A Guide to Pandemic Preparedness for Businesses

Adapting your Organization for Safety and Success during the Pandemic
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How To Use This Guide

This guide is intended for employers and business leaders who want to modify their business plan to accommodate for the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are two step-by-step guides; in part one, employers are given the steps, strategies and tools involved in creating a business recovery and continuity plan. In part two, the focus is on adapting your workplace, business practices and policies to mitigate infection and transmission risks to ensure your organization is safe and accounts for pandemic-related risks.

This guide is an accumulation of information from numerous credible sources (identified by Roman Numeral footnotes throughout), including, but not limited to, the federal and provincial governments, the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, Statistics Canada, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health, Canadian Labour and Employment Law, as well as business and legal think-tanks, such as Ernst & Young, Norton Rose Fulbright, and FASKEN. You can explore the sources in detail using the reference links starting on Page 18.

Using the information and tools provided in the guide, employers are free to use their own business plan templates with specific steps in their business plan. The guide is meant to inform business leaders of the key aspects that should be included in planning, and also provides many useful tips and strategies when creating their continuity and recovery plan.
PART 1: BUSINESS RECOVERY AND CONTINUITY PLAN

Rationale
Creating a business continuity plan enables employers to resolve pandemic-related business pressures, recover from these impacts, and proactively plan for success in a global pandemic. With this guide, business leaders will be equipped with the steps, strategies, tips and tools for creating and implementing their business plan. Identifying the essential components of your business sets the foundation from which to re-shape your business plan.

1 Identify your Organization’s Critical Components

Essential Processes, Operations and Functions
• Logistics, business commitments/relationships, accounting and finances, investments, skills, information systems

Key internal and external dependencies
• Assets, raw materials, products, employees, subcontractors, equipment

Other factors that affect your business

Consider how pandemic impacts can contribute to the loss of essential business components and operations.

Assess Pandemic Impacts

Realities of the Pandemic
• Reduced labour supply
• Change in demands
• Reduction or restrictions on public meetings and gatherings
• Travel restrictions
• Restrictions related to government and public health orders
• Customer orders cancelled/not filled
• Limited imported supplies or materials
• Possible disruptions in other services (telecommunications, financial/banking, water, power, etc.)

Business Impact Analysis
• Determine the consequences of losing critical business functions and possible business interruptions. Evaluate its interdependent impact on others.
• Quantify the financial and non-financial costs of these issues.
• Identify critical staff, systems, and steps required for recovery.

Risk Assessment
• Identify possible loss scenarios by both internal and external (i.e. supplier) sources.

Assessment Tools

QUICK FACTS: how the pandemic has impacted Ontario’s labour force

12.2% of Ontarians were unemployed in June

34.8% of Canada’s labour force was underutilized in May

Job losses concentrated in:
Small businesses, below-average

Down 1.4% from May, which was the all-time highest unemployment rate on record

(13.6%)

Youth (ages 15-24) had the highest labour underutilization rate of 51.8%

Most affected workers:
Temporary workers, youth (15-24), women, low educational attainment

[1] Source: Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0287-03 Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted
### Strategize for Business Continuity

Create goals for both business **continuity** and **recovery**

- **Continuity strategies** aim to keep your business operational during a crisis.
- **Recovery strategies** aim to recuperate and adapt your business to the “new normal”.

Ensure that you develop goals for the short and long-term. Account for the future of the pandemic, including multiple waves and changing pandemic epicenters.

| Personnel | • Identify and train back-ups for essential functions  
|           | • Plan for possible overtime requirements  
|           | • Plan for a reduction in staff and work hours |
| Equipment | • Identify essential equipment and ensure its functionality  
|           | • Consider if duplicate or back-up equipment is required |
| Availability of assets | • Ensure on- and/or off-site access to facilities, utilities, raw materials, computers, machinery/equipment, replacement parts, tools, vehicles, and communication equipment |
| Availability of back-ups | • Plan to make back-ups of paper and electronic media, and off-site facilities for storage |
| Business commitments | • Research contractual and/or legal implications of non-performance for services  
|           | • Review arrangements that were established in business agreements |

### Budget and Business Planning

- Stress-test financial plans under multiple scenarios
- Revise budget assumptions and business plans that are no longer relevant
- Reconsider non-essential expenses and minimum operating requirements
- Consider raising short-term capital and refinancing debt
- Gain additional credit support from banks or investors, or policy support from the government

