

The power of one: Covid-19 virus moving into the workplace

by

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On Friday I spoke to a healthcare worker over the phone who told me that her workplace is safe from the Covid-19 virus because they have taken all precautions to prevent the virus from entering their premises. I immediately thought: How on earth can she be so confident that the virus is not in her health centre? I then reminded her that none of us are immune to the virus and that thousands of medical doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers and support staff have already died all over the world and that several health systems are overwhelmed to cope with the increase in hospital patients. I was surprised that she was surprised by my answer. What this shows me is that there is still a very long way to go in creating sufficient awareness about how viruses spread in general, and how the Covid-19 virus specifically spreads given the fact that scientists have not yet found a treatment or vaccine.

What we need to understand is that you need only one person for a virus to enter a building or public place. That one person infects the next person, and so it starts spreading from person to person. *Times Live* reports that ninety-nine staff at a single Cape Town factory have tested positive for Covid-19 and the site was subsequently closed down last week by the Department of Employment and Labour. Pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline factory in Epping was forced to suspend all production and operations until safety measures were improved. However, the company deserves some recognition for testing all their staff, and from 1 May all companies with more than 500 staff members must do the same. The company's Human Resource Manager in the Western Cape, Natasha Carnow states on *Times Live*: "We are committed to supporting these staff currently who are in isolation, including providing essential food and medical supplies as well as full pay." The Department of Employment and Labour spokesperson Candice van Reenen said a prohibition notice has been issued because GSK has been "found to be in contravention of the Occupational Health and Safety Act". She added: "They did not have a risk assessment in place that spoke to Covid-19 regulations, they did not have adequate sanitising, they did not have adequate personal protective equipment for staff." If this is the case at a pharmaceutical company who should have a far better awareness about viruses than other companies, we must get ourselves ready for mass infections at workplaces from May, ironically as we move from relaxing the national alert level from Level 5 to Level 4.

The risk-adjusted strategy announced by President Ramaphosa makes it clear that we are still in level 5 this week, while moving to level 4 on 1 May. In her presentation to the media on 25 April, Minister of Co-operative Governance, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma said that the five levels of the risk-adjusted strategy envisage three systems of implementation:

System 1: An alert system to determine the level of restrictions in place nationally, in provinces and in districts.

System 2: An industry classification for readiness to return at each level based on criteria, together with restrictions that should remain after the lockdown regardless of the alert level.

System 3: Enhanced public health and social distancing arrangements at workplaces and public spaces (including schools and universities).

In accordance with the System 1 classification, the Minister emphasised the reality of different alert levels for different provinces and districts based on the risk profile of that area. For instance, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban are at a much higher risk than smaller towns with lower numbers of infections. Likewise, the Western Cape, Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal and Eastern Cape are at much higher risk than the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga. But even this situation could change if the virus is spread across provinces, hence the continuation of travel bans across provinces.

Regarding system 2, the focus is on industry classification to return at each alert level. Thus, different sectors are affected in different ways in terms of certain criteria such as the risk of transmission. For instance, as outlined by the Minister, initially when entering level 4 in May, returning to work will be based on the national and district level, enabling workplaces to adapt to the level of infection and healthcare readiness in their locality.

System 3 focuses on a comprehensive system of public health and social-distancing arrangements, covering areas such as the following:

- Industries are encouraged to adopt a work-from-home strategy where possible, and all staff who can work remotely must be allowed to do so.
- Workers above the age of 60, as well as workers with comorbidities, should be offered a work-from-home option or remain on leave after engagement with employers and the UIF.
- Workplace protocols to be put in place that would include diseases surveillance and prevention of the spread of the infection, disabling contact biometric systems or making them Covid-proof.

Minister Dlamini-Zuma further outlined explicit conditions of return to the workplace based on a sector-specific focus. Companies must not lose sight of the fact that generally applicable health and safety protocols should anyway be in place in accordance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Now each sector must agree upon a Covid-19 prevention and mitigation plan, approved by the Minister of Health and any other Minister relevant to the sector. For example, the mining minister will approve the mining sector prevention and mitigation plan. Moving then from sector to specific companies, individual businesses or workplaces, in other words, all sites, must conduct worker education on Covid-19 and protection measures such as the following:

- Identification and protection of vulnerable employees;
- Safe transport of employees;
- Screening of employees on entering the workplace;
- Prevention of viral spread in the workplace;
- Hand sanitisers and face masks;
- Cleaning of surfaces and shared equipment;
- Good ventilation;
- Shift arrangements and canteen controls;
- Managing sick employees.

Robust monitoring systems must be in place to ensure compliance with safety protocols and identify infections among employees. Government must be commended for utilising a risk management approach for dealing with the coronavirus epidemic in South Africa. Having said that, Minister Ebrahim Patel, the Minister of Trade and Industry indicated that government is committed to stakeholder

engagement and requested inputs regarding the impact of the risk-adjusted strategy on the different economic sectors. He indicated that the easing of the lockdown will open the gates to about 1,5 million workers. However, while the World Health Organisation has praised South Africa's efforts in fighting the coronavirus, and despite the good risk-adjusted strategy, details regarding its full implementation is not clear to all sectors. It is evident that different sectors and workplaces interpret the regulations differently. For instance, some old age homes still allow people to eat together, while others have ceased this practice in full compliance to the Disaster Management Act regulations. Some retailers are very strict in terms of sanitising protocols, while others are more relaxed. We are likely to see similar discrepancies and inconsistencies in non-essential services resuming business activities from next week.

The Covid-19 virus is already very prevalent and has spread among employees in sectors providing essential services such as hospitals, retailers and factories producing essential products. From May, if we don't follow the above guidelines strictly and take all steps to prevent the spread of the virus, the virus will now move from essential services to non-essential services. If that happens, companies will be closed down until being allowed to open again.

As Bryce Courtenay asserted: "The power of one is the power to believe in yourself. It is the power to believe in yourself often well beyond any latent ability previously demonstrated. The mind is the athlete, the body is simply the means it uses." The Covid-19 virus follows the same philosophy, and it is using people as athletes moving around from person to person. One person brought the virus to South Africa, and that one person spread the virus to the next person, and after today we should reach close to 4 500 people being infected and officially diagnosed and reported in South Africa. The real infection rate is much higher than that while intensified screening and testing continues.

The power of one also means that you have a voice and you can make a difference. Minister Patel yesterday acknowledged that government is listening and responding to comments on social media. Moreover, he invited sectors to submit their comments by 27 April. You have more power than you think, you can influence the Minister and other ministers with their lockdown level 4 decision-making.

We now need all of us to believe in ourselves. Each individual has the power of one. You need to believe in your own power to prevent the spread of the virus. Most of us have done very well in stopping the spread of the virus during the level 5 lockdown by staying at home. We are all in this together and we all need to work together in preventing the further spread of the virus. But our own beliefs and behaviour will determine whether the virus moves to your company and its customers from next month if and when you are allowed to return to work. This makes you a very powerful person. You can spread the virus, or you can stop it. That decision is yours, and you don't need to wait for the 1st of May to take that decision. You can take the decision today. You are the power of one.

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