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How can we best protect our employees from Coronavirus exposure in the workplace?

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Many of us remember very well when the term “SARS” entered our vocabularies in 2003. The effect of SARS in Canada was considerable – 251 cases resulted in 43 deaths; only three countries experienced more of an impact than Canada.

Workplaces, hospitals and government agencies were all faced with unique and unfamiliar challenges and threats.

Late last year, the world began hearing of another outbreak – this time, the Coronavirus or COVID-19 – which originated in Wuhan, China but has now begun to spread beyond China’s borders.

At the time of this writing, there have been over 87,000 infections worldwide, and while the World Health Organization (“WHO”) has not yet declared a pandemic (defined as a worldwide spread of a new disease to which most people do not have an immunity), experts believe the disease will continue to spread. While there have been fewer than 10 cases in Toronto, much attention is being paid to best practices to ensure that the spread of the virus is

contained. What can managers and business owners do to protect their employees and their businesses?

Communication is Key

It is fair to say that there is no such thing as too much communication when people are on edge about an unfamiliar and potentially frightening situation like a possible pandemic. Most people have access to all the publicly available information; however, communication should be customized to how the organization is handling developments and how employees are required to conduct themselves in the context of their roles at their organization.

Proactive Good Health and Management Practices

Frequent and thorough hand washing remains the single most important action anyone can take in staying well. Reminders to employees in this regard, along with the provision of containers of hand sanitizers, should be frequent. Specifically, people should be reminded to thoroughly clean hands after taking public transit. Wiping down surfaces, including computers, doorknobs and garbage receptacles, with anti-bacterial wipes will assist in keeping your premises as germ-free as possible.

It is also a good idea for offices to track all visitors to the premises, in the event there is a possible issue of infection. Knowing who has been in and out and when will assist in ensuring that anyone who might have been exposed is informed on a timely basis.

Obligations of Ontario Employers

The Occupational Health and Safety Act (“OHS”) requires that all Ontario employers ensure they are always providing a healthy and safe workplace. In addition to the good health practices set out above, employers should encourage staff not to attend the office if they are ill or if they have traveled to or been in contact with someone who has travelled to a high-risk area. Strong consideration should also be given to restricting non-essential business travel. If someone becomes ill, company policies on sick time and short-term disability coverage should be clearly explained to the impacted employee. While communication is important for the safety of all,

business owners and managers should also be mindful of the importance of keeping personal medical information strictly confidential.

Getting the Work Done

While the health and wellbeing of staff should always be paramount, there is also an imperative to continue to operate businesses despite possible disruptions. With some accommodation, many roles can be performed remotely. Management can consult with IT support personnel to determine what would be required in order to facilitate remote work.

Workplaces, medical facilities and governments have learned a great deal since the SARS outbreak. There is a greater understanding of how to contain transmission and more resources in terms of the ability to keep businesses running despite any absences or other disruptions. Taking proactive steps to keep employees both healthy

and productive will assist in ensuring the COVID-19 outbreak passes with minimal impact on your business.

Crowe Soberman’s Human Resources Consulting Group is available to assist with any matters concerning the day to day operations, growth or strategic direction of your business. Please contact Susan Hodgkinson at 416 963 7172 if you have any questions.

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Connect with the Author

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