

Returning staff to skyscrapers

Key issues for financial services
firms in post COVID-19 office
planning – a focus on Germany

June 2, 2020

Step through the doors of any trading floor and you are likely to find yourself in a densely packed open-plan office full of bustling noise from people, phones, business television and sound boxes sending out information over banks of stacked desks. Head to any other floor of a typical financial services firm and the situation may be the same, albeit with possibly less noise. Proximity to information and people generates efficiency for financial services, especially in trading and investment banking. That was certainly the consensus in the world prior to COVID-19.

At a time when, even if lockdowns are being loosened, employees in financial services firms are being asked to do more together, albeit in a socially distanced setting, people, processes and policies are coming under increasing pressure, regardless of how they have been adapted to cope with the present pandemic.

Open-plan offices facilitate collaboration and fuel deep thinking but, as in past pandemics, possibly also the transmission of disease. Part of the challenge in reopening with some semblance of a return to normal includes looking at the future of the office and reevaluating physical proximity tolerance levels. As has been seen in most jurisdictions, the majority of contemporary office set-ups were not planned with pandemics or transmissibility paths in mind. This raises questions not only for the future of open plan offices with social distancing, but also more mundane and operational issues, such as how to get large numbers of employees up elevators. The larger the number of employees returning to the workplace, the larger the operational challenges for prevention measures, and more tellingly, the higher the number, the higher the risk. With COVID-19, it really is a numbers game after all.

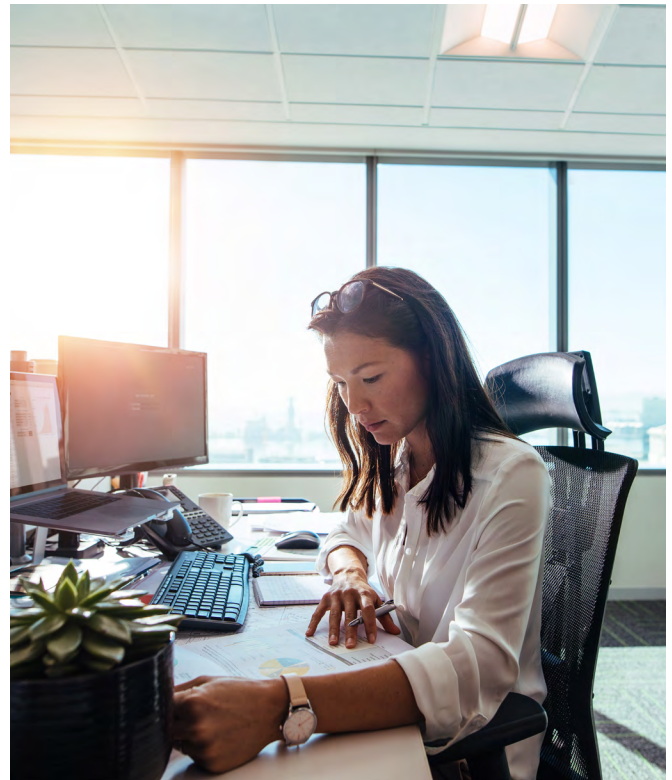
So what needs to change?

Some important questions for all

So do these considerations highlighted above require the return of the (gloved) elevator attendant to minimize the amount of people touching keypads? How else can and should one deal with other bottlenecks, such as bathrooms and other common areas? And can employers monitor the health of employees, such as checking temperature on arrival, requiring masks to be worn in the office and/or providing active health monitoring and testing in the office, in addition to encouraging the use of tracing apps? How much can and should employers do to reduce fears of staff, while protecting privacy but also doing so in a manner that minimizes potential negligence actions. Equally, can landlords and large occupiers request such measures on a building-wide basis? What of the future of building design for existing but also new projects? Will offices need more (marked) one-way entry points to reduce congestion and will staggering arrival and departure times (by floor) perhaps become the new normal to take account of reducing congestion, with reduced capacity of people carried per elevator? And what of cleaning of goods and materials or vehicles entering offices or worksites?

These logistics raise a number of legal, regulatory and reputational issues that clients may need to consider tactically but also strategically. These issues are likely to apply regardless of whether employers have already split key workers into rotating teams/shifts or even whether they move to more multi-location strategies over the longer term. These issues also raise the questions of what to do and how to engage with those parts of the workforce who may be required to continue to work from home for the majority of the remaining year (or longer), due to a range of reasons.

