

# What can businesses do to prevent a workplace outbreak of Covid-19?

Encouraging a shared sense of responsibility and ensuring that staff know they will not lose out if they have a positive diagnosis will help keep everyone safe



**Derek McKay**

**W**e have become all too aware in recent weeks of just how quickly the coronavirus can spread once it gains a foothold in the community, but what about the workplace? What rights do employers have to be informed if a member of staff tests positive for Covid-19?

With the country on level 3 restrictions, employees are required to work from home if they can, and employers must do all they can to facilitate this. In certain cases, however, this

is not possible. In others, employers still need to plan for a return of their staff to the workplace at some point.

On the face of it, you would think employees would be quick to let their employer know if they have – or suspect they have – contracted the virus. The situation is not clear-cut, however.

In May, the HSE suspended its practice of informing employers when a named member of their staff had tested positive for Covid-19. The move followed criticism from Tony Holohan, the chief medical officer, who described the practice as “a breach of confidentiality”.

In response, the HSE introduced a new regime in early September whereby it will

notify employers if a member of their staff tests positive, but the employee in question will not be identified.

For employers, the concern is that a delay may arise between the time an employee finds out that they have Covid-19 and when they inform their company.

If the employee in question has been interacting with other colleagues, the more the employer knows about their movements – and the sooner they find out – the more they can do to prevent the spread of the virus and protect others in the workplace.

It is crucial to get ahead of the problem, and to do so, communication is vital.

Employees will be more likely to disclose a diagnosis if they understand that doing so will not mean that they will be punished in some way or lose out, financially or otherwise.

It is up to employers to make clear to all employees that they will be treated with the utmost respect, and in a responsible and confiden-



**Keep employees in the loop: any updates to policies must be clearly communicated**

tial manner, if they do come forward.

I would also advise employers to communicate and reinforce the role of the employee in preventing the spread of Covid-19. A sense of shared responsibility and purpose can be a powerful tool.

Adhering to the return to work protocol is also hugely important. As the pandemic rolls on, there is really no room for complacency.

Here are the minimum measures employers must implement to help prevent any Covid-19 outbreaks:

Develop a Covid-19 response plan and update business continuity and safety plans, occupational health

and safety risk assessments. Everyone needs to be clear on exactly how the organisation will deal with any suspected Covid-19 cases.

Ensure that employees complete a pre-return to work form at least three days before they come back to the workplace. The employee must confirm that they have not had any symptoms of the virus nor been in close contact with anyone who has suspected Covid-19 for a ten-day period.

A template for the pre-return to work form can be downloaded from the Health and Safety Authority website at [hsa.ie](http://hsa.ie).

Make Covid-19 prevention

training available to all staff, and implement and maintain all of the advised health and safety measures such as hand sanitiser stations, social distancing, health notifications and signage.

Remember, any updates or changes to policies and procedures must be communicated to employees.

For their part, employees should follow the public health advice and any additional measures introduced by their employer.

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