



Guidance for Employers

on flexible work arrangements, childcare support and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19

Interim guidance to support external partners (employers - public and private)¹

¹ This is an interim guidance note, developed on request in a fast evolving situation. It should not be seen as promoting particular work arrangements generally, but provides guidance to support partners (employers) in relation to the unusual work situation created by the COVID-19 outbreak. As such information may date quickly and you are advised to check the sources and online information (via links) regularly.

What you need to know about flexible work arrangements and how you can strengthen and accelerate best practices

A family-friendly workplace or employer is one whose policies and practices make it possible for employees and/or workers to more easily achieving work-life balance, and to fulfil both their work and family obligations. These policies may include, but are not limited to, childcare, breastfeeding rooms, flexible work arrangements, paid leave, safe transport, and so on.

In some countries, authorities may enforce school closure policies as part of the response to contain the COVID-19 epidemic. In addition to the impacts on children’s education, there are concerns about children’s protection and well-being as children are left alone or without adequate care as many parents still need to go to work. COVID-19 may also have negative effects on mental health and wellbeing of patients, caregivers, and the public², such as experiencing fear of the consequences of infection with a new virus and triggering stigma. Those placed in quarantine (or self-isolated) may experience boredom, loneliness, and anger.

By promoting flexible working arrangements and/or support childcare, your employees will be in a better position to address any childcare challenges and not be distracted by concerns about their children’s safety and wellbeing at home.

Key steps to take

- I. Understand the situation – what are the needs of all of your workers/employees.
Carry out a rapid needs-assessment in close and direct consultation with your employees. The goals of the assessment include:
 - a. reveal if the current workplace and policies are supportive enough to working families during COVID-19;
 - b. identify the most pressing needs of parent workers
- II. Identify which improvements can be made i.e. introducing flexible work arrangements (refer to list) and/or support to childcare, promotion of messages to workers who are parents (activities, psycho-social well-being), promotion of hygiene messages.
- III. Apply the best practices when introducing new policies (see list), make sure all of your employees know about them, understand them and feel comfortable using them (no reprimanding or retribution if employees take advantage of the new policies)

² YT Xiang et al. Timely mental health care for the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak is urgently needed. *Lancet Psychiatry*; published online 4 February. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30046-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30046-8).

Flexible work arrangements

Flexible work arrangements are alternate arrangements or schedules from the traditional work setting. Under flexible work arrangement, workers and employees are given greater scheduling freedom in how they fulfil their job responsibilities, and may therefore meet personal or family needs and achieve better work-life balance. Meanwhile, the needs of employers, e.g. timely delivery of tasks with quality, is not to be compromised. In short, workplace flexibility arrangements are expected to create a win-win working relationship, which simultaneously recognises and realises the needs of both employers and employees. Not all types of flexible work arrangements are manageable or worthwhile for all sizes and types of organisations, so every employer considering flexible work arrangement should undertake an organisational assessment to determine whether and what kind of flexible scheduling will meet their needs the best.

Examples of flexible work arrangements

Whether formally written into company policy or an informal agreement between the employee and employer, common flexible work arrangements are summarised in the below table and detailed information of typical arrangements can be found in Appendix I:

Flexible Work Arrangement for Employees		
Flex Time	Flex Time Off	Flex Location/Roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Banking of working hours ✓ Compressed work week ✓ Flexible working hours ✓ Job sharing ✓ Switch shifts ✓ ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Extra or prolonged holiday or personal leave ✓ Long-term leave with position being kept ✓ Reduced hours (part-time) with the same hourly rate ✓ Paid lactation breaks ✓ ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Telework or telecommuting ✓ Temporary remote work for caring purposes ✓ Job sharing ✓ Change of responsibilities ✓ ...

Best practices:

Successful flexible work arrangement policies should take the following elements into account:

- ✓ **Needs-based:** Workers' needs can vary greatly under different circumstances and there are many types of flexible work arrangements available. Not all types are manageable or worthwhile for all sizes and types of organisations, so every employer considering flexible work arrangement should undertake an organisational assessment to determine whether and what kind of flexible scheduling will meet their needs the best.
- ✓ **Non-interference and non-discrimination:** Make sure that all your workers and employees can benefit from flexible working time, and that no one is discriminated against or penalised for leaves associated with family responsibilities.
- ✓ **Well-defined responsibilities:** No matter which programme or how many options are available, the duties, expectations, and deadlines should be clearly outlined by the supervisor and agreed upon by both the employer/supervisor and the employee/worker.