### Finances and Operations

- Monitor direct cost escalations and their impact on overall product margins
- Mitigate workplace risks and identify pressures impacting customers, contractors, suppliers, and alliance partners
- Stress test tier one and tier two suppliers that are impacted
- Be aware of violating agreements with financial institutions regarding impairment risks in asset value

### Alternative Supply Chains

- Consider quick moves to alternate suppliers if supplier is in a pandemic hot spot
- Plan for possible disruptions with service and logistics providers, given potential demand spikes

### Short-Term Liquidity

- Monitor short-term cash flow to predict cash flow pressures and respond quickly
- Intervene to shorten working capital cycle
- Remain in regular contact with suppliers to identify potential risks

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Employees
- Use a tone of caution and safety, while maintaining a business-as-usual mindset
- Inform and train on new workplace practices and policies

Creditors and Investors
- Review terms and conditions on loan contracts
- Identify sensitive debt and avoid debt breaches
- Make amendments to existing terms
- Consider refinancing options

Generate a list of contacts required for each step in your recovery plan and maintain timely communication of business changes

Customers
- Inform of any impacts to product or service delivery
- Revisit timelines and/or invoke “force majeure” clauses to contracts, should contractual obligations be unmet due to supplier or production disruption

Suppliers
- Maintain regular contact regarding their capability to deliver goods and services
- Discuss their recovery plan and reconsider supply chain options

Government & Regulators
- Consult legal and risk management teams for advice on potential exposures and communicate with stakeholders

Once you have developed your business’s response plan with clear and documented policies, it is time to test your plan. Educate workers and stakeholders on new policies and protocols and get their feedback.

Test. Try practice exercises or desk-top practice runs. Allow employees to run new operations for a period of time.

Monitor. Continuously review the plan’s implications on business operations and financials. Seek support from business analysts to ensure your plan’s success.

Adapt. Work alongside local organizations and your community as pandemic impacts evolve. Prepare for higher rates of absenteeism and implement flexible work options or alternative staffing arrangements.

Options to adapt your business:

Flexible work options: Develop an infrastructure to work from home and continue job duties via internet and phone. Reorganize the workplace layout and staff scheduling to minimize personal contact.

Alternative staffing arrangements: Cross-train employees on different job duties. Consider a reserve workforce.

Human Resources: Protect the health and safety of your workers with pandemic-specific considerations. Hire an Employee Assistance Program or a counselling service to help with workers experiencing stress, grief and mental illness-related issues.

References:

Implement and Continuously Review your Plan

After meticulously testing, monitoring and modifying your plan, there will come the time for it to be implemented. Ultimately this occurs when the workforce is comfortable with the policies and practices in place. It is also important that the business is equipped with the resources required to execute the plan. Monitor your plan as it progresses by implementing regular audits and reviews of your plan’s functionality and success, making adaptations as required.

As you work through the steps of your continuity plan, make sure to gain insight from financial, legal, and health and safety professionals. Consider working with a business analyst or other business planning professionals.

Many businesses experience underperformance and disruption to business-as-usual activity throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This may be a factor of operational disruption, supply chain disruption, and/or shifts in consumer demands and behaviour affecting multiple sectors. As these impacts persist, businesses should use their continuity plan to recover and sustain business activity. However, continuing your business continuity plan over the long-term can make your business more successful and prosperous.

In the next section, you will develop plans and strategies to mitigate risks in the workplace pertaining to COVID-19 transmission and infection. As opposed to adapting your business for success in the current economic climate, Part 2 focuses on adapting your business for safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.
PART 2: MITIGATING RISKS IN THE WORKPLACE

Rationale
During this global pandemic, there exists a requirement for organizations to modify their workplace practices and policies in order to ensure the safety of its employees. In fact, employers have a legal obligation to protect their workers from infection under the Ontario Health and Safety Act. Preventing workplace outbreaks requires adapting policies and procedures, assessing workplace transmission risks, and implementing infection control strategies in the workplace. Of utmost importance is keeping workers healthy by providing education and training on how to reduce their risks of infection and illness.

