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Reopening safely: Sample practices from essential businesses

The safety protocols of hospitals, grocery stores, and other establishments that stayed open during the COVID-19 pandemic can offer ideas for businesses preparing to welcome employees and customers back.

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After weeks of shutdowns and remote working, businesses around the world are gradually resuming on-site operations. Of course, some businesses—those considered essential—kept their doors open and operated at full capacity, even at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the list of essential businesses varies by jurisdiction, in most cases it includes healthcare facilities, pharmacies, grocery stores, convenience stores, banks, and gas stations, as well as delivery, sanitation, plumbing, and electrical-repair services. Those businesses offer valuable lessons for companies in any sector considering reopening: How does a business stay operational while keeping employees and customers safe and preventing new COVID-19 outbreaks?

Work environments differ vastly from each other, and there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. That said, as we studied the safety practices of essential businesses during the pandemic, two principles clearly stood out as effective: tailoring safety measures to the unique business environment and implementing them across the full range of business activities (not just on-site operations). This article describes several practices that essential businesses have adopted, some of which are applicable in other sectors as well. These practices are well worth considering as the business world charts a path toward the next normal.[1]

Different workplaces, different risks

Some workplace environments are easier to control than others. Exhibit 1 illustrates six types of work environments based on the proximity of exposure (how closely and how long people interact with each other in person) and the extent of exposure (how many other people an individual tends to encounter in a typical workday). Some businesses may operate in more than one of these work environments—for instance, a retail chain has stores but might also have warehouses and offer delivery services. Businesses must adjust safety measures to fit the specific environments in which they operate.

In addition, businesses must implement safety measures across the full range of activities associated with their operations, including activities that take place outside the work environment. Businesses must also define protocols and policies for pre-entry, travel to and from work locations, use

Businesses must define protocols and policies for pre-entry, travel to and from work locations, use of common spaces, and post-infection.
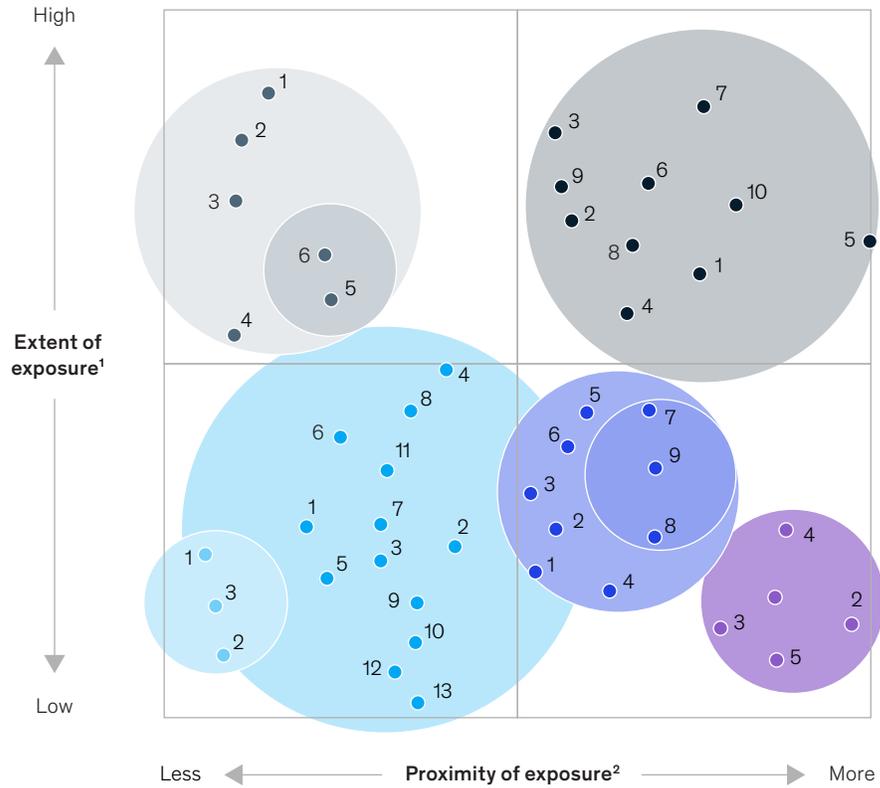
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[1] Shubham Singhal and Kevin Sneader, "From thinking about the next normal to making it work: What to stop, start, and accelerate," May 15, 2020, McKinsey.com.