Equally, firms will probably need to focus increasingly on clear and consistent communication of their “values” to internal and external stakeholders. This is necessary not only to communicate prevention planning and safety measures but more importantly to strengthen the sense of trust. Proactive communication of values internally can prevent fear and possible discrimination setting in. If values and preventive measures are clearly and consistently communicated, a colleague’s cough or sneeze in the office should not be mistaken for a serious condition and that person should not be singled out as a potential virus carrier.



Who can go back to the office when, and who works remotely for longer?

Rapid retrenchment from offices to “home offices” (i.e. working from home or “WFH”) seems to have been successful for a majority of business areas across financial services. Aside from operational challenges with network capacity and access to tools, the core change has been the increased compliance concerns where suddenly every living room or study has become an extended arm of a firm’s three lines of defense model, as well as a flank that might see bad actors exploit internal and external weaknesses. Firms will want to continue to improve awareness of the importance of cyber hygiene and compliance as working remotely becomes central to all employees, regardless of the level of return to “normal” or the level of prolonged pandemic preparedness, with split or rotating shift scheduling of personnel.¹

The above also raises procurement and related cost questions about how, where and how much to position both disinfectant material across working spaces but also to what extent open-plan offices and common areas should be deep cleaned. Coffee stations and cafeterias may become the first areas that firms decide

¹ See further coverage from Dentons [here](#).

to redesign, especially as buffet-style serving stations may be exchanged for pre-packaged items ready for collection, along with more use of social distancing markers. Team lunches could become more than just a voluntary sharing of a meal as employers encourage employees to limit social contact during social settings to core team members in order to contain the potential spread of illness.

The pandemic has shown how many companies can function adequately, even successfully, without placing all their employees in the same office. If efficiency can be maintained through remote working, then there may be some sense in encouraging personnel to run with those arrangements for a bit longer, even as lockdowns are gradually loosened. This is important, whether a second wave materializes or not. That being said, the pandemic has also shown that, for financial services firms, some functions, notably trading, cannot be done off-site or even may not be permitted, or even where it is permitted, it cannot be done as efficiently or in the best interests of the clients.

This also raises issues about how to avoid bias and promote fair treatment for all. These considerations were discussed recently by Dentons' Global Chairman, Joe Andrew, in an article² in which he argued that we should stop asking the question "When are we going back to the office?" and instead focus on the "opportunity to rebalance "office" dynamics". These points are likely to ring true regardless of which sector a firm operates in:

"For the foreseeable future, the world is going to be even more divided between those who have to go into their place of work and those who have the luxury of continuing to work from home. The literal distance between the haves and the have nots is likely going to grow even wider.

Here is why: If your company decides to reopen and you can drive your nice car to the office but your assistant or your support team has to take public transportation, are you really going to force them to come into the office? If your support team is not there, is there any reason for you to be there? If you are not certain if you have to come in, then won't your other co-workers ask the same question? If they don't come into the office, and some are on video conferences rather than in-person meetings, then why not just have everyone on video?

Support staff are more likely living paycheck to paycheck and therefore might have to take risks that their boss does not, but will you want to be the bad boss who either makes them take those risks or doesn't want to be in the office with them? They can't wait until testing gets sorted out and realize that even if there is a vaccine, they won't be able to afford it because of disparities in health care, which will make the most well-meaning of those who can get the vaccine fear gatherings of those who cannot.

Temporary workers have trouble getting unemployment benefits, and once they leave the big city with their small government support checks, will they be able to afford to come back in person when they may not actually have to?

Will you really want those who have children at home without schools open to feel like they are second class citizens because they are on video and others are not? Won't that be particularly true if those who are more likely to be on video are women? Won't that sexism, once again, be on display at work?

If going into the office involves social distancing, with only having half of a team in at any one time, and wearing masks, you will not be having many meetings in person — and those interactions will be awkward and unusual while everyone has just gotten used to the new normal of a video conference."

Not every financial services firm will take the same course of action or return to the same level of occupancy. That being said, there are some issues, principles and solutions that may have a common application. The following provides a non-exhaustive list of considerations as they stand at the time of writing and all firms may need to be agile, so as to effectively conduct change management and adjust to the "New Dynamic", as well as to allow those returning to the office to re-acclimatize.

