Ensure Supply Chain Professionals’ Safe Return to the Workplace

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Initiatives: Supply Chain Strategy, Leadership and Governance and 1 more

As organizations welcome employees back to offices across the U.S., supply chain leaders must provide a safe work environment. Supply chain leaders should leverage this research to assess the risks and implement modifications that will ensure employee safety and minimize internal risk.

Overview

Key Challenges

- With limited consistency of approach across state and local governments, U.S. supply chain leaders face continued uncertainty in assessing and modifying processes and physical workplaces to enable the safe return of their employees during this protracted pandemic.

- Supply chain’s central and physically connected role in managing third-parties and incoming supplies results in touchpoints that can pose risks to employee health and safety through either human interaction or surface contamination. These are often scattered across the end-to-end supply chain from the receiving dock all the way to the end user/customer and include touchpoints into office environments as well.

Recommendations

Supply chain leaders responsible for leadership strategy and minimizing risk upon the supply chain team’s return to the physical workplace should:

- Identify risks in the supply chain office environment’s legacy workflows and facility layouts by process mapping work and material flows that may introduce risk to employee health. Focus on processes and areas where employees interface with others, handle supplies from third parties or use shared workspaces with limited capacity.

- Comply with regionally applicable return-to-work guidelines by designing, implementing and socializing new policies, process changes and physical modifications to work areas that will minimize supply-chain-related exposure to COVID-19.

Introduction
With COVID-19 cases on the rise again in the U.S., some organizations are slowing their return-to-work plans, and others may face the potential of being asked to shut down for a second time. Most organizations have adopted a hybrid return-to-work strategy whereby some employees will return (or have already returned) to the physical workplace, while other employees will remain working from home for the foreseeable future. Supply chain leaders are tasked with assessing and minimizing risk for those returning to the physical workplace and for making the call for individuals or groups to leave the workplace again. Leaders who have already begun returning to the workplace have been recognizing the importance of assessing the risks of operating during a protracted pandemic like COVID-19.

Supply chain’s central and physically connected role in managing third parties, incoming supplies, manufacturing, outbound logistics and fulfillment results in touchpoints that can pose risks to employee health and safety. Supply chain organizations have spent the last few months addressing touchpoints from either human interaction or surface contamination across the end-to-end supply chain, from receiving docks and plants all the way to the end user/customer. Keeping these supply chain employees (many of them hourly frontline workers who were deemed essential) safe has required widespread modifications to the existing processes and physical layouts that could otherwise introduce risk exposure. For salaried supply chain professionals, many supply chain leaders are finding their pre-COVID physical work environments and/or processes to be insufficient for protecting on-site employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, workplace design has evolved over the years to introduce efficiencies via open floor plans with smaller and/or shared workstations. However, since these changes usually created more density in the workplace, this becomes problematic now that social distancing is a workplace necessity.

According to respondents from a recent Gartner survey, several measures being put in place are more common than others in attempting to address this new social distancing challenge in the workplace, as shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Measures Organizations Have Put in Place to Help Employees Socially Distance in the Workplace**
This research addresses the importance of assessing these new workplace risks (particularly in office environments), designing potential modifications and implementing effective safety measures (like those described in Figure 1) that will minimize risk exposure for employees.

**Analysis**

**Identify Risks in Legacy Processes and Facility Layouts by Mapping Touchpoints, Workflows and Capacity Limitations**

When navigating through uncharted territory, like operating a business during the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptability clearly becomes a critical success factor. Since organizations began executing their return-to-work plans, it is clear that social distancing will be a workplace reality for an extended period. According to a recent Gartner poll, more than 80% of leaders projected a 12- to 18-month (or more) period of social distancing in the workplace. With such a protracted timeline, supply chain leaders must design a sustainable return-to-work experience that maximizes both physical and emotional safety for employees upon their return. For manufacturing environments, and factory settings in particular, be sure to review more in-depth information on this topic in
“Supply Chain Brief: Successful Return-to-Work Strategies for Factories.” For more depth on warehousing and distribution environments, see “Key Actions to Ensure Your Warehouse Can Operate in the Midst of a Major Disruption.”

Review, Monitor and Comply With National, State and Local Government Return-to-Work Guidelines

In order to identify risks in your legacy processes during times like this, it will be important to first understand the potential impact that new regulatory guidelines may have on your supply chain. Work with HR and legal counsel to keep up to date with the latest return-to-work guidelines from regulatory bodies like the CDC, WHO, OSHA and FDA, as well as applicable state and local governments. These organizations play a key role in providing return-to-work guidance for employers. These guidelines not only establish dates for reopening, or even shutting down again, but they also introduce new health and safety protocols for the workplace, like whether face coverings are mandatory. Collaborate with HR and legal leaders by reviewing and discussing potential COVID-related safety implications across the supply chain, with a goal of reopening the function in a way that promotes health and safety for all employees.