Exhibit 1

Risk levels vary across different types of work environments.

Proximity and extent of exposure in select work environments

Significant public interaction
1 Airports
2 Banks
3 Grocery stores
4 Gyms and fitness studios
5 Hospitals
6 Hotels
7 Public transit
8 Restaurants
9 Retail stores
10 Stadiums and theme parks

Physical contact required
1 Barbershops and hair salons
2 Nursing homes
3 Performing-arts venues
4 Physical-therapy offices
5 Spas

Large confined spaces
1 Engineering labs
2 Factories
3 Schools (K–12)
4 Sports arenas
5 Universities
6 Warehouses

Large confined spaces (low compliance)
7 Day-care centers
8 Mental-care facilities
9 Preschools

Professional working spaces
1 Call centers
2 Large offices
3 Public-service functions
4 Small offices

Professional working spaces (physical presence required)
5 Air-traffic-control towers
6 Research labs

Isolated
1 Artisanal work
2 Construction
3 Farming
4 Firefighting
5 Landscaping
6 Mail delivery
7 Moving services
8 Police
9 Real estate
10 Repair services
11 Sanitation
12 Trucking
13 Waste management

Solo
1 Fine arts
2 Graphic design
3 Programming

[1] Number of unique contacts in a typical workday.
[2] How closely and how long people interact in person within the work environment.

of common spaces, and post-infection. Exhibit 2 can provide guidance for business leaders as to the levels of risk associated with work-related activities and the types of safety measures to implement.

Actions to consider

Based on our recent research and our work with leading companies around the world, we have compiled a list of some of the safety measures that essential businesses across a range of industries have put in place. This list of practices could be helpful to business owners and operators as they seek to reopen their workspaces.

Pre-entry

Before reopening, employers can take measures to educate employees on new protocols, identify at-risk individuals, and provide additional resources to make the return-to-work experience safe and orderly. The following issues merit consideration:
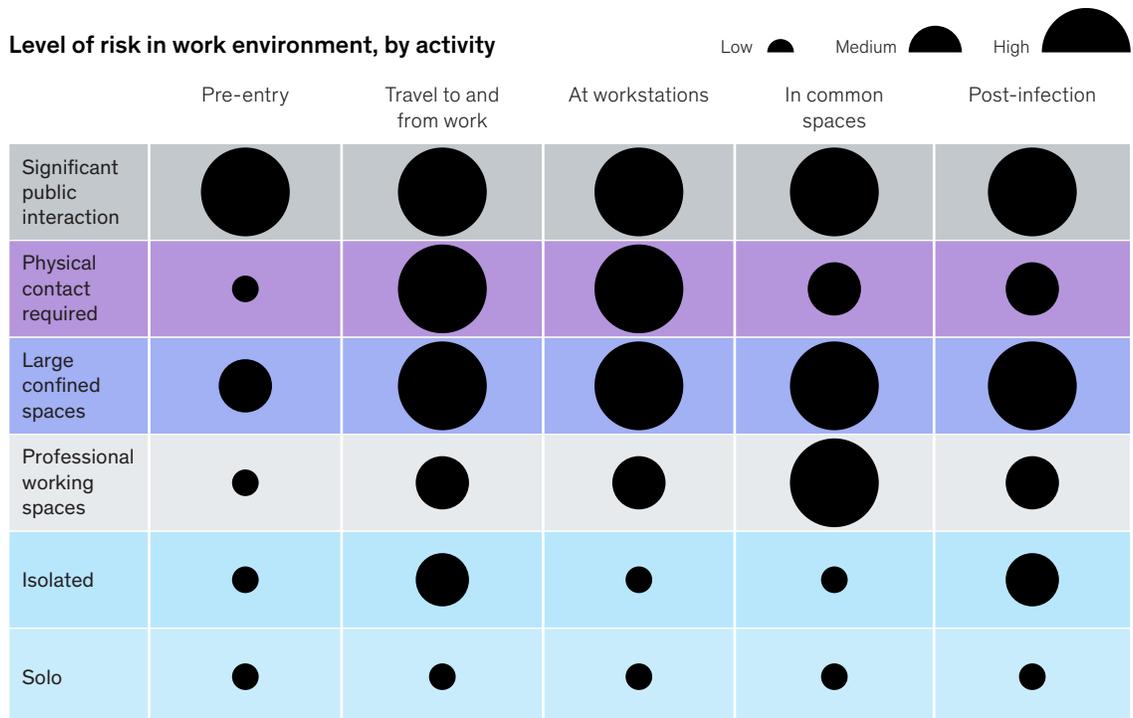
— *Shift to remote work.* The most obvious risk-mitigation measure is to continue remote work where possible. Even at businesses where much of the work cannot be done remotely (such as grocery stores), company leaders have made significant efforts toward contactless services. For instance, grocery chains introduced contactless pickup in their parking lots. Manufacturers moved functions that don't require access to on-site equipment (functions such as finance, procurement, and marketing) to a remote model. Physical therapists are leveraging telehealth and at-home, virtual exercise routines.