1. **Assemble a Pandemic Response Team**

   **Responsibilities of the Pandemic Response Team:**
   - Contingency planning to ensure operations continue as public health risks persist
   - Performing a risk assessment of the workplace and implementing controls to prevent COVID-19 infection and transmission
   - Overseeing employee training and transition into the modified work setting
   - Planning for technical and logistical challenges in returning employees to the workplace

   Planning should be done with the input and assistance of the Joint Health and Safety Committee, senior leadership, upper management, supervisors, union leaders, human resources department, health and safety and risk management professionals.

2. **Identify Workplace Risks and Hazards**

   **What defines a risk?** Any interaction that may lead to COVID-19 exposure or infection.

   - **Personal Contact Risks**
     - Job functions requiring personal contact with others at close proximity (e.g., coworkers, customers, clients, contractors, and other third parties).
     - Multiple persons in communal spaces (i.e., washrooms, lunchroom, common areas, meeting rooms, walkways).

   - **Equipment Contact Risks**
     - Any interaction with equipment necessary for one’s job function, such as stationery, office supplies, computers, and other industry-specific equipment.

   - **Surface Contact Risks**
     - Contact with workplace surfaces, such as doors, light switches, railings, handles, shared workstations and tools, and other high-contact areas.

   - **External Risks**
     - Recent travel abroad, local and distant worker travel, community exposure, contact with an infected person.

   Do a personal walkthrough of your workplace with relevant stakeholders and generate a list of risk factors, categorized as one of the four risk types. Consider assistance from health and safety representatives, those who understand common interactions in the work environment, or others who specialize in risk mitigation.

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What is the likelihood of infection of the interaction in question? Assume that any risk of infection by COVID-19 is likely to have severe consequences.

High-level risks:
- Personal contact with infected individuals, especially without the use of PPE and other controls
- Interactions with high-contact surfaces that are not cleaned and disinfected regularly

COVID-19 is spread by infected individuals when they talk, cough, laugh, or sneeze. People are most contagious **up to 48 hours before displaying symptoms** and at symptom onset. The virus can settle on surfaces and remain there for hours. Touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your face can lead to infection.

Develop Risk Mitigation Strategies

Prioritize. Give the most focus to high-risk sources of infection. Consider strategies that resolve many of your identified risk factors, rather than a unique solution for each risk factor.

Can this interaction or job duty be eliminated altogether?

Is there a substitute to this interaction that does not involve personal contact or a risk of transmission/infection?

Are there physical interventions that can mitigate this hazard, such as physical barriers, floor markers or redesigning the workspace?

Are there business policies or protocols that can be implemented to reduce this risk, regarding hygiene, physical distancing, health screening, decontamination, signage, or training?

Which PPE should workers use to be protected from infection? (i.e. face shield, goggles, gloves, face mask)

Personal Contact Risks
- Replace with non-contact communication methods (phone, internet)
- If interaction is required, add controls such as physical barriers or floor markers, and mandate use of PPE

Equipment and Surface Contact Risks
- Eliminate use, if possible
- Sanitize and disinfect between each use
- Consider individual use of equipment
- Create a user log with a sanitation check

Non-Occupational Risks and External Sources
- Consider regular staff health screening measures
- Encourage employee self-reporting of COVID-19 symptoms and risk factors
- Monitor public health notices to identify community outbreaks

