Safe return to work in the context of COVID-19

24/04/2020

Summary of participants

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>672</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of WHO Regions represented</td>
<td>6 (of 6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of countries represented</td>
<td>72</td>
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On 24 April 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) hosted an EPI-WIN COVID-19 webinar on the topic of “safe return to work”. Participants represented a wide variety of organizations including hospitals, universities and research institutes, professional bodies and academic societies, United Nations agencies and other international organizations, national government departments and agencies, non-governmental organizations, labour unions, and the private sector. As the numbers of daily deaths as a result of the ongoing Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic begin to decline and conversations intensify around lifting restrictions on both individuals and businesses in a number of countries, this webinar sought to address the growing demand for information on how this can be achieved safely, and implications of the pandemic’s secondary impacts for business and society going forward. The webinar’s speakers were able to highlight specific challenges faced across a range of sectors.

Ivan Ivanov, Team Leader at the WHO’s Global Occupational Health Programme, is currently leading development of guidance for specific industries and workplaces. While the WHO has provided interim guidance on adapting workplaces and work routines to minimize transmission of the virus, work is ongoing on sector-relevant guidance for a safe return to work as pandemic control measures are eased. The ongoing need for sharing of experiences across sectors, dissemination of case studies and lessons learned which can be applied internationally, and further work on revising and extending recommendations and formal guidance for employers and employees, was emphasized.

The webinar featured presentations by Will Posonby and Nick Pahl, the President and Chief Executive respectively of the United Kingdom-based Society of Occupational Medicine; Ray Bowe, Head of Crisis
Management and Food Safety at Musgrave; Martin Knuchel, Senior Director and Head of Crisis, Emergency and Business Continuity Management for Lufthansa Group Airlines; Guy Platten, Secretary-General of the International Chamber of Shipping; and Greta Bodino, Senior Human Resources Consultant at the European Club Association (an international body representing 246 football clubs and 55 national football associations).

Despite pandemic control measures in many countries, certain industries, for example retail, telecommunications, transport, and emergency services, continue to function to provide essential goods and services. Musgrave, Ireland’s largest food retailer, has adopted a number of changes in terms of its policies, support processes, and employee management to continue operations while safeguarding worker health. These changes have taken place alongside implementation of various protective measures, including social distancing in employee canteens, one-way traffic systems on business premises, regular sanitization of high-risk surfaces, and robust communication and dialogue between employees and management to ensure adherence to new safety measures and address workers’ concerns. The company has also established criteria for return to work for individuals with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19, and those who are believed to have come in contact with an infected person.

Although aviation has been severely restricted globally, workers in the sector, particularly those crewing flights to and from Asia during the early stages of the global pandemic, already have extensive experience in managing risks associated with the virus as airlines had already taken adaptive measures. Lufthansa Group Airlines have paid close attention to the safety of passengers throughout their entire journey chain, including on arrival or in transit at airports.

The maritime sector, including cargo, cruise and ferry operations, has faced similar challenges, and has adopted similar approaches to the airline industry in safeguarding crew throughout their journeys both on land and aboard ships. This has involved development of industry guidelines covering a complex range of procedures. In many instances, restrictions on flights have meant that sailors have often had to extend their journeys, spending more time at sea—as a result the industry has adapted to enhance the mental health and psychosocial support provided to its workers. Adaption to the global pandemic has also required close cooperation between clients, ship owners, ports, and national customs and regulatory authorities.

Given the global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of the industries affected and their supply chains, guidelines on workers’ safe return to work must recognize the differences in laws and regulations between countries, and attempt to reach a standard common denominator across a range of settings. While consistent standards are also needed within industries, they must also recognize the dependencies between different parts of individual businesses and between economic sectors. Decisions at the business level on implementing these standards to safeguard workers should be supported by effective use of data to identify the most vulnerable members of the workforce and those at highest risk of contact with infected individuals.
The global COVID-19 pandemic is likely to lead to long-term changes to how we work and travel. At the same time, individuals affected by the virus may face long-term stress or trauma, while others may experience job loss and the challenges of moving into new employment and integrating into new work environments. One key insight identified by multiple speakers was that the crisis presents opportunities in the long run to change workplaces for the better by enhancing economic, social and environmental sustainability. It is hoped that this “new usual” might enhance safety and flexibility for workers, promote their physical and psychosocial health, and positively impact their productivity.