— *At-scale testing.* In places where COVID-19 testing is widely available, companies have found it a highly effective way of protecting employees' health.[2] Electronics manufacturer Foxconn, with more than one million workers across Asia, has tested more than 50,000 employees.

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[2] Mohammed Behnam, Li Han, Pooja Kumar, and Shubham Singhal, "Major challenges remain in COVID-19 testing," May 1, 2020, McKinsey.com.

Exhibit 2

Businesses must implement safety measures across the full range of work-related activities.

Level of risk in work environment, by activity   Low ◗ Medium ◖ High ◗

	Pre-entry	Travel to and from work	At workstations	In common spaces	Post-infection
Significant public interaction	High	High	High	High	High
Physical contact required	Low	High	High	Medium	Medium
Large confined spaces	Medium	High	High	High	High
Professional working spaces	Low	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
Isolated	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Medium
Solo	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

E-commerce giant Amazon has pledged to test all of its employees and build its own COVID-19 test center.

— *Symptom assessment.* In places where tests haven't been available, businesses have used various forms of symptom assessment to screen for high-risk employees, who they then prohibit from coming to work. For example, Alibaba employees must fill out a daily health questionnaire on an internal app before they travel to the company's headquarters office; they must then present the color-coded results to get past building security. Similarly, several companies in South Korea are requiring employees to fill out online health self-assessment surveys every Sunday before coming to work the following day. A US ad agency segmented its employees into three risk levels and staggered its return-to-work plan accordingly: level-one employees, those who have tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies, can return to work right away. Level-two employees, those younger than 65 and without any health conditions, are in the next wave allowed back into their offices. Finally, the return of level-three employees—those who are immunocompromised or aged 65 or older—has been deferred until further notice.

— *Training and education.* The experience of essential businesses suggests that softer safety measures, such as training and education, played a significant role in instilling new habits among employees and customers. Several US companies have developed online training and education modules to familiarize employees with the new safety and hygiene protocols before they return to work. In China, some corporate offices are going as far as denying workplace access to those who haven't completed the training; they're also requiring employees to pass an app-based test on the new safety measures. Internet giant Tencent produced a video for employees to watch before coming back to their workplaces. The video covers basic information on COVID-19 and explains the company's return-to-work process in detail.

— *Childcare.* Challenges related to childcare have been among the biggest impediments to the availability and productivity of essential workers during the pandemic. Childcare is therefore a major focus area for both employers and local authorities. Some hospitals arranged for medical students to provide childcare for essential employees; caregivers kept children in the same groups every day to minimize potential exposure. Companies and local governments have been offering childcare subsidies or reimbursing workers for virtual babysitting services: remote babysitters entertain children with virtual activities for up to 90 minutes, giving their parents time to get some work done. A few governments have also granted emergency licenses for day-care facilities. The licenses allow day-care centers, subject to specific safety measures, to care for the children of essential workers during the pandemic.

— *Mental health.* Businesses are helping employees take care of not just their physical safety and well-being but also their mental health. Companies are starting to provide mental-health tools—providing free subscriptions to meditation apps, for instance. Many universities and businesses are offering on-demand video counseling to employees and constituents.

