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# COVID-19: Addressing the risk

A BESPOKE APPROACH FOR THE CALL CENTER  
/ BPO SECTOR

# A bespoke approach for the Call Center / BPO Sector

## INTRODUCTION

The growth of the Call Center business sector, as part of providing Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) support to companies, is seen as an employment stimulation initiative by the South African Government. It is often seen as a first entrant opportunity to formal employment by many young citizens.

Employees working in a call centre are predominantly young adults who, generally, are less vulnerable to serious complications when infected, and more prone to asymptomatic Covid 19. –The type of work done at call centres is also often suitable for the employment of employees with disabilities, who could potentially become a significant portion of employees in this sector.

Turnover of employees in this sector is high, with rates found to be as high as 20% annually.

### COVID-19 Risk Profile:

**The demographic profile of call centre employees creates a particular COVID-19 risk profile:**

- Young adults are as prone to become infected by the COVID-19 virus as the elderly, but their chances of developing serious or fatal disease is significantly lower.

- Young adults are also more likely to be asymptomatic or have fewer COVID-19 symptoms and may be unaware that they are infected with COVID-19, posing a significant risk of spreading the virus to other people.
- At the same time, young adults are also socially active, and interact freely and gladly with their counterparts, on a regular basis.
- Young adults are frequently less risk averse than their elderly counterparts, and often exhibit high-risk behaviour with little thought of the potential consequences.
- As these young employees are often still living at their parents' homes, they frequently socially interact with elderly family members when they are at home, posing a significant risk of spreading the virus to the more vulnerable members of the population.

**The nature of the business sector also contributes to the specific risk profile for COVID-19 risk management:**

- Call centre employees are often deployed in large numbers in a single closed space, and social distancing, as well as good ventilation, is difficult to enforce and maintain.
- Additionally, acceptable ventilation standards are often not present in these workspaces.

The permanent correct wearing of masks can be difficult to achieve as wearing of masks may be seen to muffle the call agent's voice, affecting the call quality.

All these factors create a unique risk management environment, needing a unique and bespoke approach not only to reduce the impact of the pandemic on the industry, but also the country.

## COVID-19 RISK MANAGEMENT APPROACH



### Training and awareness

**To successfully manage the risk of COVID-19 transmission in call centres, it is critical that employees are well-versed on issues relating to COVID-19:**

They need to understand the nature of the virus in terms of:

- Contagiousness.
- Symptoms.
- The likelihood of asymptomatic or low-symptomatic infections in the young.
- The risk that infected young people poses to the elderly and vulnerable at work, at home, and in society.

- The risk that super spreader incidents, where many employees become infected in a short period, may affect the sustainability of the business, and their employment.
- The importance of not coming to work when they have symptoms, were in close contact to a known Covid case, or awaiting their own Covid test results – until they have been cleared to return by a medical professional or until after the quarantine or isolation period has ended.
- The responsibility that these young adult employees need to accept to protect themselves, their families, and the business against the impact of the pandemic.

There must be signed proof of training in all these aspects available for all employees. Communicative and information brochures and posters should be in place and available. These should be presented and styled in a way that is attractive to young adults.



## PROTECTIVE RISK MANAGEMENT MEASURES

**In view of the nature of the business operating environment, it is critically important that employers deploy and maintain protective measures to protect against the spread of the virus. This should be implemented and supervised by the appointed COVID-19 Compliance Officer:**

- Efficient screening of all employees daily before they access the workplace, and the effective management of all cases, who screen suspicious for Covid 19 symptoms, within the prescriptions of the company's screening procedure.
- Ensuring and maintaining proper ventilation in all workspaces.
- The frequent sanitization of all workspaces, common areas, and equipment.
- Free availability of sanitizers to all employees, and the promotion of frequent hand sanitization.
- Ensuring 1,5 m social distancing between employees and providing for an average of 6 sq. m floor space per employee in the workspace.
- Providing physical barriers between employee stations to increase protection of employees.
- Aggressive sterilization and sanitization of workspaces when a positive COVID-19 case has occurred.
- The identification and quarantining of close contacts to positive cases.
- The identification and monitoring of casual contacts to positive cases.
- Enforcement of the correct use of masks, always.
- Clarifying the approach to provision of sick leave benefits for quarantine and isolation requirements to all employees – to ensure that employees are not concerned about loss of income when they need to quarantine or isolate.

The goal of this risk management approach is to foster the ideal behavioural patterns with all employees. Non-compliance with protective measures should not automatically be addressed through punitive measures. An initial approach of explaining the potential severity of the consequences of their risk behaviour should be provided to transgressors. Retraining could also be used as a corrective measure.

However, where employees transgress repeatedly despite repeated attempts to address their at-risk behaviour, the disciplinary process should be initiated, and followed to the maximum.