Hierarchy of Risk Mitigation Controls

- Elimination
- Substitution
- Engineering Controls
- Administrative Controls

Personal Protective Equipment

Strategizing by Risk Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEST PRACTICES FOR RISK MITIGATION</th>
<th>XII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a procedure for when an employee reports COVID-19 symptoms or possible exposure.</td>
<td>Post signs regarding appropriate hand hygiene and effective handwashing procedures in visible locations in the workplace, including all restrooms and lunchrooms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a reporting and/or screening procedure to ensure employees do not attend work if they: are displaying COVID-19 symptoms; have been in close contact with an individual who has been diagnosed with COVID-19; have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or are waiting for COVID-19 test results; and/or are otherwise required to be in self-isolation or quarantine.</td>
<td>Post signs regarding the symptoms of COVID-19 and information regarding what steps employees are required to take if they are experiencing symptoms. Place in visible locations in the workplace, including all entrances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage workers to measure their temperatures and self-screen for COVID-19 symptoms and risk factors before attending work.</td>
<td>Provide access to PPE, hand sanitizer, and handwashing facilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit access to the workplace for non-employees and protect employees from visitors and/or customers. Screen visitors for COVID-19 symptoms and ensure face masks are worn in the workplace.</td>
<td>Perform routine cleanings of the workplace, especially high-touch surfaces and/or shared surfaces, including workstations/desks, computer screens and keyboards, tables, doorknobs, light switches, counter tops, handles, tools, barriers, restrooms and lunch areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use email, the telephone, or video conference to reduce the need for in-person meetings.</td>
<td>Maintain and require social distancing in the workplace by: increasing the distance between desks, tables, and workstations; mandating a six-foot distance to be kept between coworkers, or employees and customers using physical distancing markers on the floor; installing physical barriers where distancing is not possible and wear masks as needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspend all non-essential business travel, in accordance with applicable direction given by Canadian authorities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal Protective Equipment \[XII\]

PPE should be used only when more effective controls are not sufficient to eliminate the risk of COVID-19 transmission or infection. PPE can also be used in combination with engineering and administrative controls to add another level of protection. In order for PPE to be effective, users must be trained on safe PPE use, donning and doffing techniques, and safe cleaning and disposal procedures.

**Masks**
- Face coverings reduce the risk of transmission when physical distancing is challenging.
- Masks should be worn by those with broad exposure to others.
- Medical grade masks should be reserved for healthcare worker use, but are recommended if in contact with an infected person.

**Eye protection**
- Face shields and goggles can be used to block virus particles from entering mucous membranes and causing infection.
- Face shields should be used when physical distancing is challenging and barriers are not feasible.

**Gloves**
- It is necessary to wear gloves when disinfecting contaminated surfaces and equipment.
- Users should wash or sanitize their hands before and after wearing gloves.
- Gloves do not provide any more protection from infection than hand washing and using hand sanitizers.

Health Screening \[XII, XIII\]

Health screening measures include a questionnaire and temperature measurements. A sample of a health screening questionnaire is found in Appendix A. Encourage employees to self-monitor for symptoms and stay home if they believe they are infected. If an employee believes they are infected, have been exposed to or have tested positive for COVID-19, they should inform their employer.

Employees should be regularly screened for COVID-19 symptoms and risk factors before or upon entering the workplace. Set up barriers at entrances and a dedicated team for screening those entering the workplace. Administer PPE and hand hygiene products as required.

Cleaning, Hygiene and Disinfection \[XIV\]

**Disinfection 101**
- Disinfectants must have a drug identification number (DIN), meaning the product is approved by Health Canada. To ensure the disinfectant is effective against COVID-19, enter the DIN in the database.
- Follow the manufacturer’s label for solution preparation and surface contact time.
- Ensure surfaces are first cleaned with water, detergent (a product that breaks down organic materials and grease), and friction.
- Some products have combined cleaner and disinfectant properties, including disinfectant wipes, which can be used on surfaces that are not heavily soiled.
- Wear gloves when using disinfectants and cleaning products.


Disinfect common workspaces, surfaces, equipment, and high-touch surfaces (doors, light switches, railings, handwashing sinks) at least twice daily, or more depending on frequency of use.

Limit sharing materials and equipment, and disinfect shared equipment after each individual use.

Promote workers and visitors in the workplace to wash their hands often with soap and water or hand sanitizer, especially upon entering the workplace and after touching high-contact surfaces. Additionally, provide hand sanitizing units for workers to use.

Display posters reminding workers to wash their hands regularly, follow proper cough etiquette, and avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth.
Procedure for COVID-19-Infected Workers XV

1) Remove symptomatic worker(s) from the workplace
   If worker calls in sick: ask them to do a self-assessment if they are reporting symptoms or have been in close contact with an infected person. Recommend they get tested and self-isolate, and follow the directions of the self-assessment.
   If worker shows symptoms in the workplace: remove them from the workplace immediately, or if not possible, keep them isolated until they can leave. Ask the worker to self-isolate and contact their doctor for further direction.

2) Contact public health
   Contact your local public health unit for direction and steps to take. Ensure there is a contact tracing system in place so you can provide information about coworkers that had recent contact with the infected worker. This helps public health workers to identify individuals that may have been infected by the individual. Include factors such as the date, length and frequency of the interaction, names, contact phone numbers, and worker and business addresses.

