

# Is your office space Covid-19 ready?

By [Bongani Nhlapo](#)

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Earlier this year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak of a new coronavirus disease in Hubei Province, China, to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. WHO stated there is a high risk of the 2019 coronavirus disease (Covid-19) spreading to other countries around the globe. WHO and public health authorities around the world are taking action to contain the Covid-19 outbreak.

However, long-term success cannot be taken for granted. All sections of our society – including businesses and employers – must play a role if we are to manage the spread of this disease.

## Advent of the new normal

It's time for us to accept that this pandemic and social isolation are here for a while. But in addition to that, our reality has changed, possibly for good. This more so in the workplace - agitators of change have had boardroom and academic discussions for many years on how technological advancement and evolution (read fourth industrial revolution) is affecting people and, more specifically, how we relate to the world. It took a deadly quick-spreading virus to catapult humanity into a forced new state of normal.

The perspective of the world of work has changed, possibly forever:

- How both employers and employees view “my working space” has changed,
- The definition of “work teams” will never be the same,
- Access to internet connectivity is quickly being recognised as “a human right”,
- Managing performance by “output” is now a strategic business discussion,
- “Personal hygiene” and “social distancing protocols” will make up permanent agenda items of organisational governance meetings,
- Organisations will in most instances be compelled to review their current “operating models”, which means a lot of “standard operating procedures/processes” will or must change, and
- Talent retention and attraction conversations will assume a totally new trajectory as organisations think anew about critical skills definitions.



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## Compliance with Covid-19 regulations - a new balance sheet item

Most employers, especially small medium and micro enterprises (SMME), will find compliance to the Covid-19 regulatory framework extremely onerous and perhaps even costly. It is, however, very encouraging to see how South Africans from all walks of life have chosen to embrace the necessary and elusive balance between “preserving life and protecting livelihoods”.

The legislative framework governing workplaces in relation to Covid-19 is made up of the following acts:

The Occupational Health and Safety Act, Act 85 of 1993, as amended, read with the Hazardous Biological Agents Regulations. Section 8 (1) of the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act, Act 85 of 1993, as amended, requires the employer to provide and maintain as far as is reasonably practicable a working environment that is safe and without risks to the health of employees. Specifically section 8(2)(b) requires steps such as may be reasonably practicable to eliminate or mitigate any hazard or potential hazard before resorting to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Employers should prepare themselves and their employees as far in advance as possible of potentially worsening outbreak conditions. Lack of continuity planning can result in a cascade of failures as employers attempt to address challenges of Covid-19 with insufficient resources and employees who might not be adequately trained for jobs they may have to perform under pandemic conditions.



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The World Health Organisation (WHO) has advocated basic measures for individuals to follow, to reduce their risk of contracting Covid-19. These include:

- Frequent washing of hands with the recommended sanitiser or soap,
- Correct coughing and sneezing techniques, and
- Avoiding contact with sick individuals.

As the South African economy is gradually coming back into full swing through the various stages of reduced restrictions, the South African government, through the Department of Labour, has provided minimum compliance guidelines to employers to keep infection levels down and protect lives in the workplace.



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To comply with the Government Gazette 43096 of 15 March 2020, employers must:

- Appoint or nominate an employee as the designate “compliance officer”,
- Develop a Covid-19 Return to Work Company Policy that must be strictly adhered to and administered by the compliance officer.

This policy will, amongst others, cover the following salient issues:

- Workplace social distancing protocols,
- Provision of all required PPE,
- Office hygiene prescribed conduct,
- Conducting of daily risk and hazard assessments and keeping record,
- Employee testing protocols,
- What to do in case an employee displays symptoms of Covid-19,
- Clearly define the responsibilities of all parties in the workplace,
- Keep record of risk and hazard inspections,
- Develop a detailed Covid-19 Ready Workplace Plan. The workplace plan is developed in a bid to facilitate the proper

and effective application of the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Covid-19 Direction on Health and Safety in the workplace.

We are reminded that it is through proactive action and planning that organisations and their employees can successfully resume business whilst protecting lives.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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