Principles for financial services firms when looking beyond the pandemic

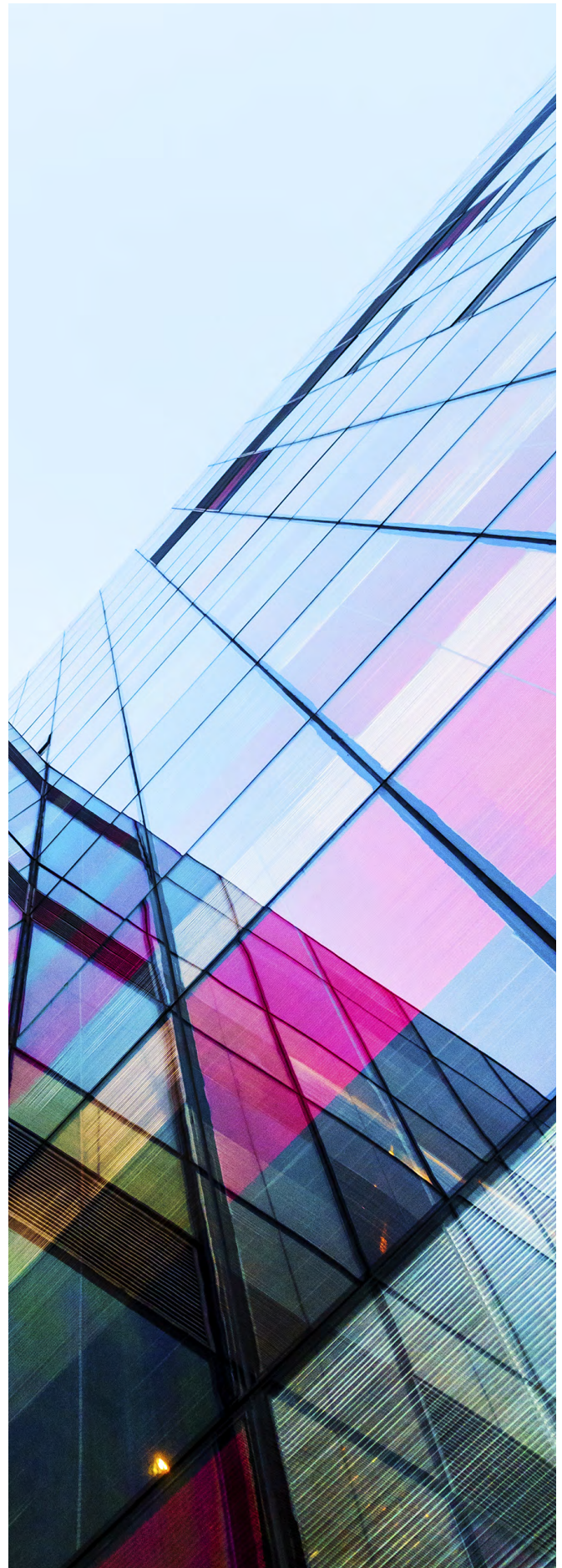
The change in how financial services firms operate and engage with counterparties, clients and customers along with the communities in which they are based may also require firms to revisit and amend existing policies and procedures as well as draft new ones. This goes beyond just updating business continuity planning and contingency arrangements but looking at the impact across a range of workflows throughout the working day.

² Please see an opinion piece available [here](#).

As part of this assessment, office and facility managers may need to be in closer contact with other existing control functions of financial services firms such as compliance, legal, risk, governance and audit. Some firms may wish to set up a standing agenda for a task force to action specific objectives to improve workplace resilience, as well as to develop and monitor activity relationship charts (**ARCs**), which display the closeness of pairs of job functions and/or departments, in a manner that reflects COVID-19 prevention best practices and also assists in preventing contagion. Some of this includes assessing:

- which employees (really/fully) need to be on-site and which ought to continue to engage in WFH and/or on a rotating on-/off-site shift basis and adapting the ARCs as the lockdown continues to loosen;
- which business units would benefit from putting in place screens or barriers to separate people from each other or which would benefit from back-to-back or side-to-side desk arrangements to reduce contagion;
- which teams can return when and with what degree of variability and, if yes, on what staggered basis; and
- what a reduced on-site with rolling on-/off-site rotations means for the actual need for office space, i.e. the need for financial services firms to have the same amount of office space may reduce over the shorter term. Can cost efficiencies be obtained through reviewing leases and/or negotiating with building management?