3) Implement public health measures
   Your public health unit may advise that workers be sent home and the workplace or affected area be shut down and disinfected. Ensure symptomatic workers and coworkers that came in contact with the worker self-isolate for 14 days and get tested.

4) Report to Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development
   If the worker has tested positive for COVID-19 due to workplace exposure, or a claim with the WSIB has been filed, give notice within four days to:
   - the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development
   - the workplace’s joint health and safety committee or a health and safety representative
   - the worker’s trade union (if applicable)


5) Create Risk Mitigation Charts XVI

Risk mitigation charts are a great way to list, categorize and resolve workplace risk factors. Below is a sample of a risk mitigation chart. The “Actions Taken” column is optional, however having this holds accountability to ensure that the risk has been mitigated. Consider organizing the chart by risk priority so that the highest level risks are managed first.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Likelihood of transmission/ infection</th>
<th>Can the risk factor be eliminated?</th>
<th>Risk Mitigation</th>
<th>Actions Taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal contact through use of communal lunch room</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>• Implement staggered lunch breaks and limit number of employees in lunch area at one time by altering seating options • Ask employees to self-monitor for congestion and symptoms, and adjust their behavior accordingly • Disinfect lunch area after each use</td>
<td>Completed? Y/N Date: 7/20/2020 Name: Jane Doe Actions: created staff lunch schedule, reduced seats in lunchroom to 3 and spread out seating, disinfected eating areas after each use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal contact through weekly staff check-in meetings</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>• Switch to on-line or telephone meetings • Communicate important information through emails or postings</td>
<td>Completed? Y/N Date: Name: Actions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Factor</td>
<td>Likelihood of transmission/ infection</td>
<td>Can the risk factor be eliminated?</td>
<td>Risk Mitigation</td>
<td>Actions Taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Equipment contact through use of shared photocopier | High | No | • Ensure shared work equipment (computers, photocopiers, printers, office supplies) and office supply room are frequently cleaned and disinfected  
• Place hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes near photocopier  
• Create an activity log for photocopier use and ensure it is disinfected after each use | Completed? Y/N  
Date:  
Name:  
Actions: |
| Surface contact through opening washroom door | High | Yes | • Prop open the washroom door or consider installing a non-touch mechanical door opener  
• Frequently clean high-touch bathroom surfaces | Completed? Y/N  
Date:  
Name:  
Actions: |
| Surface contact of high-touch surfaces (doors, light switches, handles, buttons, etc.) | High | No | • Train employees on proper disinfection practices and assign daily disinfection duties to workers  
• Ensure high-touch surfaces are disinfected at least twice daily, or more depending on frequency of contact  
• Consider switching to contact-free doors and lights, or limit contact of these surfaces to one person | Completed? Y/N  
Date:  
Name:  
Actions: |
| High COVID-19 activity level in local community | Very high | No | • Consider temporarily closing the workplace and maintain business operations remotely until community outbreak is stabilized  
• Restrict entry of non-essential workers and visitors in the workplace  
• Do not allow close personal interactions between coworkers or clients. If necessary, place barriers between individuals  
• Require face masks to be worn at all times  
• Modify scheduling to reduce contacts between staff and maintain social distancing  
• Ensure all workers are following health screening measures before attending work. Any employee reporting possible COVID-19 risks or symptoms should stay home | Completed? Y/N  
Date:  
Name:  
Actions: |

Modify Workplace Policies

Transmission Prevention and Exposure

- **Work from home** XVIII, XXI: if an employee can effectively work from home, they should do so. Provide access to work programs on devices used remotely.
- **Scheduling arrangements** XVIII, XX: consider reducing work hours and staggering employee shifts to limit the number of workers in the workplace at one time. Form groups of employees that share the same shifts with their group, but not with other employees. If workers share a workspace or work close together, ensure their work hours do not overlap.
- **Sanitation, hygiene and disinfection** XIX: train employees on proper handwashing, sanitization and disinfection techniques. Mandate handwashing before and after using shared equipment and require workers to disinfect surfaces and equipment after use. Supply hand sanitizing units to workers and place disinfectant supplies at common work areas or at shared equipment.
- **Routine health screening** XX: implement regular staff health screening before or upon entering work. Generate a questionnaire regarding COVID-19 symptoms and risk factors and ask employees to measure their temperature to check for a fever. Encourage employees to self-assess their health status. If employees feel ill, ensure that they remain at home and contact their health provider.
- **Outbreak plan** XX: if an employee reports that they have COVID-19, implement a workplace outbreak protocol, which may involve tracing contacts of the infected individual with coworkers, sending workers home, evacuating the workplace, and disinfecting work areas that the infected person came in contact with.

