

Is Your COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan Setting You up for Success?

How Employers Can Optimize Employee Compliance

October 22, 2020

Employers across multiple industries are currently formalizing return-to-work policies and COVID-19 workplace safety plans. While formal safety protocols can help mitigate virus spread in the workplace, a written safety policy alone, or in conjunction with an employee education program, cannot guarantee effectiveness. Decades of human factors research demonstrate that even the most thorough safety protocols may have limited impact simply due to typical human behavior.

For any workplace safety policy to be effective, employees must seek out, notice, understand, and accept information. This, in turn, depends on personal factors such as motivations, experiences, and beliefs, as well as situational factors such as ease or difficulty of behavior and social context. Though no protocol can guarantee full compliance, it is important for employers to consider both personal and situational factors when evaluating return-to-work policies and workplace safety plans meant to protect the health and safety of their employees.

Failures of Information Seeking

The human factors team at Exponent has collected survey data on individuals' understanding of COVID-19 risks and related protective behaviors. The data show that individuals are habituating to the risks associated with COVID-19 as restrictions extend throughout 2020: that is, their perception of the risks posed by the pandemic has diminished, despite likely being more informed about those risks than they were several months ago.

Such risk habituation can also manifest in a workplace setting. Employees may have had prior benign experiences when behaviors deemed risky by an employer's policy—such as failing to wear a face covering in the office—did not result in illness or other negative consequences

(e.g., Elledge et al., 2008). Individuals may also begin to feel “disaster fatigue,” a lowered interest in or decreased fear of natural disasters over time (Elledge et al., 2008).

Relatedly, individuals may feel they already know everything they need to know about COVID-19, as suggested by the responses in Exponent's survey data, which can result in a reduced appetite for new information. Failures to continuously seek out information over time are problematic given the ever-evolving state of knowledge about protective measures and disease transmission in the current pandemic. For example, many may still believe old guidance on not wearing face masks in public because they have not sought updated information on the benefits of masks. When people fail to seek new information, the likelihood of noncompliance—if only in certain situations—increases.

Addressing Situational Influences

Even employees who understand and believe the information in an employer's safety policy, and who have every intention of complying, can still fail to follow safety guidelines because of the prevailing context. For example, employees who understand the requirement to wear face coverings in common areas like conference rooms may forget to put one on when leaving their

Is Your COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan Setting You up for Success?

individual offices. Although personal factors are out of an employer's control, they often interact with situational factors that give employers opportunities to influence compliance.

Social Modeling

Studies of self-protective behaviors such as seatbelt use in automobiles (Hong et al., 1998) or home isolation in prior epidemics (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013) demonstrate that individuals around others who comply with written warnings and safety plans are more likely to adhere to such warnings and plans themselves. The converse is also true: an employee working beside a colleague who is not wearing a face covering or using hand sanitizer despite their shared employer's requirements may feel singled out when complying with the safety policy. This is especially true if the employee views that individual as an authoritative figure in the workplace. Because of this phenomenon, compliance is likely to be greatest when all workers model safe behavior, regardless of their role, their level of responsibility, or the risk associated with their job function.

Cost of Compliance

Both opportunity and convenience "costs" can negatively affect employee compliance with workplace safety plans. Studies demonstrate that even a marginal amount of required effort will reduce the likelihood that individuals comply with an employer's guidelines (e.g., Dingus et al., 1991). Exponent's data suggest some costs associated with wearing a face covering in the current pandemic include discomfort and time spent obtaining or laundering masks. When crafting workplace safety policies, employers may seek to remove costs to compliance whenever possible to maximize the likelihood of employee compliance. For example, if wearing masks and routinely sanitizing hands is required, employers may consider placing mask and hand sanitizing stations in immediate proximity to employees' workstations.

Degree of Enforcement

Studies of self-protective behaviors demonstrate that compliance is highest when individuals are held accountable for their behaviors (Betsch et al., 2020). If wearing face coverings and using hand sanitizer are strictly enforced, employees' motivation to comply may outweigh the cost of their own discomfort or inconvenience. One study found that the implementation of mandatory mask policies in Germany in April and May of 2020 was associated with an increase from approximately 25% compliance to over 80% compliance, despite an overall low rate of personal acceptance for wearing masks (Betsch et al., 2020).

How Exponent Can Help

Exponent's human factors scientists have helped employers evaluate workplace safety and address factors in employee behavior for decades. Alongside our multi-disciplinary team of life sciences and public health experts, we can proactively evaluate employer policies, identify protocol or compliance gaps, and address workplace complaints in the context of the information that was available at a given point in time.

References

- Betsch, C., Korn, L., Sprengholz, P., Felgendreff, L., Eitze, S., Bohm, R. (2020). Social and behavioral consequences of mask policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PNAS*.
- Braunack-Mayer, A., Tooher, R., Collins, J. E., Street, J. M., & Marshall, H. (2013). Understanding the school community's response to school closures during the H1N1 2009 influenza pandemic. *BMC Public Health*, 13(1), 344.
- Dingus, T. A., Hathaway, J. A., & Hunn, B. P. (1991). A most critical warning variable: Two demonstrations of the powerful effects of cost on warning compliance. In *Proceedings of the Human Factors Society Annual Meeting*, 35(15), 1034-1038.
- Elledge, B. L., Brand, M., Regens, J. L., & Boatright, D. T. (2008). Implications of public understanding of avian influenza for fostering effective risk communication. *Health Promotion Practice*, 9(4), 545-595.
- Hong, S., Kim, D., Kritkasky, K., & Rashid, R. (1998). Effects of imitative behavior on seat belt usage: Three field observational studies. In *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting*, 42(15), 1093-1097.



Caroline Crump, Ph.D.
Human Factors
Managing Scientist
Los Angeles
(310) 754-2768
ccrump@exponent.com



Young Bui, Ph.D.
Human Factors
Managing Scientist
Denver
(303) 802-3408
dbui@exponent.com

Alexandria | Atlanta | Austin | Bowie | Chicago | Denver | Detroit | Houston | Irvine | Los Angeles | Maynard | Menlo Park | Miami | Natick | New York | Oakland | Pasadena | Philadelphia | Phoenix | Sacramento | Seattle | Warrenville | Washington D.C. | United Kingdom | Switzerland | China | Singapore