Travel to and from work

Businesses should account for the various modes of transportation that employees use to travel to and from their workplaces. The mix typically includes public transportation, private or individual transport (such as cars, bikes, and walking), and, for some companies, employer-sponsored transportation. Equally important, businesses must introduce new safety measures for entry into and exit from the workplace. The following are some issues to consider:

— *Transportation.* To minimize the risk of employees' exposure to infection during transit, some New York City hospitals have arranged for organized transportation (such as shuttle buses), encouraged carpooling, or subsidized ride sharing

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for staff. Healthcare facilities with more operational flexibility, such as dental offices and primary-care physicians' offices, have adjusted their working days and hours to minimize the employee commute during rush hours.

— *Temperature checks.* Many establishments in China and in the US states that have reopened are requiring temperature checks for all employees and customers upon entry. Some are stationing employees at the entrance and equipping them with contactless thermometers; others have adopted automated temperature checks. Taipei Rapid Transit has set up infrared thermometers in its most crowded stations. Passengers with temperatures higher than 38°C are prohibited from entering the station.

— *Staggered entry and exit.* To minimize crowding at entrances and exits, some factories in China have established staggered start times for each workday: employees arrive in waves every ten or 20 minutes. Many US grocery stores are restricting the number of shoppers they allow in stores at one time and have created decals on the sidewalks leading up to the store to guide customers in lining up six feet apart. Similarly, some small and medium-size businesses are limiting the number of people inside their facilities by seeing customers only by appointment (no walk-ins) and asking customers to wait in their cars or outside the facility until they receive a text inviting them to come in. US amusement parks have replaced physical queuing with virtual waiting areas in digital apps.

To limit close contact among children, parents, and staff members, US day-care centers have set staggered curbside drop-off/pickup times, allowing only one parent or guardian—who is required to wear a face covering—to drop off or pick up each child.

— *New cleaning protocols.* Businesses must significantly enhance their cleaning protocols. For example, grocers and other retailers are now routinely making hand sanitizer or disinfecting wipes available at store entrances. Nail spas and salons are requiring customers to wash their hands before and after appointments.

— *Protective equipment.* Entry into and exit from a workplace are opportunities to remind individuals about safety protocols and enforce the wearing of personal protective equipment (PPE). At one Chinese retailer, customers are greeted by employees carrying signs encouraging shoppers to wear masks. Many business establishments across the globe don't allow customers to enter unless they're wearing face coverings. Medical facilities have created strict rules regarding PPE, with dedicated rooms for healthcare workers to change their clothing at the start and end of their workdays.

At work

Enforcing physical-distancing protocols is easier in some work environments than in others. Essential businesses have had to adapt quickly during the pandemic to keep their employees safe at work. Here are some of the ways they've done it:

— *Ongoing reminders and conditional service.* Many US grocers have created signage for one-way aisles; floor decals indicate where shoppers should stand when lining up for checkout. Kroger has been making in-store loudspeaker announcements about healthy habits and urging shoppers to keep their distance. Some companies have been sending their employees reminders to sanitize workstations every few hours. A real-estate company in New York, RXR Realty, is launching an app that tracks whether an employee is at least six feet away from another person. The intent is to incentivize positive behavior among employees and to monitor compliance with physical-distancing rules. Meanwhile, restaurants in China have introduced a range of new conditions for serving customers, including spacing tables farther apart to adhere to local distancing guidelines, using conveyor belts to transport food to customers, and requiring customers to wear masks when not eating or drinking.

— *Enhanced hygiene protocols.* In work environments where people are required to be in close physical proximity to each other, the focus has been on dramatically enhancing cleaning protocols. Several companies have installed hand-washing stations in high-traffic areas at their facilities. Grocers are assigning employees to sanitize shopping carts after each use; gyms and hotels are doing the same with fitness equipment. Other companies have upgraded their air-filtration systems. Deep cleaning is particularly important in facilities where individuals may have trouble following a set of safety guidelines, such as day-care centers, schools with young children, and institutions caring for people with disabilities. For example, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that day-care centers keep the same groups of children and care providers in the same rooms every day. In addition, the CDC recommends separating those who are at higher risk of exposure—such as children of first responders or healthcare workers—into their own classrooms; spacing out mats and placing children head to toe during naptime to reduce high-risk contact; discarding toys that can't be disinfected; and creating soiled-toy bins filled with soapy water for toys that have been placed in a child's mouth.

