

## **RETURNING TO WORK: A new safety and hygiene regime**

by

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On 23 April President Ramaphosa announced that the National Command Council have decided to implement a five level risk framework in responding to the Covid-19 virus crisis. This framework has been developed after extensive consultation with various stakeholders, including the scientific community.

The five levels risk framework indicated by the President are as follows:

Alert level 1: Most normal activity can resume, with precautions and health guidelines followed at all times;

Alert level 2: Physical distancing and restrictions on leisure and social activities to prevent a resurgence of the virus;

Alert level 3: Restrictions on many activities, including at workplaces and socially, to address a high risk of transmission;

Alert level 4: Extreme precautions to limit community transmission and outbreaks, while allowing some activity to resume;

Alert level 5: Drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus and save lives.

We were also informed that we are now at level 5 and that we are planning to move to level 4. What this means is that government is implementing a risk adjusted strategy through which they take a deliberate and cautious approach to the easing of current lockdown restrictions. However, these changes will be phased in and could differ based on the sector, province, district or city. In other words, we are not merely jumping from one level to the next automatically and relax all current measures in place. As Minister of Co-operative Governance, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma stated earlier in the week: "We cannot open the flood gates at once."

The President emphasised the importance of workplace safety in his message to the nation. As of 1 May every business allowed to open will have to adhere to strict and detailed health and safety protocols to protect their employees, and workplace plans will be put in place to enable diseases surveillance and prevent the spread of infection.

All over the country workplaces have been affected by the virus. Hundreds of healthcare workers, police officers and retail staff members have already been infected and sites have been closed. This morning, Gauteng Premier David Makhura confirmed that 44 government officials have tested positive for Covid-19 in the province. The spread of the virus is so rapid and unpredictable that the Western Cape is now the new epicentre of the Coronavirus. The President also made it clear that even as we begin to ease some of the lockdown measures, restrictions on large and high-risk gatherings will

remain in place to ensure the rate of coronavirus infections does not increase too rapidly. We need to be mindful of the fact that we are still at level 5 until the end of the month. Even if we move to level 4 in May, we may return to level 5 if things get worse. The Covid-19 virus is spread by people, not calendars.

What is evident is that not all employees will be allowed to return to work immediately. In fact, the President made it clear that people who can work from home must continue to do so. Fortunately, we now have a strong pool of “working from home” champions who are ready to continue working from home, and they will welcome opportunities to legally walk around and get some exercise under the new regulations. However, returning to work does not mean business as usual. Many employees are very excited to return to work, but they must realise that things will be different.

We are ushering in a new era of occupational hygiene, building on 35 days of personal experience at home. Therefore, and ironically, your home has prepared you for the new work environment. It is of utmost importance for employers to step up significantly in adding occupational hygiene to their corporate agenda. Failing to do so would constitute non-compliance to the Disaster Management Act regulations, as well as the Occupational Health and Safety Act, despite a dispensation of relaxed requirements. The mass deployment of further defence force personnel has a clear purpose and that is to support the police in enforcing the amended regulations.

At a company level, 10 key short-term priorities will need to be planned and implemented:

- Setting up a governance structure to lead the process of occupational hygiene;
- Creating a budget for adding occupational hygiene to your current safety risk and compliance portfolio;
- Amending your workplace safety policy to make hygiene prominent;
- Developing specific procedures regarding hygiene in the workplace;
- Training of key staff, i.e. safety officers and safety representatives and cleaning staff;
- Awareness training for all staff (put them on a compulsory online programme);
- Acquiring safety and protective equipment for the workplace;
- Redesigning of occupational work spaces to promote hygiene and social distancing;
- Increased monitoring and control capacity;
- Regular reporting on occupational hygiene and safety.

Specific details will be announced by the Minister of Employment and Labour, Mr Thulas Nxesi next week. HR Managers, Safety Managers, Risk Managers and Compliance Managers will be required to develop all the necessary plans for approval and announcement by top management at companies.

Once all the above actions have been prioritised, in addition to the new compliance regulations issued by the Minister of Employment and Labour, you can integrate all this work into an overarching employee health and wellness strategy. An overall wellness strategy should ensure that you do not neglect other health and wellness issues such as financial well-being, stress, anxiety, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, obesity, hypertension and cancer. Over the medium- to long term, it is critical to ensure that employee health becomes a top business priority and that all health issues are addressed to promote employee wellness not only within organisations, but also at a national level.

The International Labor Organisation says that the health and safety of our communities and the resilience of our businesses depends on how we protect our workers from Covid-19. Thus, we are entering a new regime of occupational safety and hygiene at the top of the business and government agenda. Workplaces will be at different levels of readiness, but most organisations will have major development work to do. It will require a change in mind-set, new hygiene programmes and interventions, and changed behaviour from managers and employees. As the President concluded last

night: “There is no person who doesn’t want to return to work. There is no student who does not want to return to their studies. Yet, we are all called upon, at some time in our lives, to make great sacrifices for our own future and for the future of others.”

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