

Post-Covid Workplace Scenario – Employer and Employee Health and Safety

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ABSTRACT

The decreasing trend in the spread of the covid-19 infection has relaxed the restrictions imposed on the community, especially the working people. This working community, whether or not infected by the virus is now slowly turning back to work, along with the impacts of the lockdown. Though there is a decrease in the infection rate, there is always the possibility of infection at the workplace, as some percentage of the vaccinated people are also getting infected. It is necessary to follow the covid precautionary measures. Hence, it cannot be said that the normal situation has returned. The employer is in a state to manage a crowd comprising post-covid patients, caretakers of covid patients, and non-affected groups. The literature works reporting on post covid scenario, precautionary measures to be taken and workplace, benefits of workplace social distancing and sanitation, and medical care needed for workers were reviewed. This paper discusses the post-pandemic workplace scenario, health, and safety, sanitation among workers, awareness of precautionary measures, and their behavioral changes.

Key words: Covid awareness, medical care, prevention strategies, workplace safety

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed on a global scale was first identified in China at the end of the Year 2019. The fast-spreading nature of the virus shook almost all the countries of the world in terms of human lives and the economy.¹ Few countries experienced more than three waves of the deadly pandemic. In January 2020, the virus entered India and gradually started spreading throughout the country, the first wave peaking in September and then seeing a declining phase for not more than five months.² There was an

increasing trend in the number of positive COVID 19 cases with a much more severe second peak at the beginning of April 2021. Meantime Indian government started the vaccination campaign and created awareness of the importance of vaccination. Though there was an initial reluctance among the people in getting vaccinated, later more people received vaccines realizing their necessity.³ During the early stages, before the advent of the vaccines, the only measure that could successfully control the spread of the virus was a lockdown and the government had no other way to save people. Many countries including India had never seen such a lockdown in the past which overturned the entire economy. To bring back the economy, the restrictions were slowly relaxed as the rate of the virus spread decreased.⁴ But the fear of new strains of the virus is still not answered. It is also evident that few countries are still on the verge of the next wave of COVID-19.^{5,6} There is also fear about the disease spreading among children and the non-vaccinated population soon. It is the responsibility of the government to take appropriate measures to control the start of the next wave and at the same time

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/ijosh.v12i4.42225>

Conflicts of interest: None
Supporting agencies: Dr. N.G.P. Institute of Technology, Coimbatore, India

Date of submission: 10.01.2022

Date of acceptance: 10.07.2022

Date of publication: 01.10.2022

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revive the economy. In this context, the workplace or an industrial area should be studied for the post-COVID-19 attitude among the workers.⁷ The lost time and the economy are to be recovered. The workforce should regularly be given the necessary awareness and training on tackling the post-COVID-19 challenges. The workers are to be trained in the revised techniques for quick adaptation.

At the workplace, the condition is not turned to normal and it is very important to manage the situation and do productive work without compromising the safety of the workers. Regular reviews for all the workers at various levels are to be conducted to ensure the practice of safe operating procedures. In the initial stages, it would have been difficult to adopt the revised way of working, but due to the existing COVID threat, it becomes mandatory.⁸

Post-pandemic Scenario

The spread of various strains of the virus affected the livelihood of most people. The lockdown measures either partially or completely have brought down the country's economy. Till now, newly mutated viruses are emerging; there is no clarity on the end of the virus spread and resuming to normal conditions. The mutated form of the virus is spreading several times faster than the previous ones. Also, it is very difficult to prevent the transmission of the virus from one part of the world to the other unless a strict lockdown is imposed. There is a possibility of vaccinated people getting infected by the virus but with less severity.⁹ The vaccinated people are also required to follow strict COVID-19 precautionary measures. Even after the complete subsidence of the disease, people certainly will follow the safety measures because they are used to it or out of fear.¹⁰ The development of herd immunity is not so easy because of the new mutated virus arrivals, especially at a global level. Because of the relaxation, though people return to work, health and safety at the workplace remain a challenge.

Post Covid Work Related Health and Safety – Measures to be adopted

Due to the conditions prevailing after a few waves of the pandemic, returning to normal working conditions is not easy. It is the responsibility of the employer and government to formulate plans and procedures to be followed at the workplace to tackle the prevailing situation and also future threats. The hazard cannot

be seen through the eye and the safety team should be more conscious of this fact. The workers should be prevented from exposure to the virus at the workplace, by regularly monitoring their health conditions. It should be ensured no individual infected by the virus is getting into the workplace, thus curtailing the exposure at the initial stage.^{11, 12} In major locations in the workplace where many workers can gather, reshuffling of the work and time should be done before the start of the work. The sanitary conditions of all the areas of the workplace are to be maintained in a good manner. Among the workers, awareness is to be created regarding dealing with COVID when an unexpected infection occurs. The steps to be adopted during this time should be made known to all the workers. Nowadays all of us are used to wearing face masks, face shields, gloves, applying hand sanitizer periodically, and maintaining social distance. While encouraging the workers to follow the covid precautionary measures, the employer should convince the workers to adopt such things positively. The top management should be sufficiently strong in predicting difficult situations and handle situation which does not affect the workers' health and safety and at the same time their productivity. The plans implemented should go in line with that of the government. A common action plan may not be suitable for all kinds of workplaces. Workplace-specific strategies are to be developed by the employer based on the existing conditions.

