



# CORONAVIRUS

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A GUIDE TO PREPARING YOUR FLEXIBLE  
OFFICE SPACE

[www.globalworkspaceassociation.org](http://www.globalworkspaceassociation.org)



## **BACKGROUND**

On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially designated COVID-19 a pandemic. The number of confirmed cases is growing rapidly as reflected in the frequent updates to the [World Health Organization Situation Report](#). The question is no longer “if” COVID-19 will impact your immediate area, but when. Kris Elliott, COO of Novel Coworking, explained the situation this way: “Don’t hold your breath and hope it doesn’t happen. Be ready and FEEL BETTER.”

Each of us can play our part in helping slow down the spread of novel coronavirus. According to the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\) website](#), “Coronavirus is spread from person-to-person is most likely among close contacts (about 6 feet). Person-to-person spread is thought to occur mainly via respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how influenza and other respiratory pathogens spread. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. It’s currently unknown if a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes.”

In order to stop the spread of the coronavirus and the overwhelming of our healthcare infrastructure, the WHO and CDC are asking everyone to take steps to [“flatten the curve”](#) of this pandemic.

This guide is fluid and will continue to be updated as new information becomes available. To join our email list specifically designed to disseminate news to the flexible office community as it happens, please [click here](#).

## **HOW TO PREPARE**

**STAY INFORMED:** Hopefully, you're already keeping tabs on [cases in your state](#), but be sure you're also checking information from health authorities. Often, the official information isn't what's circulating in the news or on social media; so, you want to make sure you're tracking the best sources of information on COVID-19.

- Continue to review the facts and recommended practices as advised by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO), applicable country or state-specific public health sites, and occupational health consultants.
- Continue to monitor the situation as it unfolds by regularly reviewing the World Health Organization (WHO) [situation reports](#) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [situation summary](#). According to the CDC, the United States is, "in the initiation phases, but states where community spread is occurring are in the acceleration phase." This means that while the U.S. is still in the early phases of a pandemic, those phases are progressing quickly once COVID-19 shows up in a community.

**KNOW THE LAW:** Review and update your HR policies and familiarize yourself with your country's employment laws and what, if any, potential legal issues may arise.

- **Communicating with Employees:** From a legal perspective, you should know what questions you can and cannot ask employees (and members) who may have come in contact with coronavirus. Can you mandate an employee or member be tested? Can you take an employee's (or members) temperature at work?
  - U.S. Operators can reference the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) website for a detailed outline of [What You Should Know About the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act and the Coronavirus](#)
- **Open Door Policy/Privacy Policy:** You must keep an infected coworker or member safe from scrutiny. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) places restrictions on the inquiries that an employer can make into an employee's medical status, and the EEOC considers taking an employee's temperature [to be a "medical examination" under the ADA](#).

**CREATE/UPDATE POLICY AND PROCEDURES DOCUMENTS:** Documents might not seem like a critical part of the response to the current situation, but with the quickly accelerating nature of the spread of COVID-19, the last thing you want to be doing is making a plan *after* you're in crisis.

- Make sure you create or update your workplace policy and procedures for both your staff and your members. Some examples include:
  - Workplace safety precautions
  - Employee travel restrictions

- Employee quarantine or isolation
  - Workplace shutdown
  - Business continuity plan
- The CDC Recommends having an Infectious Disease Outbreak Plan in place which addresses, but not limited to, the following:
    - Identify possible work-related exposure and health risks to your employees.
    - Explore whether you can establish policies and practices, such as flexible worksites (e.g., telecommuting) and flexible work hours (e.g., staggered shifts), to increase the physical distance among employees and between employees and others.
    - Establish a process to communicate information to employees and business partners on your infectious disease outbreak response plans and latest COVID-19 information.
    - Determine how you will operate if absenteeism spikes from increases in sick employees, those who stay home to care for sick family members, and those who must stay home to watch their children if dismissed from school.

The full list of CDC recommendations can be found [here](#).

**DRAFT YOUR COMMUNICATIONS NOW:** Plan to be spending more time than usual answering questions from clients and staff about this outbreak but do as much of your formal communications in advance as you possibly can.

- Review who needs to know first and for what purpose and draft your messages accordingly.
- Consider using language that focuses on empowerment, practice, and compliance. The last thing you want to do is contribute to growing national panic, but it's also important for your members and staff to know you're taking their safety seriously, complying with relevant guidelines, and empowering them to take the steps they need to in order to keep themselves safe.
- Create a draft message now for all possible scenarios. Some examples include what operations would look like if:
  - Cutting down hours
  - Closing the office
  - Confirmed staff/member diagnosis

**PROTECT YOUR (AND YOUR MEMBERS') MENTAL HEALTH:** Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions. It is essential to take care of not just your physical health, but also your mental health.