- ✓ **Wage and benefits compliance:** Workers' participation in flexible work arrangement should not have negative impacts on their employment and career. For instance, workers taking flexible working hours or working from home should receive the same amount of payment in a timely manner; overtime carried home should be calculated and compensated; annual bonus distribution should not be negatively affected in an excessive way, etc.
- ✓ **Make it business friendly:** Of course any flexible worktimes need to fit your business schedule. For a factory with a production line or frontline shop workers, flexible time is trickier than for office workers. Practically this means, if you are bound to production lines and shop times you can support a balanced time management to e.g. allow certain leaves with sufficient notice, inform employees well in advance about overtime hours, have a range of multiskilled workers who can replace colleagues at different positions.

Childcare

Childcare is a key part of family friendly policies and in supporting families in providing nurturing care for young children. Usually, childcare refers to the (skilful) action or service of looking after children by parents, a day-care centre, nannies, teachers or other care providers. Childcare is a broad topic that covers a wide spectrum of professionals, institutions, contexts, activities, and social and cultural norms.

In the context of COVID-19 and the decision of some authorities to enforce school closures, many working parents are faced with lack of childcare options. Workers may be faced with low accessibility due to varied factors including lack of professional childcare workers and centres, opening hours that don't fit workers' working schedule, working conditions such as long and unpredictable hours, shift work, long travel times, and unreliable and expensive transport. As a result, caregivers may find it necessary to take their children to the workplace, which increase the risk of exposing young children to unsafe conditions.

Best practices

- ✓ **Needs-based:** Workers' childcare needs can vary greatly and there are multiple childcare arrangements available. Employer should take steps to understand the needs of working parents in collaboration with worker representatives and trade unions before investing in any childcare solution.
- ✓ **Cover particularly the most vulnerable:** The childcare programme shall cover as many working families as possible, particularly the most vulnerable children who are from the most deprived families (poor families, families in rural areas, families with unemployed, disabled or parents with mental or physical conditions, families from marginalised groups and ethnic minorities, single-headed families, parents without support from the extended-family, etc.), children who suffer from chronic illness or who are marginalized, such as the left-behind children or migrant children with little or no care from their parents, children whose parents are working in the informal sectors or whose caregivers may be less informed of their rights and procedures for childcare access.
- ✓ **Clearly defined objectives:** The childcare programme developed or adopted shall have clearly defined objectives. Bearing in mind the purpose and focus of childcare, the childcare programmes adopted by employer should foster incremental developmental progress in a healthy and safe environment and should be flexible to capture the interests of the children and the individual abilities of the children.

- ✓ **Ensure availability:** When employer decided to introduce childcare programmes in its business operation, efforts shall be made to ensure availability
Practically this means:
 - 1) *your company shall try to avail multiple childcare options and diversify measures, such as on-site childcare centre, on-site health clinics, childcare allowance, flexible work arrangements, community childcare support etc., so to better accommodate different childcare needs and preferences. Consider that some parents may want care arrangements closer to their homes in cases where they have trusted networks of support and/or where concerned about traveling with their child to their workplace;*
 - 2) *Ensure safe childcare options with appropriate infection prevention and control measures and referral mechanisms in place;*
 - 3) *the scale of the childcare programme shall be proportional with the size of working parents in the factory or plant. For instance, if the employer has a large group of parent workers, or several working sites/factories/branches, then the childcare provided shall be reasonably scaled up or expanded;*
- ✓ **Ensure affordability:** Make sure workers' salary meet and go higher than the standard of a living wage, enrol workers into social insurance or social protection, provide medical and occupational disease/injury insurance to workers, including parent workers, so they have a basic level guarantee to manage risks.
Practically this also means: *The childcare options available in the business operations shall not be "for-profit" oriented, employer shall make fees affordable by offering full or partial subsidies; it is highly recommended that provide stipends to disadvantaged families to help them secure childcare spots or give subsidies directly to providers with a specific mandate to accept children from their company.*
- ✓ **Ensure accessibility:** Make sure that the "accessibility challenges" are addressed in your childcare programmes. Is the childcare centre on-site, near-site or off-site? What have been done to minimize excessive overtime for pregnant workers, frequent work shifts and unpredictable working hours? Is there shuttle bus or other easier/cheaper transportation provided?
- ✓ **Solid quality:** as basic requirements, childcare programmes shall 1) be carried out by specialized staff, preferably certified professionals that have gone through required education and training; 2) be conducted in safe and healthy facilities/spaces with appropriate infection prevention and control measures and referral mechanisms in place; 3) have appropriate child-to-teacher ratios, so to can maximize children's learning potential and ability to interact with and learn from their teachers and peers. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017), the child-to-teacher ratios should not be over 1:3 for children up to 12 months and 1:5 for children up to three years old.
Practically, *there are cost-effective ways to maintain quality childcare programmes. For instance, on-site childcare centres usually cost much less than building or renting an off-site facility. Parent workers, after being properly trained, can be very qualified volunteers to rotate and provide support to one certified childcare professional. Experience parent workers can provide childcare training and counselling support to other parent workers.*
- ✓ **Engagement and participation:** Engage management and parent workers in the process. Providing working parents/caregivers with opportunities to share their perceptions, voice their needs and be involved from the start and throughout the programme improves its relevance, effectiveness and sustainability.