Workplace Sanitation

The place where workers spend most of their time plays a vital role in their health. A clean and hygienic workplace provides a conducive working environment. The productivity is many folds in a sufficiently ventilated, bright, and pollution-free area. The management should be committed to providing a stress-free workplace for the employees. Apart from the measures taken by the employers, every individual worker should be self-hygienic to protect him and also others surrounding him. Hand sanitizer usage, wearing a mask and face shield, and maintaining social distancing should be strictly followed by every individual. Regular monitoring and recording of temperature, avoiding air conditioners as far as possible, and minimizing manual handling of objects are some important preventive measures. To provide a sufficient quantity of air supply and ventilation to the workers, the number of occupants in a considered area can be minimized. When air conditioners are provided, the recommendations given

by the governing body should be followed strictly. The cleaning process should be done at regular intervals of time and a team should be engaged to monitor the cleaning process. Frequent servicing of all the equipment at the workplace should also be ensured. As far as possible automatic taps, bins and others can be replaced for the traditional ones. Self-hygiene practices should be taught to all the workers.

Social Distancing

The major cause for the covid waves in the country is that the social distancing norms were not followed meticulously. Strictly speaking, irrespective of the relationship between individuals, maintaining minimum distancing will help in the containment of the virus. Especially in the workplace, where more people usually gather, it is imperative to follow social distancing¹³. It is not so easy, as there may be a limited number of resources with which the workers are supposed to carry out a particular work. Here, the role of the employer is very crucial, as it is his responsibility to devise various strategies to manage the congestion. This can be accomplished by providing work from home options wherever possible, offering flexible shifts of working hours to the workers, dividing workers into batches and providing different breaking hours, avoiding mingling of one batch with others, and conducting online meetings within the campus. In certain cases, based on the prevailing conditions, additional temporary working areas may also be created to maintain social distancing. This will reduce overcrowding of the workforce in a common area, thereby minimizing contact between people. The employee data, nature of work, area of workspace available, time taken for the employee to reach the office from home, etc are to be gathered; completely analyzed and additional workspaces may be created¹⁴. The employees can be made to work in a hybrid working mode, which is partly working in the office and partly working from home whenever possible. This will increase the productivity of the workers. The mode of transport used by the workforce is also of great concern. As far as possible, employees can opt own travel arrangements or transport arranged by the industry and try to avoid public transport.

Imparting Knowledge on Post-Covid Measures

The employees are to be made aware of the steps taken by the employer and government to effectively

manage the post covid working environment. The new strategies developed regarding workplace extension, work from home option, flexible break hours, working in various shifts, restricted movement within the working campus, and avoiding large gatherings are to be communicated to all the workers. A team may be constituted to check the proper functioning of the devised strategies. All the workers are to be trained to follow covid appropriate behavior by conducting regular awareness programs. Though the covid cases are decreasing, casual behavior like not following social distancing norms may lead to trouble. All the employees should be aware of how the virus spreads and the symptoms of infection and immediate reporting to the concerned authorities.^{15, 16}

Post-Covid Behavioural Changes

Apart from the physical health problems faced due to the pandemic, the changes in the behavior of the infected person, or their relatives and caretakers could be observed. Self-quarantine for several weeks, confusion about the symptoms of the disease will last even after getting cured.^{17, 18} In such cases, the organization should come forward to address the problems of such people rather than just ignoring them. Strategies that are devised to isolate people from getting the infection, may sometimes affect their mental health leading to stress.^{19,20,21} The measures taken to prevent the disease spread like working in shifts, working from home, online education of children, etc can lead to stressful conditions.²² The employer can provide counseling to such people to come out of the stress. Online sources can be used by people connected by conducting meetings through online platforms. Stress relieving classes should be frequently arranged for the workers.

Medical Care to Covid patients

The strategies devised for control and containment of the disease may not work out always. Few employees may get the infection in one way or other. The people infected by the virus should be given immediate medical attention. A part of the medical expenses may be shared by the industry as per the rules. On recovery from the disease, the employee should be given sufficient time to get back to work. The mental state of an employee returning to work after a covid infection should be taken care of by the employer and his colleagues. Those who were seriously affected and recovered may

have memory and concentration problems.²³ In the same way, if an employee gets the infection, all the other persons in close contact with him are to be tested for Covid infection. Immediate disinfection of that particular area should be made so that others do not get the infection. Regular thermal scanning at all the entry points should be strictly enforced. The complete data of all the persons entering the workplace should be available at any point in time. The data includes personal details, nature of work, work area, present health condition, any existing medical problems, etc. This will help to act quickly during the spread of the virus. All the data should be digitized and should be made available round the clock.

Conclusion

The pandemic has impacted the people and working environment to a great extent. The virus has not yet seen the endpoint. It is continuously mutating itself and trying to make the situation worse. The condition is still vague as new variants are coming out in the queue. The work-from-home culture can be encouraged, but this needs a lot of digitization. The workforce should also be given sufficient training to use the available online tools. Employers with the support of the government should identify new strategies and techniques and educate the working community and utilize their service effectively without compromising the health and safety of the workers.

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