- The CDC's "[Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19](#)" article provides excellent recommendations for caring for your mental health. Additional recommendations include:
  - Connect with family, friends, and others in your community.
  - Take care of yourself and each other and know when and how to seek help.

- Call your healthcare provider if stress reactions interfere with your daily activities for several days in a row.

**INCREASE CLEANING:** Make sure both staff and members have easy access to cleaning supplies and that they're reminded frequently to use them.

- Wipe down every possible surface people come in contact with.
- Provide hand sanitizers in multiple areas throughout your space. Remember that it should include at least 60% alcohol to be effective.
- Consider additional cleaning methods such as [electrostatic sanitization sprayers](#).

**CREATE SIGNAGE AND POST IT:** Six-foot bubbles, not touching your face, and other protective measures aren't normal. Integrating them takes everyone reminding everyone.

- Provide clear communications throughout your space listing some helpful prevention tips. Things to include:
  - Avoid close contact with people who are sick. The [CDC recommends maintaining least 6 feet](#) of space between yourself and anyone who is coughing and/or wheezing.
  - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
  - Cough and sneeze into a tissue then throw it away, or cough and sneeze into your upper shirt sleeve, completely covering your mouth and nose.
  - Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
  - Stay home when you are sick.
  - Seek medical attention if you exhibit any early [signs and symptoms](#) of coronavirus including fever, a dry cough, and shortness of breath. Encourage your team and members to do the same. Reaffirming a safe open-door policy is very helpful in creating an atmosphere of trust within your flexible office space.

**ENCOURAGE OVER-COMMUNICATION:** Your members will appreciate hearing from you regularly and knowing that you are working to keep their work environment safe.

- Create a [communications plan](#) that includes regular updates from local, state, and federal government as well as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC).
- Ask your members to notify you if they have been to a high impact area.

**ADJUST AMENITIES AND OFFERINGS:** With some states already shutting down [restaurants and bars](#) and other public gathering places, thinking about how your space and amenities might put members at risk for COVID-19 is a must.

- Consider closing your kitchen temporarily.
- Ask members to bring their own dishes and utensils for meals.
- Consider providing pre-packaged meals
- Close any larger communal spaces such as podcast studios, gym, large meetings, etc.

- Use unused private offices
  - The key to reducing the spread is minimizing in-person contact. If you have the space available, consider moving some of your open space members into separate, private offices on a temporary basis.
- Modify your events
  - Ask your attendees to practice [social distancing](#).
  - Offer pre-packaged food versus an open buffet or passed hor d'oeuvres.
  - Consider postponing events to a later date if at all possible.
  - Utilize social media and video conferencing software to host events that must go on in spite of the current situation.
- Offer virtual services
  - If you already offer virtual office services and/or virtual mail, consider allowing your members to opt to switch to that program for free or for a low cost, instead of coming into your space. The fewer people you have in your space, the less likely that illness could spread.
  - If you don't offer a virtual services package, consider at least consider working with clients to establish services they would need to be able to more easily work from home (e.g., having space staff take calls for clients, mail collection and forwarding, etc.). And then consider [putting virtual services on the list](#) for future strategy meetings.

## **HOW TO RESPOND**

In the event you or a member contracts coronavirus and your space is impacted, what next?

- **KEEP CALM:** Fear can often exacerbate an already troubling situation. Try your best to remain calm.
- **NOTIFY AUTHORITIES:** Immediately alert the local public health agency in your country. They will guide you on next steps as far as contacting those you have been in contact with over a designated period of time.
- **WORK THE PLAN**
  - [Alert employees but stay within ADA guidelines](#).
  - Clean your space and tell members to clean their personal equipment as well.
  - Communicate with your staff about maintaining critical operations or closing temporarily if necessary. If you have multiple locations, [give local community managers as much discretion as possible](#) in deciding if they need to scale back services or close the space in the event of a confirmed case of coronavirus in your space.

## **TOOLKIT FOR FLEXIBLE OFFICE OPERATORS**

- **Signage for your flexible office space**
  - [Social Distancing Guidelines at work](#)
  - [Covid Facts](#)
- [Sample Business Continuity Plan](#)
- [Sample Communications Plan](#)
- [Coronavirus: How to make your own DIY hand sanitizer](#)

### **Additional Resources**

[Keeping the Workplace Safe](#) (CDC)

[Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19](#) (OSHA)

[Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19](#) (WHO)

[Guidance for Business Preparedness](#) (LITTLER)

[Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19](#) (CDC)

[SBA Disaster Assistance in Response to the Coronavirus](#) (SBA)

[Webinar: SHRM/CDC Update: How Business, Workers and Workplaces Should Respond to COVID-19](#) (SHRM)

[Eeoc: Pandemic Preparedness In The Workplace And The Americans With Disabilities Act](#) (EEOC)

[The coronavirus and your company: a roadmap](#)