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Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for GCC employers

Understand how to support your business and workforce through a global health emergency

Introduction

The new coronavirus disease, now officially named COVID-19, was declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization in January 2020. As the virus has the potential to spread extensively, it's likely to pose a significant challenge to many organisations.

This factsheet provides an overview of the current coronavirus situation. It explains what the virus is and gives advice on how employers should respond to the threat and support employees by being prepared, looking after employees' health and safety, precautions for employees returning from travel, and developing flexible resourcing plans.

What is coronavirus (COVID-19)?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as MERS-CoV and SARS (Cov). The official name for this new disease, not previously seen in humans, is Covid-19. It was first identified in Wuhan City, in Hubei province, China.

Coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted between animals and people. As this new strain causes a new illness, it's not known exactly how it spreads from person to person, but similar viruses spread by cough droplets.

Common signs of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and death. Generally, more severe cases occur in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the virus a global health emergency. Although it is spreading around the world, and spreading quickly, it is yet to be classed as a 'pandemic'. A pandemic, in WHO terms, is 'the worldwide spread of a disease'. It's still unclear how severe the virus is, and how far it will spread.

On Friday 28 February 2020, the World Health Organization raised the global risk assessment of the infection to "very high", but the risk level depends on each country.

Currently the main concern for employers is dealing with travel to and from affected areas. Several governments have advised against all travel to Hubei province and all but essential travel to the rest of mainland China, the cities of Daegu and Cheongdo in South Korea and several small towns in Northern Italy. We advise all employers to keep up to date with the latest advice on travel from local authorities.

How employers should respond to the COVID-19 threat

As the virus continues to spread, it could pose a significant threat to some organisations. We live in a global economy and many employers have operations or supply chains based overseas. The level of risk an organisation may face will depend on whether it is directly or indirectly affected in this way. An organisation may also be affected if it employs people who have travelled back, or been in contact with, anyone who has returned from an area affected by the virus.

If the virus becomes a pandemic, it could lead to wider disruptions with suppliers and customers and to shortages of fuel and other basic commodities. There may also be disruptions to public transport.

Be prepared

- **Keep up to date with Government and public health advice:** Employers should keep up to date with the situation as it develops and refer employees who are concerned about infection to official and expert medical sources through local and federal government agencies like Health Ministries and Health Authorities.
- **Develop a contingency plan:** Every organisation will need to assess its own level of exposure to business disruption caused by the virus. If it has a site, conducts business or has supply chains in China or an affected region, there will be a direct impact to the company's day-to-day operations. The plan will need to take account of current and potential impacts and manage the specific business risks associated with the disruption, including service delivery and workforce issues. Communicate

the plan to key teams and individuals across the business.

- **Build a contingency team:** Identify a person, or small group of people, that would take responsibility for operating the contingency plan should a pandemic occur and allocate clear responsibilities for its implementation.
- **If a pandemic does occur:** Those responsible for the contingency plan should meet regularly to review the preparations and ensure they are still fit for purpose. It's important to act early, even if planned contingencies are not then needed.

Advice for employees returning from travel

In the GCC, advice from local authorities differ but we generally see a theme of: Any employee who has returned from Wuhan and Hubei province in the last 14 days and Iran, several towns in Northern Italy and certain areas in South Korea since 19 February should stay indoors, avoid contact with other people and advise the emergency services of their recent travel, even if they do not have symptoms of this virus. This list is changing daily - stay up to date with the latest advice from your local authority.

Any employee who has returned from other areas of China, or Macao, Hong Kong, Thailand, Japan, Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, northern Italy, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar in the last 14 days and develops a cough, fever or shortness of breath, however mild should stay indoors, avoid contact with other people and advise the emergency services of their travel.

Look after people's health, well-being and safety

Employees' health, safety and well-being during a global health emergency like the coronavirus outbreak should be paramount. Employers have a statutory duty of care for people's health and safety and to provide a safe place to work, but there's also a strong moral responsibility to ensure that employees feel safe and secure in their employment. Communicate clearly to employees that they need to take precautions, avoiding travel to affected areas and/or coming into contact with infected or potentially infected people or animals. Advise them on what to do if they think they may have caught the virus.

As the likely spread of the virus continues, employers may face the following situations:

- **If employees have been told by a medical professional to self-isolate:** The advice from the Government is that if NHS 111, or a doctor, advises an employee or worker to self-isolate, they are entitled to Statutory Sick Pay. This includes individuals who may be a carrier of COVID-19 who may not have symptoms. Employers should use discretion around the need for medical evidence for a period of absence where an employee is advised to self-isolate in the current exceptional circumstances.

CIPD recommends that employers providing contractual sick pay should provide this if a member of staff is asked to self-isolate by a medical professional even if they have no symptoms. Alternative options to providing sick pay are to allow people who are asked to self-isolate to work from home wherever possible and continue to pay as normal.

