



COVID-19: How to facilitate a safe return to the workplace

April 2020



Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer

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Particularly during these times of the COVID-19 crisis, we long for normality. Depending on where you are, it may take weeks or months before the COVID-19 lockdown is lifted. Companies have been shut, employers have been required to implement cross-office "work-from-home" policies. While it is unclear when exactly this global crisis will be over, it is certain that employers will need to be careful about how and when employees return to their workplace. For Austria, we recommend employers to follow the guidelines and measures proposed by the Austrian General Accident Insurance Institution (*Allgemeine Unfallversicherungsanstalt, AUVA*), in particular with a focus to provide employees with a safe working environment and to allow them to comply with the increased safety level:

1. Hygiene measures

- Employers should provide certain hygiene equipment "*to enable the required frequent hand hygiene*", such as disinfectant dispensers, soaps etc.
- Hygiene and infection protection guidelines at the workplace are to be communicated properly, i.e. hygiene measures through display of posters, e-mails or other communication channels frequently used in the company.
- In general, there should be shorter cleaning intervals implemented at the entire office.

2. Organisational measures

- Employees shall limit any direct contact with colleagues as much as possible. This requires an increased degree of reorganisation of the usual working processes and could, *inter alia*, be achieved by way of introducing phased working and break times so that fewer employees are present at one place at the same time.
- Likewise, if possible, the same employees should be assigned to be working together going forward. Equipment should be used on a person-related basis; otherwise it should be cleaned accordingly.
- The requirement of physical meetings should be well assessed; preferably, meetings should be held using digital communication, even when returning to the office.
- It should be ensured that employees keep the required distance (currently 1m) to other people or colleagues – both indoors and outdoors. This can be implemented by setting up barriers, markings, access regulations or partition walls. In common rooms and canteens, tables and chairs should be set with appropriate distance. Where this is not feasible, employers should provide nose-mouth covers (masks) for employees and for customers and service providers.
- Actively record which employees have spent the last 14 days in a risk area for business or private purposes.
- Refrain from unnecessary external services, business trips or face-to-face meetings.

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3. Best-practice in the event a COVID-19 case occurs in your company

- Determine in advance what to do if someone falls ill at work (also considering any responsibilities and contact persons)
- Consider how employees who may fall within the “risk group” will be identified and how they can be protected. This may include employees (i) who have recently travelled to an affected area, (ii) who are at higher risk due to prior illness, or (iii) who already exceeded a certain age limit.
- Instruct your employees, contractors and customers that in cases of an infection, anyone who has COVID-19-related symptoms should stay at home. Employees who have taken medication such as paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin should also stay at home or work from home, as these medications may make the symptoms of the infection go undetected.
- Develop a contingency step-plan in case of increased spread of the virus. The plan should address how you can keep your business running even if a significant number of employees, contractors and/or suppliers are absent. Inform all individuals concerned about the plan and make sure they know what to do in case of an emergency.
- Encourage regular teleworking in your organisation.

We are of course happy to assist if you would like to discuss the abovementioned measures or require further details on their implementation.

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