The issues above may also prompt firms to rethink not only their target operating model (**TOM**) and what it means for their on-/off-site resources and infrastructure but also a need to re-assess the three lines of defense (**3LOD**) model during a time of continued crisis and remote working³. This also raises questions whether on-site infrastructure accurately serve to identify, mitigate and manage risks that emerge remotely or where bad actors exploit linkages between offices, servers and those WFH?



³ See analysis from our Eurozone Hub is available [here](#).

Putting the shift in working-styles into a wider perspective – the new normal may be different

For many regulatory policymakers, despite being under pressure to deliver relief to lenders to stimulate the “real economy” corporates and consumers, the longer-term outlook poses a problem if output, and thus GDP, along with tax revenues and interest rates remain depressed throughout and following any market recovery phase. Certain industry sectors, notably those making up the “real economy”, may take more time to recover. A lot of that may depend on how to resume normal work where working from home and teleworking are not feasible.

More worryingly, some firms might come back to a very different business operating environment and different channels of engagement with counterparties, clients, consumers, as well as the wider community in which they operate. This will cause a number of challenges for creditors in assessing for whom, for how long and for how much they should grant support during the COVID-19 crisis. This is complicated by the fact that the recovery is unlikely to be even across Europe, whether by jurisdiction, sector and ultimately business model – i.e., those less digital may be at a disadvantage compared with those that have been able to embrace, embed or expand the use of technology, and there will also be differences between those that are more and less agile and dynamic in their strategic steering.⁴

COVID-19 and remote working arrangements have created a window for rapid digital transformation for financial services firms. Management and specialist teams may need to step up plans for how such a transformation will change operating conditions and how the firm engages in the market (including how many employees it needs). Automation will likely continue to gather pace and this will need to be forward-planned, both for how this impacts policies and procedures but also management of people in

terms of positions and budget. This may require new approaches on meetings and room constructions to fuel these new approaches, but it may also increase the scope of those that, for regulatory purposes, are considered material risk takers and/or otherwise subject to accountability standards. For talent management, aside from changing how the way workforce engages, the next challenge will be over how and for whom to provide additional training, be it microskilling⁵, upskilling⁶ or reskilling⁷ employees.

Firms may also need to consider what changes are needed in terms of existing insurance policies, including reviewing whether any form of termination or *force majeure* may exist. Equally, firms should consider whether there are merits in securing new coverage, including for employees working offsite or WFH.

Furthermore, firms may need to have frank conversations amongst stakeholders but also with their supervisors and auditors as to how the cost and possible return on investing in a healthier building factors into their financial reporting where line items for such efforts do not exist. Instead, firms may need to calculate how such an investment is reflected in other metrics, such as increased productivity (including through fewer sick days), employee retention and satisfaction.

Finally, firms should also consider evaluating what went well during the phases of lockdown and loosening and how to improve their regulatory, legal, operational and employment risk assessments, as well as their business continuity plans, pandemic plans and ARCs. This includes looking also at what those changes mean for a changing corporate culture, morale and the awareness of potential issues and disputes. This will require setting the appropriate tone from the top and ensuring communication is consistent, transparent and fair. Internal communications will also have to be aligned with how building and services management react.

4 This includes, in particular, those firms that have moved away from viewing hierarchy as the only way of structuring relationships and engagement channels. This single-line chain of command can get stuck and overtaken by events, and leads to situations where people, including those working from home, may pursue different directions, with a view that someone else has responsibility, causing challenges and bottlenecks. Those financial services companies, counterparties and clients that have adopted agile, dynamic and multiple-line chains of accountability and responsibility have often found that this provides more resilient and strategic steering which can be ahead of the curve rather than just responsive.

5 Microskilling refers to providing training to employees without any addition or expansion of the current job role.

6 Upskilling refers to training employees with new skills that will be part of the “new normal”.

7 Reskilling refers to retraining on all skills necessary for a new role in response to changing operating conditions and longer-term strategic changes in the market.