— *Workspace redesign.* Many US grocers and convenience stores—as well as manufacturing plants where workers are required to stand close together on an assembly line—have installed plexiglass partitions at checkouts or workstations. At telecom company BT, call-center workers now sit two meters apart and walkways have been designated to be one way. Cushman & Wakefield, a global commercial real-estate-services company, has designed the 6 Feet Office concept, which it has implemented in its Amsterdam headquarters and across offices in China. The design includes barriers between desks, bold circles on the carpets around desks indicating where people can stand, and increased signage—all to encourage physical distancing.

— *Working in consistent teams.* Chinese food-delivery company Meituan divided employees into three teams, allowing only one team in the office each day. Several US health systems have separated staff working in COVID-19 zones from staff working in non-COVID-19 zones, and have made changes to their care models (such as batching activities or using mobile devices to conduct hospital rounds), to minimize the risk of virus spread and of nurse and physician shortages. In Denmark, primary schools adjusted their operating model by splitting up children into groups of about a dozen, with each group taught by the same teacher every school day. Each group has assigned start and end times and holds separate classes, mealtimes, and playground activities.

In common spaces
Businesses have been taking measures to eliminate or at least minimize gatherings in common spaces. US grocery stores have closed down high-contact parts of their stores, such as food courts and self-serve food stations. At the Pentagon, strategy meetings regularly attended by 40 to 50 people take place across three rooms, with video-conferencing in each room. Such an arrangement allows individuals to address all attendees and collaborate in smaller groups, without crowding into

a single conference room. Petrochemical group Sinochem in Beijing delivers food to employees' desks to prevent crowding in lunchrooms. At a Foxconn factory in China, workers eat at cafeteria tables separated by tall dividers. Some Chinese manufacturers have staggered lunch breaks and on-site meal offerings. Others, including electronics manufacturer TCL, require employees to scan QR codes upon entering common spaces, such as cafeterias, thus facilitating contact tracing in case of an infection. Corporate offices throughout Asia are installing motion-control doors and removing shared appliances from office kitchens and pantries.

Post-infection

Given the high transmission rates of the coronavirus, every business must have plans and processes in place in the event that an employee or customer gets infected. It's critical that a business clearly communicates its post-infection processes to all levels of the organization.

— *Contact tracing.* The capabilities for contact tracing—whether through the use of technology, a team of human contact tracers, or both— have been important for sustaining safe working environments for essential businesses.[3] Some telecom companies in Asia are supporting their governments in contact tracing. When a confirmed COVID-19 case is identified, the infected person's location history is tracked, and the government sends SMS alerts to people who may have come in contact with that person. In San Francisco, a joint partnership of the city Department of Public Health; the city government; the University of California,

San Francisco; and mobile-technology provider Dimagi has recruited more than 250 public-health workers to help with contact tracing. Those workers conduct interviews with individuals who have been infected and help trace and notify contacts. Each location should choose contact-tracing solutions consistent with local privacy norms and standards.

— *Clear triggers for returning to work.* Businesses have defined clear activation triggers and protocols for handling an infection or outbreak. For example, hospitals seal off and deep clean areas that may have had virus exposure; individuals who may be infected are placed in isolation. Some US businesses have defined return-to-work triggers for infected employees. Common triggers include multiple negative tests for COVID-19, a positive antibody test, and a two-week period of self-quarantine during which the person shows no symptoms.

As businesses prepare to reopen, setting up a plan-ahead team to guide and accelerate decision making may be appropriate.[4] The team's responsibilities will include critically evaluating all return-to-work policies and protocols, stress-testing workforce safety interventions, and reviewing and refining processes after implementation. Because every day brings new developments in the fight against COVID-19, a plan-ahead team can help a company adapt and react quickly—and, ultimately, be better positioned to protect the health and safety of employees and customers alike.

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3 Molly Bode, Matt Craven, Markus Leopoldseder, Paul Rutten, and Matt Wilson, "Contact tracing for COVID-19: New considerations for its practical application," May 8, 2020, McKinsey.com.
4 Yuval Atsmon, Chris Bradley, Martin Hirt, Mihir Mysore, Nicholas Northcote, Sven Smit, and Robert Uhlaner, "Getting ahead of the next stage of the coronavirus crisis," April 2020, McKinsey.com.