It is important to recognize that these regulatory guidelines often vary between different parts of the country. For supply chain leaders with an organizational footprint that spans multiple geographic locations, it will be crucial to be well-informed on return-to-work guidelines set forth by state and local governments for each of your applicable locations. One example where regulations may vary is regarding capacity limitations, so be sure to determine how many employees can legally return to each work area. Work with HR and corporate counsel to understand all the relevant differences between state and local guidelines for each location. From this baseline, you can effectively begin to assess, design and implement changes that will enable your employees’ safe return to the workplace. Determine the different needs or requirements between your locations, functions and business units.

Several regulatory return-to-work resources are available to reference:

- Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, companies in the U.S. are required to take reasonable precautions to maintain worker safety during the pandemic. Review the OSHA standards and guidelines.

- The World Health Organization recently laid out considerations for employers to prevent or reduce COVID-19 risks such as developing and agreeing to a response plan when organizing meetings and events.

- Refer to additional guidance from federal authorities, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) as a starting point.

- A list of state-by-state guidelines was recently published by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.
Identify Risks in Legacy Processes and Facility Layouts

Once you have a good regulatory baseline for applicable locations, you should begin to assess the end-to-end supply chain processes and physical layouts that may need to change due to increased risk of viral spread. You will undoubtedly find certain processes and portions of the physical workplace that naturally present employees with a higher risk for virus exposure, either by airborne means or by contamination of surfaces/supplies. Create process maps for all work areas and material flows wherever employees interface with others, handle supplies from third parties or use shared workspaces/surfaces because these areas are more likely to introduce exposure risk. Examples may include proximity to the receiving dock where incoming trucks and packages could be harboring the virus.

Mapping these (and similar) workflow processes will allow you to zero in on the most critical entry points so that you can have a laundry list of risks to mitigate. Examples might include shared equipment like forklifts and/or equipment in a warehouse setting that is regularly touched by multiple employees. Another example might include perpetual inventory management where multiple employees touch the same product in order to receive, store, deliver or use the supplies that came from third parties. For processes that you are less familiar with, engage with both employees and supervisors to map out typical activities and touchpoints across different roles and locations, assess the risks and come up with effective solutions. Also, be sure to measure and weigh the cost and time implications of making these changes. Consider a phased approach whereby initial changes are less costly and implemented quickly with future modifications being more costly and time-consuming to implement. An iterative, phased approach will also allow some flexibility since some investments may turn out to be temporary and others may be determined to be necessary on a longer-term basis.

Measure Facilities for Capacity Limitations and Chokepoints

Determine new capacity restrictions by working with HR and legal to understand changes to state and local guidelines for how many employees can be in each work area at any time while maintaining recommended social distances. Capacity restrictions, or the number of people who can safely occupy (and visit) each floor and/or work area, are now being calculated using social distancing as a new constraint. Use existing floor plans to measure each work area in supply chain office spaces, and adjacencies to manufacturing and distribution environments, to calculate the maximum capacity based on regionally applicable guidelines. In operational environments like warehousing, inventory management, assembly lines and supply distribution, review each physical...
environment separately to determine how operations would need to change in order to prevent the spread by using either physical barriers or social distancing.

Further, certain areas within a supply chain can become chokepoints, or limitations in facility layouts that make it difficult to ensure appropriate distances are maintained. Examine facility blueprints and floor plans to identify where current chokepoints may create increased risk of exposure because social distancing could be more difficult, like in hallways and doorways. Some chokepoints, like the number of loading docks, forklifts, permanent fixture workstations, or even bathroom stalls and parking spaces, could limit the number of employees who can return to the physical workplace. Identify these and other chokepoints for each supply chain office and operational area by reviewing the building floor plans to determine how many employees each area can accommodate. Use value stream mapping to identify these and to come up with potential workarounds that could mitigate these risks for all supply chain workflows and physical environments.

**Implement Physical Modifications and New Workplace Protocols to Minimize Employee Risk**

Minimize the risk of virus transmission across the supply chain organization by implementing physical modifications and by adopting new workplace protocols and/or policies that align with local guidelines from governing officials. Work with your HR, legal and employee health and safety leaders to determine the most appropriate solutions that consider the supply chain’s specific roles, responsibilities and workflow processes. We’ve identified six common actions that should be evaluated.

**Stagger Employee Shifts**

In supply chains with certain physical limitations, social distancing may only be feasible by staggering employees’ return to the workplace — having some office workers remain remote while others return to work.