Flexible Worksite Policies XXI

- **Underline expectations when working from home** concerning work hours and time tracking, overtime, confidentiality, home office insurance and liability, a procedure for monitoring work product, performance expectations, expectations when attending virtual meetings including dress code, and reserving a general right to return the employee to the office.
- **Consider legitimate requests to work from home** due to childcare or eldercare obligations, high-risk family members, or if the employee themselves have physical or mental health issues or disabilities which put them at a high risk.

Travel Restrictions XVII

- **Restrict all travel** for purposes of conferences, in-person meetings, or any duties involving social contact. Move to a contact-free platform, such as phone conferences and online meeting platforms.
- **If travel is required for job duties**, i.e. making deliveries, the employee should wear appropriate PPE and follow social distancing, hygiene, sanitation, and self-monitoring policies.
Reassess Employment Agreements

- **Work-sharing agreement**: employees accept a reduced schedule (10-60% of normal schedule) and share available work, while receiving EI benefits as income support. This agreement is allowed when there is a temporary decrease in an employer’s normal business activity that is beyond the control of the employer. Employers should act quickly to have this agreement approved by their employees, union, and the government, as special application measures are available for a limited amount of time. Visit [https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/work-sharing.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/work-sharing.html) for more information.

- Amend employment agreements to include **enforceable provisions on termination, lay-off, COVID-19-related leaves, or other unforeseeable circumstances**. This agreement should outline the right of the employer to reduce work hours, change compensation, and alter job duties of workers. Modifying existing work contracts requires consent from the employees, as well as employee consultation and consideration when developing employment contracts. The employer should seek legal council during this process in order to evaluate the impact of these proposed changes on the risk of wrongful dismissal and/or human rights claims.

- **Mass or deemed terminations**: under the employment standards legislation, employers may re-organize their workforce to adjust for pandemic impacts. This solution may be of use in subsequent pandemic waves and economic shut-downs.

Compensation Arrangements


- **Supplementary Unemployment Benefit Plan**: under Service Canada, employers may top up employment insurance benefits in the case of subsequent layoffs. Additional information about basic requirements and a SUBP guide can be found at [https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/ei/ei-list/ei-employers-supplemental-unemployment-benefit.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/ei/ei-list/ei-employers-supplemental-unemployment-benefit.html).

- **Leave policies should accommodate for the current realities of COVID-19**. There should be leaves for childcare and eldercare. Consider changing the amount and flexibility of leave entitlements, and using vacation days as paid sick leave for COVID-19. Provide clear rules on non-statutory leaves and identify a right to deny vacation requests or mandate vacation.

- **Sick leave and return to work of COVID-19 infected workers**: infected employees may declare an emergency leave and are entitled to the same rights as employees who take pregnancy/parental leave. Create a protocol for returning recovered employees to work.

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Workplaces are central to employee mental health and should be a source of wellbeing; fostering productivity and a contributive nature in workers. However, for many, stressful working conditions amplify mental health issues. Employees who have a negative experience with their workplace tend to take more sick days, are less productive, and may quit their job, which is costly to the organization. On top of this, new living and working realities of the pandemic amplify people’s mental health issues by contributing to heightened anxiety, depression, loneliness, as well as substance abuse to cope with these feelings. As an employer, you have an obligation to protect the well-being of your workers. Mental health is just as important to one’s well-being as is their physical health, and employers should implement a workplace mental health strategy to promote mental well-being. Investing in your workers’ mental wellbeing results in extraordinary returns for your organization.

Key Elements of a Workplace Mental Health Strategy

**Leadership**
Decrease mental health stigma and train leaders on mental health and support strategies in the workplace.

**Inclusion**
Embed diversity and inclusion into your business vision and work to meet the diverse needs of your employees.