- **If an employer sends people home as a precaution:** Employees are following the reasonable instruction of their employer and should get their normal pay.
- **If employees choose to self-isolate but have not been advised to by a medical professional, and have no symptoms: Employees who voluntarily self-isolate without symptoms,** and without their employer's agreement, could be required to attend work by their employer. However, employers should take people's concerns seriously, especially if there are underlying health conditions, including mental ill health.
 - [Read the CIPD's People Managers' Guide to Mental Health \(2018\)](#)

Wider health and well-being concerns

- Keep up to date and follow official medical advice as it's updated. Keep employees informed, particularly in relation to the specific guidelines for employees who have returned from affected areas, or have been in contact with an infected person, or with an individual who has returned from affected areas. Actively communicate this advice with your people, customers and suppliers.
- Implement an internal communication strategy so that employees are aware of measures that are being taken to manage the situation in your organisation. Understand that some people may have real concerns about catching the virus, while others may have worries about family or friends stranded in, or returning from, an affected area. Try to reassure employees that there is no need to panic and the risk to the population remains low. Ensure that line managers are regularly informed about the organisation's contingency plans and how to discuss the situation with any concerned employees, and where to signpost people to for further advice or support.
- Promote the resources you have available to support people's health and well-being generally, including those through an employee assistance programme.
- If the virus spreads widely and/or becomes a pandemic and the risk of infection is heightened, be prepared to step up the level of support you provide to staff and adjust your resourcing plans accordingly. Keep in mind anyone who may be more

vulnerable due to a pre-existing health conditions, age, or pregnancy.

- [Consult the CIPD's resources on health and well-being](#)

Develop flexible resourcing plans

- As part of your organisation's contingency plan, explore more flexible resourcing strategies in case your business suffers staffing shortages.
- Develop strategies to maximise the amount of home working to prevent the spread of infection if necessary.
- Investigate ways of harnessing the use of technology to limit the amount of face-to-face contact, for example, video conferencing to facilitate remote meetings. For customer-facing organisations, consider introducing or maximising the use of self-service options and online services.
- Increased sickness absence may create a need for other employees, if willing, to work longer hours to keep your business going. If this happens, you will need to comply with the working time regulations applicable in your jurisdiction to ensure appropriate length of day time working hours, night shifts and rest breaks.
- Have in place plans that will enable the organisation to operate on a skeleton staff if necessary. Identify key services and roles that are essential and can't be put on hold, as well as projects or roles that could be temporarily stood down. Identify those individuals and managers who have transferrable skills, who can fulfil more than one function and could be allocated to more essential roles.
- Carry out a resourcing risk assessment of the organisation, identifying essential areas of the business where few employees have the required skills. Training additional employees in these skills should be considered. Ensure that procedures are developed to ensure smooth handovers for employees who are filling in for colleagues in unfamiliar roles. It may be necessary to provide additional training and a risk assessment if individuals are moving to roles where there may be a health and safety risk.
- If your operations are severely affected, consider introducing a voluntary special leave policy on a temporary basis whereby individuals can opt to take paid or unpaid leave. Be mindful that there could be some employees who are willing to take additional time off and welcome a break, but others may struggle financially if they lose pay. Consider offering a shorter working week or other flexible resourcing arrangements and communicate the business reasons to employees.

Useful contacts and further reading

Resources

Information and guidance on coronavirus disease (COVID-19) (World Health Organization)

Coronavirus outbreak (International SOS)

Business responses to the COVID-19 outbreak: survey findings (Mercer)

Contacts

In the United Arab Emirates:

- Media: www.thenational.ae
- For the latest updates on education and school timings: [Knowledge and Human Development Authority \(KHDA\) Twitter](#)
- For communication from the government of Dubai: [Dubai Media office Twitter](#)
- For public health information: [Dubai Health Authority \(DHA\)](#)

In Saudi Arabia:

- For travel advice and guidance: [General Authority of Civil Aviation \(GACA\)](#)
- Media: www.okaz.com.sa, www.arabnews.com
- For general guidance: www.mofa.gov.sa

In Bahrain:

- For public health information: [Ministry of Health of the Kingdom of Bahrain](#)
- Media: www.newsofbahrain.com

In Kuwait:

- For public health information: [Ministry of Health in Kuwait](#)
- Media: <https://news.kuwaittimes.net/website/>

In Oman:

- Media: www.timesofoman.com
- For public health information: [Ministry of Health \(Oman\)](#)

In Qatar:

- Media: www.qatar-tribune.com; www.thepeninsulaqatar.com

- For public health information: [Ministry of Public Health \(Qatar\)](#)
- For the latest Covid-19 information: The Ministry of Public Health in collaboration with Hamad Medical Corporation and Primary Health Care Corporation has created [this website](#) to share trusted information regarding the virus.

Note: The CIPD is not engaged in the practice of law, accounting or medicine. Any commentary in this article does not constitute and is not a substitute for legal, tax or medical advice. Readers of this article should consult a legal, tax or medical expert for advice on those matters.

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