Building planning and services management priorities – why acting earlier on will help

When it comes to the “lessons learned” from the lockdown period we estimate that in back office departments there will remain a considerable home office practice, helping to reduce the overall office space consumption by about 20%. This, together with a clear reduction of business travel, will help to reduce the overall CO₂ footprint of companies in the financial sector by about 25% without radical changes in organizational structures.

Trading floors will remain an exception where intensive communication between staff is vital to their team and individual success. It is also the sheer cost and bulk of a trader’s workplace that will keep traders physically more or less in offices. For some offices, safety partitions fitted between workstations may be here to stay beyond the initial lockdown period. Other firms may have taken steps to improve indoor air quality, adding filtration systems or simply airing out office space by opening windows.

Touchless building elements such as security access points, door openers and building technology interfaces were already being introduced as standard features in office design but the current experience will accelerate their use. Other measures may include increased use of automatic or swing doors versus unidirectional doors where possible, along with the increased use of touchless and sensor technology.

Moreover, cubicle-style or box-office arrangements, which were once commonplace, partly due to past pandemics but also due to pressures to optimize space, may seem attractive but they are not without risk. Some arrangements may not conform to building codes and employment regulations in all jurisdictions, let alone rental and use agreements. Co-working spaces face further challenges.

Other challenges also exist over the longer-term solutions being proposed. This includes the viability and resilience of a larger-scale move to “contactless pathways” where employees can stop touching call buttons and door handles and instead activate commands through a smartphone (whether by facial recognition, voiceprint or otherwise). These may



still be a long way off due to privacy, security and cyber-resilience concerns, particularly for financial services, and forward-thinking firms may want to weigh up the costs of what an increased move to smart buildings might mean for the way firms work and how to update financial market supervisors of the risks these new technological solutions pose.

We will also see the wider use of easily cleanable surfaces and automatic disinfection features in sanitary spaces. Regular cleaning is one part of the equation; the other part is reassessing the adequacy of ventilation, as well as filtration, temperature control and humidity. This may require not only careful planning within a company's offices but also with building management, possibly requiring some form of certification of adequacy of standards in common areas beyond the immediate office space.

For firms going a step further, they could look at how to emulate hospitals and military- grade standards, and introduce fixtures such as handles etc., with more virus resistant materials, including stainless copper and other alloys with anti-microbial properties, or automatic toilet seat cleaners, covers and disinfectants. We anticipate that the more intensive cleaning and disinfection processes that are now required as a matter of law will gradually disappear due to cost reasons once the threat from the virus diminishes. Other more cost-effective solutions such as greater use of "visitor offices" may become more widespread.

Landlord and tenant law issues – Collaboration not confrontation

COVID-19 has already put a lot of pressure on landlord-tenant relationships, ranging from performance of payment obligations but also questions on refits. As a result, some firms may find benefit from revisiting the landlord-tenant relationship, notably in some of the following circumstances:

- COVID-19 has ignited many discussions on changes to the work environment. Management should make a judgment call and cost analysis, as well as a review of the firm culture against the concept before engaging in the project. There can be substantial time and need for consents, including from local authorities, in executing a change of the work environment.
- The impact of COVID-19 is a challenge for all – and in a multi-tenant building or multi-tenant portfolio, landlords will face various different requests. Some but not all landlords may carry out, or even be required by law to carry out, their own COVID-19 risk assessment, which may have implications for the priorities and risk assessments of their tenants and what is possible in terms of post-COVID-19 planning.
- For changes to be made, both landlord and tenant will have a duty to inform the other party in advance, following a timeline, and in many instances in order to obtain the other party's consent for construction works; both may also have to review whether building permits are necessary. In many instances, construction works will not be begun before the tenant moves into the space, but only when the tenant is operating in the space.
- Has the working environment changed so much for the tenant's business that there are substantial changes to the lease space? If the parties change the lease area and fit out, the parties may have to redefine the lease area within the lease agreement. Many types of changes require a formal change to the lease, which may require an agreed written amendment, otherwise the lease may be terminable before the end of the agreed lease term.
- Tenants' and landlord's responsibilities may equally have to be redefined. Key questions may include: Who conducts works? Who bears risks? Are the works related to the building, where there is a tendency that this will be the landlord's obligation, or are the changes geared towards the operation of the business, i.e. this rather falls into the tenant's responsibilities?
- Within the realm of COVID-19, third-party rights and rights towards third parties may become relevant. Do insurance agreements have to be changed to cover pandemic risks? Are there potential claims for subsidies or compensation claims to recover costs and/or damages?

