

As the restrictions in place around the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) start to ease, and with the lockdown to date having had a significant impact on businesses across the region, companies in the UAE are now considering the practical steps they will need to take in order to reopen offices and workplaces and to boost employee morale.

In this article, we examine the current position regarding what is permissible regarding a return to the workplace and what employers can and should be doing to protect and reassure their employees during these continually difficult times.

As of 24 April 2020, with the introduction of a partial reduction to the lockdown restrictions, it is now possible for UAE residents to move outside of their homes between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. without requiring a permit. However, all individuals must continue to follow government guidelines and the stipulated preventative measures, which include continuing to maintain a safe physical distance of at least two metres from others and wearing facemasks. The government has now also expressly confirmed that employees are allowed to work in offices and workplaces, but “only if it is absolutely necessary.” If employees are returning to the workplace, companies must ensure that no more than 30% of the workforce is in the office or workplace at any one time. The rest of the workforce must continue to work remotely from home, where possible, as was the case during the previous complete lockdown. Employers must closely monitor the number of employees and visitors entering and leaving the workplace each day. Please see our [guide](#) on the UAE reopening for more information on which sectors are exempt from the continuing, albeit reduced, restrictions.

What Steps Should Employers Be Taking to Ensure the Health and Safety of Employees?

Employers are required to:

- Ensure offices are only open for a maximum of 8 hours
- Only hold meetings at the office if “absolutely necessary”, and attendees should not exceed five people and social distancing requirements should be followed
- Carry out daily sterilisation of the workplace and ensure that all employees and visitors are provided with sanitiser gel at all times
- Ensure that all employees are wearing masks
- Continue temperature-screening checks twice per day for those in the workplace

In addition to following general government guidance regarding the percentage of employees who can be in the workplace at any one time, employers should consider taking additional steps to protect the safety and wellbeing of their employees.

In order to ensure that employees maintain at least a two-metre distance between each other, employers should consider redesigning the workplace and removing desks/workstations, where possible. Employers could also assess whether they could install separation panels for open-plan areas and markings on workplace floors to highlight the requisite distance that employees should keep between each other. Employers should also manage entrance and exit ways so that employees keep any potential contact to an absolute minimum. This should include even more regular cleaning and sanitisation of areas and surfaces that are touched more regularly (e.g. door handles and machines such as photocopiers). Where possible, and where not a fire hazard, doors can be kept open.



What Should Employers Do if Employees Are Afraid to Return to the Workplace?

As things stand currently, employers should only have employees in the workplace if they are working in a vital sector and otherwise only where “absolutely necessary”. Employers should, therefore, require employees to keep working remotely, where possible, until further notice from the UAE government. Where employers are requiring employees to return to the workplace, employers should take all necessary precautions to alleviate employees’ concerns. This can include the employer providing masks and gloves, hand sanitiser and any other necessary protective equipment depending on the nature of the work. Some employees may naturally be afraid and reticent to return to the workplace. We recommend that employers take as many steps as possible to alleviate those concerns, which could include:

- Ensuring that an appropriate risk assessment is done regarding which employees can return to work and avoiding having employees return to the workplace who may themselves be vulnerable or who may have vulnerable family members
- Maintaining open and regular communication with employees to understand any concerns
- Asking employees for their input and feedback regularly on how the workplace could be protected and asking them to highlight any particular areas of worry they may have
- Ensuring that employees know whom they should contact if they have any questions or issues to report, or perhaps implementing a designated email address or online reporting procedure for any such matters



The reopening of businesses even to a limited degree is very welcome for most employers who have been struggling through the disruption of remote working, social isolation and travel restrictions. However, if mishandled, the return to the workplace could be dangerous. All businesses should, therefore, take the time to plan reintegration properly and ensure that their workplace adheres to government guidance on the necessary health and safety precautions.

In addition to practical steps, employers should not forget about the importance of maintaining workplace morale. For employees who have been away from their workplaces for weeks, returning may feel unsettling, especially if there has also been a workplace restructure. This is where addressing employee concerns through regular communication can help, and many employers have actually communicated more regularly with employees during the lockdown. When there is a return to the workplace and eventually a return to some semblance of normality, all businesses will benefit from maintaining these regular lines of communication.

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