

Is your workplace Covid-19 ready?

35 Actions to implement from Day 35 of lockdown

by

Marius Meyer

Today 30 April 2020 was a day many South Africans was looking forward to. It is the 35th day of the extended lockdown. Many people thought that the lockdown would be over, but we have been informed that the total period of lockdown alert levels can change and be extended to as long as 6-8 months, depending on whether we are able to progress from level 4 to level 1. So many people will have mixed feelings about today, especially with the latest news received over the last day, in particular the fact that we have now exceeded 5000 infections with a record number of infections for a day, i.e. 354 taking the overall infection numbers to 5350. Furthermore, we now have also reached 103 deaths, but this number is still lower than in many other countries. Fortunately though, recoveries are now at 2073, while we will exceed 200 000 tests today. The sharp increase in cases in the Western Cape as the epicentre of the virus is a serious concern, in addition to the growth in infections in the Eastern Cape.

In reality level 4 is not that different to level 5. Government made only a few concessions such as the following, albeit under strict health and hygiene protocols:

- Individuals are now allowed to cycle, walk or jog in a radius 5km from their homes at 6am to 9am;
- Delivery of restaurant food take-aways are allowed;
- More businesses are permitted to open provided that they meet the regulations and strict safety protocols;
- Some non-food retailers can open.
- Agricultural businesses can operate again.
- Exports are allowed as indicated in the schedule.

Regarding the specific regulation 16(6)(b) employers must have workplace plans prior to the reopening of the business as published in the Government Gazette on 29 April 2020. For small businesses, the plan must be basic reflecting the size of the business, while for medium and larger businesses, a more detailed written plan should be developed given the large number of persons at the workplace. According to the Government Gazette, the plan for medium and large businesses must include the following:

1. The date the business will open and the hours of opening;
2. The timetable setting out the phased return-to-work of employees to enable appropriate measures to be taken to avoid and reduce the spread of the virus in the workplace;
3. The steps taken to get the workplace Covid-19 ready;
4. A list of staff who can work from home; staff who are 60 years or older; and staff with comorbidities who will be required to stay at home or work from home;
5. Arrangements for staff in the establishment:
 - (a) Sanitary and social distancing measures and facilities at the entrance and exit to the workplace;

- (b) Screening facilities and systems;
 - (c) The attendance-record system and infrastructure;
 - (d) The work-area of employees;
 - (e) Any designated area where the public is served;
 - (f) Canteen and bathroom facilities;
 - (g) Testing facilities (for establishments with more than 500 employees);
 - (h) Staff rotational arrangements (for establishments where fewer than 100% of employees will be permitted to work).
6. Arrangements for customers or members of the public, including sanitation and social distancing measures.

Most other typical level 5 regulations we were used to are still in place under level 4 such as not being allowed to visit friends and family, not driving around unnecessarily, not buying or distributing alcohol, not buying cigarettes, and not going to any religious or social functions. In assisting employers in ensuring compliance to the Government Gazette workplace readiness regulation, and specifically the number 3 requirement above of steps taken, the following guidelines can be used by management teams in getting their workplace Covid-19 ready and maintaining this standard of compliance:

1. A strong statement from the CEO that compliance and people safety is your top priority. Most employees don't know that the CEO is the accountable officer in accordance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Remind them of this fact and take responsibility for your role as corporate head of safety. Use a team of senior managers and high-level experts to accelerate the speed of sound decision-making, follow-up and follow-through.
2. Conduct a full workplace readiness assessment of all your sites.
3. Assign one manager or compliance officer to assist you with safety duties and make this individual visible in the business. Work closely with the compliance officer in driving your work readiness planning, measures, execution and monitoring thereof.
4. Read and apply all the regulations published by government (study the Government Gazette of 29 April for the latest regulations) relevant to your business and employees.
5. Ensure that your sites are properly cleaned using deep cleaning.
6. Start and end each day with a strong Covid-19 message for staff to see how serious you are about compliance.
7. If you pick up any non-compliance, address it immediately.
8. Acquire the necessary protective equipment such as masks, hand sanitisers and other resources and make them accessible to employees and visible at your sites.
9. Institute strict access control and daily attendance registers of all staff and visitors.
10. Screen all employees and visitors to your buildings.
11. Show regular Youtube or other videos to staff from medical doctors talking about Covid-19 so that they can understand the seriousness of the situation and the behaviour expected from them.
12. Make it clear that you oppose all conspiracy theories and fake news, some staff members have been exposed to misinformation and they need to be educated correctly.
13. Create a group of change agents who will execute quickly and inspire others to follow.
14. Management visibility is key in regular organisation-wide conversations about the Covid-19 virus and the continuous rapid response of the organisation.
15. Set clear Covid-19 goals for the business and communicate it to all staff.
16. Cascade overall organisational goals on Covid-19 to divisions and departments affecting all sites.
17. Link Covid-19 compliance to one of your company's values and communicate it as such, for example many companies already have responsibility, safety or compassion as values.
18. Ensure consistent compliance at all sites.
19. Mobilise teams and individuals to drive and achieve safety and hygiene goals and targets.
20. Identify and address all potential barriers to compliance.