For these reasons, change requests should ideally be addressed early and cooperatively.

Employment law considerations – creating communal purpose and consensus for change

For most firms their office corridors have never been as empty as during the lockdown. While WFH was the exception until recently, the numbers have increased dramatically within a very short time. This raises legal employment law questions for the remainder of the lockdown but beyond to the new normal.

Some immediate issues are in need of agile solutions that balance what is permitted in terms of employment law and what the employer is permitted to do in discharge of its obligations to protect workers and others from risk to their health and safety. This employment-related risk assessment needs to focus on the risks that are faced and what can be done to minimize such risks, while at the same time recognizing fully that a corporate cannot eliminate the risk of COVID-19 occurring. Such risk assessments are not meant to generate undue burdens and paperwork but instead serve to optimize relevant policies, procedures and internal control systems and ensure these remain agile and that the powers when used in respect of employees⁸, including when WFH, serve to secure the corporate's ability to discharge its duty of care to protect employees and others.

Importantly, what powers does an employer have to send an employee to WFH or keep them there? The answer to this question is hidden in the employment contract. In exceptional cases, with reference to terms in which an employee is under an obligation to consider the employer's interests (including the avoidance or minimizing of economic damage), it can be argued that an instruction may be issued, irrespective of the employment contract agreement, to impose working from home on an employee. However, the requirements for obliging the employee to work from his or her office in the absence of an employment contract provision must be carefully examined. The same applies for situations in which an employee has requested to work from home (including due to needing to care for relatives, children or any other matters) but the general policy of the firm is to restrict working from home for certain employees. Financial services firms, notably trading functions, are no exception from this, as supervisors may limit the amount of work that may

be carried out off-site. Then there are instances, such as business workout units dealing with non-performing loans and/or exposures (**NPLs**) where it may not be practicable to WFH due to lack of infrastructure, systems and oversight.

In Germany for example, the instruction to WFH would be considered a relocation according to Sec. 99 BetrVG and therefore requires the consent of any existing works council. With reference to an emergency, however, it could also be argued here that the transfer is initially effective without co-determination, but that it immediately needs to be made up for. In the case of only exceptional and temporary remote working, this does not qualify as a teleworking job within the meaning of Germany's Workplace Regulation, so that its requirements do not necessarily have to be met. In any case, however, the occupational health and safety law continues to apply in an employee's "home office" as well. For example, the requirement of Sec. 3 of Germany's Labor Protection Law (**ArbSchG**) to exclude health risks at the workplace as far as possible also applies to the employee in their "home office". Similar interpretations may apply in other jurisdictions across the EU. Some firms may want to consider communicating tips for employees to follow for healthier (physical and mental) wellbeing while WFH. This includes:

1. Regular communication with managers and colleagues both in formal and informal settings like a virtual coffee break in addition to video team meetings;
2. Avoiding irregular working schedules and setting core processes and rules to follow;
3. Open communication on work plans, tasks, deadlines and escalation channels;
4. Increasing the use of collaborative tools and restraining the use of duplicative communication channels;
5. Creating quiet and comfortable remote working stations;
6. Reminding employees that their WFH environment needs to ensure confidentiality in addition to being safe to work in; and
7. Reminding employees to avoid working "without end" and, while remaining responsive, to enjoy downtime and time with family, to take regular screen breaks, to keep to a schedule in order to eat, rest and recharge.

⁸ At its most effective, full involvement of a firm's workers creates a culture where relationships between employers and workers are based on collaboration, trust and joint problem solving. As is normal practice, workers should be involved in assessing workplace risks and the development and review of workplace health and safety policies in partnership with the employer.

