

How Covid-19 has forced businesses to re-evaluate cleaning regimes, waste management

One of the biggest changes last year, brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, was how businesses globally re-evaluated their approach at facilitating their cleaning and hygiene regimes, including revision of waste management activities and protocols.



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According to Brindha Roberts, head of sustainability at waste management company Averda, one of the most interesting developments in major companies was how they now are including their new cleaning and waste management protocols into their communication strategies and incorporating these into their brand messaging.

"What lead to this is the environment of increased regulatory compliance, public and businesses demands for cleanliness, and the importance of retaining and attracting new clients," says Roberts.

Legal responsibility

Waste generators also have legal responsibility, according to the National Environmental Management: Waste Act, to take all appropriate steps to manage waste in such a way that it does not harm health or the environment.

With that in mind, 2020 saw a change in the nature of residential waste. The Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated an increase in the use of PPE (disposable masks and gloves) and, therefore, disposal of medical-type waste within domestic waste streams for citizens to comply with new regulations.

Realising that waste had become more 'healthcare' - the waste management sector had to make some changes; firstly, to help educate non-medical professionals on the correct way of handling their waste, especially items that previously were never considered hazardous, such as used tissues.

Secondly, public awareness of the measures taken to protect frontline collection employees who handle waste. This includes handling and packaging of the 'new' waste that is being generated due to the pandemic. This group of employees offering essential services are exposed to a significant health and safety risk, and these are the people directly employed by the waste management sector.

"Understanding this first-hand and how the pandemic impacted the waste management sector, Averda ensured that protocols and procedures were updated to protect clients and staff from the beginning," says Roberts.

Supporting waste workers

Before the Covid-19 pandemic there were standard health and safety policies and protocols in place, but these were not enough, says Roberts: "While South African law focuses on the control of waste within organisations and communities, there is little legislation that specifically supports waste workers who are at the coalface of this vital and hazardous industry."

Averda worked with its international teams to identify trends and adopt best practice and learnings even prior to legislation being enforced locally. "As a company that already has a focus on the containment of hazardous materials, we were able to apply our expertise to our broader operations and sites," says Roberts. "Every organisation in South Africa should be taking steps like this right now as we find ourselves in the second wave."

Concludes Roberts, "To ensure the health and safety of everyone within the waste management value chain – as well as of the population at large – companies should contract providers with the expertise and compliance to safely manage waste while limiting harm to their employees."

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