21. Open an online discussion group and lead regular conversations in the business about the Covid-19 virus.
22. Ensure that you dispel all myths about the virus by focusing on the correct behaviour and facts.
23. Create an environment in which employees support one another in driving Covid-19 compliance.
24. Recognise all positive employee behaviour in terms of Covid-19 compliance and profile those employees in your company newsletters, website and social media platforms.
25. Be firm and do not tolerate any form of non-compliance.
26. Guide, coach and train managers and team leaders as business leaders and people managers so that they are able to fulfil their roles as responsible leaders and management compliance officers.
27. Have regular and visible results and compliance feedback sessions, e.g. by using and sharing Covid-19 scorecards or dashboards.
28. Develop a comprehensive communication campaign and communicate important information on a daily basis.
29. Invest in people development, learning, training and coaching around compliance improvement initiatives. Replicate or adapt the Minister of Health's daily scorecard, i.e. number of infections, number of recoveries, number of deaths at your company.
30. Use change management approaches and methodologies to embed a Covid-19 prevention and risk management culture in the organisation.
31. Make Covid-19 the first agenda item of all meetings over the short term.
32. Continuously remind staff of the change in behaviour expected.
33. Keep the number of people on site to a minimum. Encourage working from home for certain staff members where possible, for example accountants or marketing officers and communicate the need for flexible work practices and alternative work arrangements.
34. Prevent stigmatisation of Covid-19 infected staff members by communicating the correct facts and information. Provide support to all people infected with the virus and treat them with the necessary respect, dignity and compassion.
35. Invest significantly in employee health and wellness in positioning the company as a caring and compliant employer.

If you are ready to plan and start executing all the above actions, you are ready to open. Many companies have already implemented some of the above guidelines over the past 35 days, and some will start planning towards it from today. If you are behind, get going and strengthen your actions. Even essential service employers neglected or omitted some of the above 35 actions, hence large number of staff infections and their subsequent closures. Admittedly, you will not be able to execute all actions at once. Prioritise the direct hygiene actions, such as the provision of protective equipment, cleaning of your sites and access control. You can then gradually plan and execute the other actions. Make it a team effort and delegate functions to different staff members. Full compliance is going to be a tall order but a key requirement if you want your business open. The choice is quite simple: Decide if you want to play the game by the rules and stay open, or be forced to close your business again.

Remember that you only need one person to spread the virus. One person brought the virus into the country. One person will bring it into your business and so it will spread throughout your company and to your customers or suppliers. Thus, the aim is zero infections. Keeping it at zero should be your goal, just like mining companies have a goal of zero fatalities every single day.

Most businesses will not be Covid-19 ready immediately. Get your mind-set right first, followed by decisive actions for implementation and monitoring. Implementing Covid-19 readiness actions in the level 4 period will not be business as usual. It is therefore important to guard against short-cuts, window-dressing and superficial actions. Ultimately, an explicit Covid-19 strategy and management plan is needed to ensure that a compliance organisation culture is infused in creating an environment conducive to ensuring that the company is allowed to continue doing business. Make it clear to staff that your business will be closed if you have infections. Covid-19 workplace readiness and being alert

continuously will depend on leadership and compliance by all managers, followed by the co-operation of all employees and customers in their behaviour and actions.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information about the coronavirus and Covid-19 visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za