Occupational health and safety standards – front line prevention starts with preparedness

In these challenging times, employers always face further hurdles. In Germany, it should be assumed that the current social distancing and hand-mouth hygiene measures, even with a loosening of the lockdown, will remain in place for the short to mid-term future. Germany's Federal Minister of Employment, Hubertus Heil, along with the Managing Director of the German Social Accident Insurance, Dr. Stefan Hussy, presented the COVID-19 Occupational Safety and Health Standard on April 16, 2020. This standard sets specific recommendations for occupational health and safety during the COVID-19 crisis. In the absence of the EU (currently not having full competence in terms of healthcare and occupational safety standards, national, regional and local governments across the EU-27 will set standards. Firms will need to reflect these standards in their policies and procedures and may need to look to finalize and roll out uniform standards, as supplemented by country-specific requirements, that apply to all employees across all jurisdictions and which certainly go beyond the following common elements:

- In case of doubt about the reliable observance of minimum distance, mouth-and-nose covering must be provided and worn;
- Persons with respiratory symptoms or with fever should not be on plant premises at all. Employers must establish a procedure (such as in an infection emergency plan) for dealing with suspected cases.



Germany's occupational health and safety standards include recommendations on minimum distance and wearing masks, as well as regular ventilation of rooms, hygienic standards, e.g. the provision of soap / sanitizer, the regular cleaning of sanitary facilities and communal areas (e.g. break rooms), and guidance on meetings or business trips (they should be avoided wherever possible). The same applies to the handling of suspected cases.

Germany's COVID-19 Occupational Safety and Health Standard regulates inter alia:

- A safe distance (at least 1.5 m) between colleagues. If social distancing is not possible, other measures have to be ensured, for example office work has to be carried out at home if possible. Alternatively, free office capacity has to be offered and work should be organized in such a way that multiple occupancy of office premises can be avoided and safe distances can be maintained at all times.
- Hand sanitizer and (paper) towel dispensers should be available. Adequate room cleaning and hygiene has to be provided for all employees. To prevent infections, regular cleaning of door handles and handrails must be conducted.
- Regular ventilation improves air quality and should be made possible to reduce pathogens in the air.
- WFH arrangements should be preferred to office work, especially if practicing social distancing is not possible in the office.
- Special hygiene measures should be taken and the minimum distance should be maintained for locations used by large groups of people (such as stairs, doors or lifts), including, a compulsory wearing of masks.
- If possible, work equipment should be used individually; otherwise, regular cleaning should be ensured.
- Break times should be organized in such a way that they are not scheduled for all together. When creating shift schedules, the same employees should be assigned to shared shifts where possible, which is intended to reduce the number of different contacts at work. Suitable organizational measures must be taken for the purpose of preventing gatherings of employees at the beginning and end of working hours.
- If there is contact with other persons and observing safe distances is impossible, mouth-and-nose coverings and personal protective equipment must be provided for all employees.

Employers may also, when complying with German legal standards, be in a position where, in addition to putting in place pandemic preparedness measures, they may implement employee testing or obtain contact tracing information. Some of this may include temperature checks or the introduction of health disclosure measures. Any gathering of information must be proportionate to the aims of a safety and health at work operating plan. Any information that is gathered in respect of the employee's health must be treated as sensitive personal data and held in accordance with German and EU data protection laws.

Solutions for your business

While the above raises questions that are likely to be firm specific, inasmuch as it is also job function specific, these issues are also likely to be shaped by what is permissible in individual jurisdictions and contractual agreements. That being said, there are a number of common steps that firms, working with external counsel and building consultants, may wish to consider. Financial services firms will want to retain counsel that can cover the international breadth in which they operate, while reflective of the local market practices that affect their offices, their people and the communities in which they operate.

Some of the areas where Dentons' lawyers are already assisting include:

- Assistance with regulatory, legal and employment-related risk assessments as it applies to business continuity planning, pandemic plans and TOMs for beyond the first wave of COVID-19.
- Reviewing existing or drafting new policies and procedures and their implementation to help facilitate operating during prolonged pandemic preparedness for those WFH, as well as for those that are returning to the office.
- Providing turnkey solutions of blended legal, regulatory and workplace optimization support to help create more resilient building, office and workspace solutions and related infrastructure.
- For tenancy agreements: Liaising with landlords to agree on changes and responsibilities from early on, while keeping the landlord's challenges in mind.
- Reviewing legal and regulatory risks in employment contracts, including negotiating changes to employment contracts and securing relevant relief measures.

If you would like to discuss any of the items mentioned above, in particular how to forward-plan compliance with this new operating environment, including how it fits into wider pandemic preparedness and how this may affect your business more generally, please get in touch with our key contacts.

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