls. Redesign work environments to maintain social distancing, erect barriers when physical distancing is not possible, and increase fresh air ventilation where possible. Develop a safe at work plan, implement fit-for-duty screening, post signage and update cleaning procedures and pandemic and emergency response plans. Encourage use of face coverings to protect others or as required.

- Good health and safety practices should begin in the parking lot and continue through employee entrances, considering the path every worker travels within the facility.
- Provide resources that promote good personal hygiene (e.g., tissues, disposable sanitizing wipes, face coverings, hands-free trash cans, faucets and doors, etc.).
- Install easy to follow, helpful signage. Use signs to coordinate traffic flows and remind workers about meeting room capacities, handwashing, using face coverings, avoiding touching eyes, nose and mouth, and cleaning of common area surfaces after use.
- Review cleaning and disinfection protocols. Use approved cleaners and disinfectants and increase frequency of daily cleaning. Regularly clean high-touch hard surfaces throughout the day (e.g., in washrooms, break rooms, and shared common areas).

Building systems must also be made re-entry ready. The following suggestions are general in nature and serve as a starting point for discussions about building re-activation. Each facility’s needs and limitations are different; if unsure, contact a trusted and qualified building engineering consultant for building-specific advice before altering your systems.

- Prioritize which systems need to be brought back online first (may be impacted by environmental, building, or occupancy changes)
- Develop a re-activation plan by building, system, and item, with consideration for the safety of facilities maintenance staff and occupants
- Take steps before re-activation of HVAC, electrical, plumbing and fire and life safety systems to do so safely
- Inspect systems in detail; check for system leaks and water ingress
- Identify potential points of failure and maintenance requirements prior to re-activation (e.g., decommissioning temporary systems, refilling of systems, repairs, etc.).
- Conduct indoor air quality assessments to confirm readiness to re-occupy
- Inspect cooling towers for good condition; clean and check for Legionella

HVAC system improvements can be beneficial, but require professional advice to ensure system compatibility:

- Replace used filters with MERV 13 or higher
- Flush out the building prior to occupancy with fresh outdoor air
- Increase fresh air ventilation rates
- Maintain indoor relative humidity between 40-60%
- Adjust BAS schedule to reflect new occupancy conditions.

In conclusion, management must demonstrate responsible leadership, remembering that every worker is unique and has their own personal risk tolerance. Communication is key – inform workers of the new rules, expectations, and the tools available for their use. There are many factors to consider when planning for return to work, but help is available. *For further information contact us at ih.hsse@stantec.com.*