- ✓ **Regular evaluation:** Businesses should evaluate all childcare programmes regularly, to practice continuous improvement.

Other practical steps to take in the workplace

Practical steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace – inside offices, transport hubs, plantations, factories, project sites, shops and all retail environments:

<p>1. Provide workers with hand washing stations, soaps and hand-cleaning with alcohol-based hand rubs for adequate handwashing and hygiene practices in the workplace</p>	<p>1.1 Clean toilets and equipped with clean water and soaps. 1.2 Hand-cleaning with alcohol-based hand rubs is not mandatory but strongly encouraged. 1.3 Clean breastfeeding rooms where women can express milk. The rooms should be equipped with disinfecting wipes, trash bin with lid, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, and access to handwashing facilities. 1.4 Safety and health standards are applied to ensure breastfeeding children and mothers are not exposed to the virus, as well as to chemicals and toxins. 1.5 Clean on-site childcare facilities, which are equipped with clean water, soaps and hand-cleaning with alcohol-based hand rubs.</p>
<p>2. Provide workers with guidance to encourage hygiene practices in the workplace and post visible messages on COVID-19 prevention measures</p>	<p>2.1 Messaging should follow WHO advice for the public. See also UNICEF Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): What parents should know and How to protect yourself and your children. 2.2 Distribution of educational leaflets for workers to support hygiene practices and other protective measures for them and their families. 2.3 Display banners on walls with protection advice. 2.4 Recruitment of an HR/health specialist to raise awareness of basic measures to protect workers and others from getting sick. 2.1 2.5 Working mothers should be encouraged and supported to continue breastfeeding. Adequate facilities for breastfeeding or milk expression should include the necessary items for adequate hygiene including disinfecting wipes, trash bin with lid, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, and access to handwashing facilities. 2.5 In case meals are offered at the workplace, practice food safety (including advising workers with appropriate precautions for handling raw meat, milk or animal organs, to avoid cross-contamination with uncooked foods, as per good food safety practices and WHO guidelines).</p>

<p>3. Protect the workplace against discrimination and social stigma</p>	<p>3.1 Develop a corporate policy against workplace discrimination in the workplace.</p> <p>3.2 Provide training to workers to reduce social stigma and prevent discrimination among them.</p> <p>3.3 Encourage workers to be pro-active in reporting incidents of inappropriate, discriminatory, harassing or abusive behaviour to your supervisor, HR department, union, or management.</p> <p>3.4 Take steps to ensure that the reporting mechanism is confidential, gender-sensitive and safe. Encourage the wide and non-discriminative use of such service and ensure that it is easily accessible by all, including people with disabilities.</p> <p>3.5 Identify cases of discrimination and promptly act upon them.</p>
<p>4. Provide workers with flexible work arrangements in situations of sickness or sickness in the family</p>	<p>4.1 Provide flexible work arrangements for workers to avoid exposure to risks in affected areas³, such as teleworking, ensuring working conditions are met for workers.</p> <p>4.2 Provide flexible time for workers in situations of sickness or sickness in their families.</p> <p>4.3 Support workers spend more time with their children, as they can be more affected by stress than adults.</p> <p>4.4 Ensure working parents have enough time to spend with their children to cope with stress. In case family separation occurs due to hospitalization, ensure flexible time for workers to keep regular contact.</p>
<p>5. Travel advice</p>	<p>5.1. Management and workers should consider the various restrictions put in place by airlines and some countries before planning for their trips. Employers may consider cancelling or postponing non-essential travel to affected areas, to avoid being quarantined or denied re-entry into their country of residence. Kindly refer to the WHO website for updated information in this regard: https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports as well as IATA's up-to-date list of countries and restriction measures: https://www.iatatravelcentre.com/international-travel-document-news/1580226297.htm</p> <p>5.2 If travelling, take precautionary hygiene measures inside aeroplanes as per the WHO advice for the public.⁴</p>

³ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports>

⁴ Cabin crew and airport workers have specific IATA guidance and responsibilities based on country updates. More at: <https://www.iata.org/en/programs/safety/health/diseases/#tab-2>

<p>6. Support workers in case of fever, cough and difficulty breathing in seeking early medical care</p>	<p>6.1 Provide workers with guidance on where they can be referred for symptoms consistent with COVID-19 (e.g. address and phone number of local hospitals, health authorities, emergency hotlines), and safe transport support for referral wherever needed.</p> <p>6.2 Asymptomatic workers with travel history to affected areas should follow the same precautions as everyone else (i.e. guidance/support for referral). However, depending on policies of local health authorities, they may be placed in quarantine – and thus require support for continued access to food, water, accommodation, telecommunication services, medical services, psychosocial support, etc. See https://www.who.int/ith/Repatriation_Quarantine_nCoV-key-considerations_HQ-final11Feb.pdf?ua=1.</p> <p>6.3 Ensure that workers presenting with any symptoms are also provided with psychological support.</p>
<p>7. Support workers coping with stress during COVID-19 outbreak</p>	<p>7.1 Provide workers with special HR support in case they feel stressed, confused, scared or angry during a crisis. Such support could include peer-support groups or staff counselling, if available and according to needs.</p> <p>7.2 Access information about the outbreak from reliable sources and do not pass on unverified information from mass media and social media posts. Contribute to reducing stress by re-posting evidence-based information from reliable sources such as WHO and UNICEF.</p> <p>7.3 Advise workers to maintain a healthy lifestyle.</p> <p>7.4 Gather information that will help workers under stress to accurately understand and cope with risks.</p> <p>7.5 Support workers in helping their children cope with stress during the COVID-19 outbreak (spending more time with them with love and attention, as well as encouraging play and relax).</p> <p>7.6 Ensure working parents have enough time to spend with their children to cope with stress. In case family separation occurs due to hospitalization, ensure flexible time for workers to keep regular contact.</p>

Employers are encouraged to download videos and graphs available at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public> for use in internal communications with workers (intranet, alerts in apps, SMS). Digital communication is highly recommended in EAP workplaces.



What employees should do?

Employees can take some steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19, following [WHO Guidance for the Public](#).

- When to use a mask: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>
- Advice for parents: [UNICEF Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\): What parents should know](#)
- Myth busters: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>
- Advice for health workers: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-rights-roles-respon-hw-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=bcabd401_0

Appendix I

Flexible work arrangements examples

Flex time

Flex time is an arrangement where employees work a full day but they can vary their working hours. These arrangements are usually established with specific guidelines so that a "core" working day exists. The total hours of work are not usually affected by this arrangement.

For example, a factory may start to apply multiple day shifts in parallel, 7:30AM-3:30PM, 8:30AM-4:30PM, 9:30AM-5:30PM, 1:30PM-9:30PM, and ask workers to register with the most suitable shift. This way, both the factory and workers can achieve their daily quota, avoid peak-hour inconveniences, and worker's personal schedule could also be satisfied.

Reduced hours/Part-time

Employees may choose to work fewer than the standard 37.5 or 40 hours work week. These arrangements may be on a temporary or permanent basis depending on individual circumstances. It may also be considered in some cases for employees with health problems or disabilities. Employee benefits and qualification for government programs (such as employment insurance or pension plans) may be affected, and should be examined thoroughly before commencing. Prolonged unpaid maternity leave, working 80% hours with 80% pay, are examples.

Compressed work week

Compressed work week occurs when an employee works for longer periods of time per day or shift in exchange for a day off. Employees may start earlier or finish later than the normal workday. Compressed work weeks are often initiated by the employee, but sometimes the employer may initiate the option to improve operational efficiency, to maximize production (reduced daily start-up costs) or to establish longer business hours which can enhance customer service. Common arrangements for a 40-hour work week are working 10 hours per day, 4 days a week; working an extra hour a day with 1 day off every 2 weeks; or working an extra half hour a day and having one day every 3 or 4 weeks off.

Banking of Hours/ Annualized hours

This arrangement allows employees to choose, within negotiated boundaries, their days and hours of work to the maximum for a set period of time. This period of time may be weekly, monthly or yearly. Such arrangements are often a combination of flex time and compressed work week and can help reduce the amount of overtime hours required. These arrangements may be suited to fields where there is variation in demands such as peak hours or seasonal peaks.

Job sharing

Job sharing occurs when two or more people share one or more positions or set of duties. It should be clear before starting how these arrangements affect pay, benefits, and holidays. It is very important that those in a job-sharing arrangement work effectively as a team and communicate well. Job sharing may be an option when few part-time positions are available within the company.