**According to a Gartner survey, over three-fourths of organizations plan to stagger the return of employees to ensure smooth transition back to the workplace.**

— 2020 Gartner Return to the Workplace Benchmarking Against Your Peers Webinar Poll

However, this can be challenging, especially when employees are classified into roles that require certification for certain tasks, as the available numbers of these types of staff are usually limited.
While there are plenty of challenges in this area, there are also several ways to stagger the return to work. Some are assigning a small segment of employees to return on a full-time basis in the first “wave,” with more employees to be added as conditions gradually return to a new normal. Others are bringing more people back sooner by dividing employees into groups and staggering the times each group can come into the workplace. Others are staggering morning and afternoon shifts separated by a 30-minute gap to eliminate crossover risks. Essentially, the staggering strategy depends on the work and collaborative needs of the employees. These are three ways organizations can divide time between groups:

- **Daily staggering** — Open the workplace for 12 hours a day, with two six-hour shifts per day. Assign each group to one of the two shifts.

- **Weekly staggering** — Assign each group a few days per week during which they can come into the workplace.

- **Monthly staggering** — Allow groups to return to the workplace on a two-weeks on/two-weeks off rotation schedule.

Staggering will not be without its challenges. It must be expected that these types of changes will likely have at least some negative impact on collaboration, productivity, capacity and output/throughput. Traditionally, it is common for entire shifts of employees to come to work at the same time and overlap with those in the distribution center or factory floor. However, in the future, the typical handoff interactions that occur must be accounted for when scheduling under staggered schedules. Be sure to process-map how those handoffs will need to change accordingly.

**Equip Employees With Face Coverings and Other Personal Protective Equipment**

We are seeing broad adoption of rules requiring face coverings to be worn in the workplace any time a six-foot space is not able to be maintained between employees. Supply chain leaders should ensure that employees are equipped with face coverings and/or other personal protective equipment (as required by job duties) that might be necessary based on their role. They need to work with employee health and safety leaders to determine appropriate levels of personal protective equipment (PPE) based on the risk level by job category.

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus began, it has been widely agreed that N95 filtering facepiece respirators should not be purchased for, or provided to, employees whose job function or workplace hazards do not justify their use. This is important because hospitals in the U.S. and throughout the global supply chain continue to experience limited supply of this specialty type of PPE and also because OSHA maintains higher expectations for fit testing, training and maintenance of PPE. Common supplies used to protect employees include masks, face shields, gloves and safety glasses, especially for employees in job functions that could present increased risk of exposure.
Examples might include customer-facing roles or those who regularly interact with nonemployees. Other examples might be roles responsible for cleaning and disinfecting on-site locations or any employees conducting health screenings and/or temperature checks. Some organizations have elected to not supply face masks to employees but rather allow them to bring their own to work. However, to avoid potential legal risks, we recommend that supply chain leaders opt for a more conservative policy of providing masks, especially for employees who are in constrained environments with others and those who may come into contact with physical operations. As with disinfectant and cleaning supplies, take stock of the current supply of these items before reopening, and be sure to source adequate volumes to keep up with recurring demand for the time being.

Clean and Disinfect Shared Workstations

With the coronavirus mainly spreading through droplets, a lot of attention in preventing the spread of this virus has been placed on cleaning high-touch surfaces thoroughly and with increased frequency. This critical and recurring task is quickly becoming a portion of just about everyone's job for the foreseeable future. High-touch areas and common spaces throughout the supply chain can increase the risk of virus transmission, so be sure to implement appropriate protocols for cleaning and disinfecting in accordance with governmental guidelines. Establish cleaning protocols for the start and end of every meeting, requiring attendees to wipe down desks with disinfecting wipes whenever they sit down and leave the space. Be sure to also leave buffers between scheduled meetings to minimize overlap.

Develop and distribute a disinfection checklist by work area or workstation that includes a list of supplies, required disinfection procedures and frequency expectations. Common disinfection materials include hand soap, hand sanitizer, disinfectant spray, disinfectant wipes and paper towels. Take stock of the current supply of disinfection materials before reopening and continue to keep an ample supply. Increase cleaning requirements for common spaces and high-touch areas such as door handles, restrooms and elevator buttons. For deeper cleaning efforts, consider increasing disinfection measures at night and on the weekends. One potential bottleneck in increasing the frequency of cleaning services is likely the availability of staffing as other organizations look to increase cleaning frequency in their workplaces too. One way organizations can reduce employees' risk of infection when the frequency of cleaning services is limited is to reduce the use of shared workstations. The relatively recent trend of “hoteling” (i.e., multiple serial occupancy of a dense group of workstations) is on indefinite hold.