**Wellbeing**
Create a healthy workspace culture, free from discrimination, harassment and bullying. Consider implementing lifestyle modification programs, such as incentives to increase employee physical activity.

**Reduce Job Stress**
Give employees more control over their work by ensuring work demands are not overwhelming and by providing support. Review how processes in your organization can contribute to stress.

**Work Life Balance**
Offer workers flexible work arrangements that allow employees an opportunity to complete their personal tasks during regular work hours. Consider your role in assisting employees with the costs of childcare, housing and transportation.

Mental Health Leadership Training
To ensure the success of your business’s mental health strategy, leaders across the organization should be trained and invested in workplace mental health.

**Mental health awareness training** is provided by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. This e-course is free and can be accessed at [https://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/mh_awareness/](https://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/mh_awareness/).

The course helps leaders recognize the signs of a struggling employee, promote mental health in the workplace, and engage in behaviours that support employee mental health and well-being. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has a plethora of resources, such as a **Mental Health First Aid** training course, and **resources for workplaces during COVID-19**, found at [https://theworkingmind.ca/workplace-resources](https://theworkingmind.ca/workplace-resources).

Mental Health Supports
Ensure workers know that their workplace is a supportive environment so that they feel comfortable seeking help. Provide phone and online mental health resources. Consider investing in occupational health professionals that meet regularly with employees who are facing mental health issues and those who are away from work on mental health sick leave.

Conclusion

Since February 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic has uprooted typical business practices and how we live our lives in general. With multiple vaccine candidates in the early stages of human trials, there are still many months (and possibly years) remaining until approved vaccines will be distributed to our communities and herd immunity can be established (Flanagan, 2020). In the meantime, we’re living in the “new normal”, with government and public health-imposed restrictions and considerations in place. These are necessary to combat the spread of this respiratory virus, which is largely transmitted by unknowingly infected individuals, who shed infectious particles up to 2-3 days before showing symptoms and entering self-isolation (He et al., 2020).

As the province re-opens, employers are eager to continue business functions. There is a lot of planning required to protect the health and safety of workers and to recover from losses experienced due to the pandemic. This guide equips business leaders with useful strategies, tools, resources, and planning techniques to accomplish just that. Since this guide is very concise and packed with information, it may be useful to access the resources in Appendix B as well as the references to get a better explanation and understanding of what was covered.

Adapting your business to the new normal requires an investment of time, expertise and resources. This investment is essential to not only keep your business running during the pandemic, but to overcome current and future pandemic-related obstacles and end up on top.
References


References (Cont’d)


Appendix A: Sample Health Screening Questionnaire

Date: ______________________

Thermometer reading: _____ °C

Check boxes that apply to you:

⇒ Is your body temperature at or above 37.8°C?
⇒ In the last 14 days, have you had close physical contact with a person who:
   - was sick with a respiratory illness (including new or worsening cough, fever or difficulty breathing)?
   - has returned from travel outside of Canada in the last 14 days?
   - was a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19?
⇒ Did you travel outside of Canada or to pandemic “hot spots” within the past 14 days?
⇒ Have you tested positive for COVID-19 or had close contact with an infected individual without wearing appropriate personal protective equipment?
⇒ Are you experiencing any of the following symptoms?
   - Fever
   - New onset of cough
   - Worsening chronic cough
   - Shortness of breath
   - Difficulty breathing
   - Sore throat
   - Difficulty swallowing
   - Decrease of loss of sense of taste or smell
   - Chills
   - Headaches
   - Unexplained fatigue/malaise/muscle aches (myalgias)
   - Nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain
   - Pink eye (conjunctivitis)
   - Runny nose or nasal congestion without other known cause

If one or more of these conditions applies to you, please do the following:

- DO NOT enter the workplace
- Stay at home, self-isolate and contact your health care provider or public health officials
- Take the COVID-19 self-assessment and follow directions based on your results
- Contact your supervisor for further support and reporting
### Appendix B: Resources to Prevent COVID-19 in the Workplace

| Resources to prevent COVID-19 in the Workplace | https://www.ontario.ca/page/resources-prevent-covid-19-workplace#section-4 |
| Employers and Workers Guidance, WHO | https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/employers-and-workers |