<u>Preparing your Organization to deal with the Covid-19 Coronavirus</u>

<u>2020/03/20</u>

Organizations have a duty to be prepared to handle the possibility of a Coronavirus (Covid-19) in the company, should it be required. This is vital, since the virus is still spreading around the world with no end in sight.

South Africa is no exception. To date about 202 cases of infected persons have been recorded (2010/03/20), thankfully with no fatalities.

How should companies react?

Government has announced several directives to help curb the spread of the virus in South Africa. Important from a company perspective are:

- Restrictions on gatherings of more than 100 people
- Persons showing symptoms must be tested
- Self-isolation if a person suspects that he or she may have been in contact with and infected person, or if they suspect that they may be infected
- Etc

The company's best approach - Communication

Communication is vital to successfully deal with the pandemic and to curb the spread of fake news and fake information regarding the virus, how it spreads and how to prevent infections. HR departments should collect as much valid information as possible. They should then create a "ready-to-refer" instructional guide for all employees. This guide must be used to educate employees about viral infection, as well as ways to avoid infection.

The communication strategy should include various methods of communication. Think about bulletins, posters, e-mails, chat groups, infographics, videos, etc. Any form of communication that will help to effectively communicate the message to all employees must be considered.

Make sure that the communication content is sourced only from credible and verified sources to prevent the spread of misinformation.

Alternative work methods

Where possible, companies should consider flexible work arrangement plans. The best way would be to allow those employees who can to work from home. The objective is to eliminate the possibility of transmission of the virus at the workplace, as well as during commuting time (especially for persons using public transport). Use the technology options that are available, such as the Cloud, chat platforms, project management dashboards, etc. Also consider Skype, Google Hangouts, Zoom, and real-time collaborations using platforms such as Collabit, which is free.

Result driven companies will not mind whether the employee is working from home or in the office, as long as the work is delivered. There are many technology options available to accomplish this.

Where location specific work must be done and thus it is unavoidable that persons have to be at work, and work in close proximity to other persons, make use of face masks, gloves, alcohol-based hand sanitizers, and maintaining good personal hygiene.

Other initiatives include:

- Free masks and sanitizers
- An increased cleaning schedule for office, factory and bathroom facilities
- Senior management setting the example (use masks, gloves, sanitizing hands, etc)
- Temperature taking for all when persons enter the premises. It will help to create peace of mind, but the results must be available to all employees. Plans must be in place to deal with employees who are showing signs of fever
- Lunch can be provided to avoid employees flocking together at food outlets where the risk of contamination is higher

Policies

Another important aspect to look at is the workplace policies related to the pandemic.

Leave policies should be relooked at. The company does not want an employee who is infected to come to work simply because the employee does not have enough paid leave available. It not only impacts the infected employee, but also the colleagues of the employee, as well as other persons he or she may be incontact with on the way to and from work.

Other policies to consider include:

- Travelling
- Marketing meetings

- Internal meetings in the workplace
- Audits
- Personal hygiene
- Facilities management
- First aid treatment (considering the possibility of first aiders becoming infected)
- Visitors
- Etc

Emergency Planning

Emergency planning should be drawn up and implemented to deal with real and suspected cases of infection. Consider isolation, transportation of such employees, and identification of other persons that the employee may have been in contact with and how to deal with those employees. Organizations like museums, shops, restaurants, etc, especially should all plan in advance how to deal with potential emergencies.

If an employee is suspected of being sick, or if they start feeling sick at work (especially if they have been travelling), immediately call or contact the health authorities. It is never a good idea to try to force them into isolation against their wills. It should be avoided at all costs, because it creates panic and stress. Do so only if advised to do it by a medical authority. Do not create unnecessary fear and panic amongst employees. Get medical advice, and act accordingly.

Conclusion

By implementing some of these simple requirements the company can be made much safer and the spread of the Covid-19 virus can be restrained and eventually stopped. We have to understand that when it is first identified in a country, there will be an immediate sharp increase in the number of confirmed cases, which will become less and less as the cases are identified, treated and the spread is controlled. What is important is for everybody to cooperate to limit the spread as much as possible.

Financially it is going to impact on the economy and on companies. But we need to deal with this sensibly so that everything can return to normal again.