Implement strict guidance for ongoing cleaning and disinfecting of any workstations or physical assets that must remain shared. Implement a clean desk policy for shared workstations. For example, in the receiving department, be sure to provide ample disinfecting wipes at every common station, and require employees to wipe down desks whenever they sit down and leave the space. Compliance will lead to shared desks being among the cleanest spaces. Review CDC’s Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: CDC Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting
Reconfigure Supply Chain Workspaces to Enable Social Distancing

Use the calculations from your facility layouts discussed earlier and the reduced capacity limitations from government officials to effectively reduce capacities for all shared spaces like conference rooms. Work with facilities leadership to propose redesigns for the workplace, especially common spaces (e.g., conference rooms, kitchens, hoteling office space, breakrooms) to allow for adequate social distancing. Social distancing guidelines will be critical to minimizing the spread of COVID-19. However, according to a recent Gartner survey, one in five organizations (21%) are still unprepared for how they will implement a greater physical distance requirement between employees (see “COVID-19: Preparations Organizations Are Making for a Return to the Workplace”). The challenges organizations face in allowing greater distance between employees may include limited space within the work facility or constraints imposed by the inability to move work equipment like warehouse shelving and assembly lines.

To employ proper social distancing measures, increase the space between work areas. In some cases, effective reconfiguring of workspaces in the supply chain can be done easily by simply removing some chairs and monitors to increase spacing between desks and workstations. Work
with engineering to conduct layout and material flow studies to embed social distancing into the workflow or install plexiglass protection between more crowded workstations that cannot be modified. You can do this in-house if you have the tools, or you can use external service providers like those referenced in Gartner’s “Market Guide for Supply Chain Strategy and Operations Consulting.” Further, refer to Gartner’s “Toolkit: Stratify Your Warehouse Operations to Determine the Right-Fit Warehouse Management System and Improvement Strategy” to aid in evaluating the complexity of warehouses and distribution centers before finalizing design solutions.

Use Wayfinding, Supportive Signage and Other Visual Cues to Remind About and Encourage Social Distancing

Provide employees with visual cues that help define applicable social distances, such as marking a six-foot (in the U.S.) grid on the canteen floor using duct tape, or by marking off applicable radiiuses around each workstation. In other regions, such as Asia/Pacific and Europe, consult with regional guidelines. Arrows on the floor can also minimize exposure by designating a one-way flow for foot traffic to prevent employees from bumping into each other.

Create and display signs and markings to designate one-way traffic flow and safe distance when standing in common areas. Add tape to the floor to represent the six-foot distance if the acceptable social distance has not already been built into the factory layout. Social distancing tips will vary for different spaces: personal desks/workstations, shared desks/workstations, cafeteria, break rooms, conference rooms, offices, bathroom and lobby. Place signs that encourage employees to avoid touching surfaces and to wipe down any surfaces touched. Refer to the facility signage section of Lear’s Safe Work Playbook for some customizable examples.

Restrict Access or Capacity Limitations for Certain Areas or Shared Equipment

In designing new workplace protocols that will enable social distancing, physical modifications may be necessary. Extra precautions may be necessary in shared spaces or where supplies/surfaces are likely to be touched by more than one employee. However, before investing in such changes, be sure to evaluate alternatives that may be less costly and still effective. For example, supply chain leaders should determine whether access to certain areas should become restricted to a single employee for a given shift. One example might include assigning particular equipment (in warehouses, a forklift would be an example) to specific employees. These types of restrictions may create significant inefficiencies, so be sure to weigh the pros and cons of every decision in light of minimizing the risk of exposure. At the same time, do your best to maintain effectiveness and efficiency in the workplace. Use of spaces such as small huddle rooms, meeting rooms, scrum spaces, kitchen, cafeterias and gyms will all change when employees return to work. Meeting spaces can be repurposed as one-person offices. Communal amenities, such as gyms, may close in the short run. Cafeterias will need to be adapted to improve safety. This means that salad bars and self-serve stations will likely close, and plexiglass partitions may need to be installed for other food services. Further, restrict the use of communal spaces where social distancing cannot be maintained and physical modifications are impossible or too costly.
Recommended by the Authors

Supply Chain Brief: Successful Return-to-Work Strategies for Factories
An Executive's Guide to Returning to the Workplace
COVID-19: Preparations Organizations Are Making for a Return to the Workplace
Tracking Coronavirus-Related Regulations
Key Actions to Ensure Your Warehouse Can Operate in the Midst of a Major Disruption
Tool: How to Build a Reopening the Workplace Playbook
Return-to-the-Workplace Essentials
Maintaining Physical Safety in the Workplace
Toolkit: Stratify Your Warehouse Operations to Determine the Right-Fit Warehouse Management System and Improvement Strategy
What Employees Want: Helping Employees Get Back to Work After COVID-19

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