Considering human distancing - how to comply and why

By Raghmah Solomon

Landlords and business owners are facing new uncertainties everyday due to the coronavirus pandemic. Chief among these anxieties is how they are required to adapt interiors and buildings to comply with new international regulations.

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Dr Maria Neira of the World Health Organisation put it eloquently when she said, "The wealth of business depends on the health of workers." Bearing that in mind, an ethos of responsibility needs to be cultivated and landlords must proactively assist tenants to mitigate situations that could place them in harm's way.

A system to report possible risk factors and seek assistance should also be put in place. The Occupational Health and Safety system is there to maintain safe and healthy work environments and minimise risk to employees. The legislation has been adapted to add additional layers of protection for the unique circumstances of Covid-19.

Business owners and landlords can expect change in the following areas:

Shared public spaces:

- As some businesses require visitors to queue, landlords could assist by working together with tenants by allocating queuing space in common areas.
- Shared public areas should be as health friendly as possible and include wash or sanitising stations, as well as signage to educate individuals about health and safety protocols.
- Ensure sanitising wipes are available at regular touch points such as doors, entrances, keypads and elevator buttons for cleaning.
- All lobbies should provide hand sanitiser and have a system to ensure people entering the building are wearing masks. Lobbies must also be used to keep track of the amount of people in the building at any one time.
- Waiting areas should be redesigned to comply with the minimum 1.5m distancing and the fabrics of all public furniture should be bleach friendly and able to withstand repetitive cleaning.
- The necessary social distancing signage, such as informational posters, floor decals and limits for the number of people allowed in a lift at one time, should be visible and repeated throughout the space.
- If possible, doors could be left open during peak lockdown stages to prevent excessive touching.
- Stairwells should have hand sanitiser at the top and bottom of each flight and, if possible, should be on a sensor or dispersed by an individual that can remind visitors to sanitise when they enter.
- All taps in the bathrooms must be working so that people can wash their hands. To ensure that the water bills stay in check, refit the tap spouts with water saving nozzles.
- Consider putting sensor-operated soap dispensers in the bathrooms and check regularly that they are full.

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Offices:

- Kitchens should have restricted access. Implementing alternating lunch and tea shifts will aid in ensuring the capacity of the kitchen area is always monitored.
- Providing employees with a set of cutlery or lunch wear with their name on it mitigates the risk of spread from people using shared cutlery.
- A wipe down protocol for the fridge, coffee machines, urns, kettles, toasters, printer stations, water coolers, microwave, filing cabinet, TV remotes and all surfaces should be implemented. All crockery, cutlery and glassware need to be packed away behind closed doors.
- Deliveries should be handled by dedicated staff who can monitor parcel collection and distribution inside the office area, and personal deliveries should be prohibited from being opened inside the office.
- General social distancing, including wearing of masks, washing, and sanitising hands regularly and good health and hygiene practices are essential on an individual level.
- Staggering employees work hours to allow for spot cleaning before and after shifts is recommended, as well as a deep clean once a month at a minimum.
- A general hand wash station inside premises with warm water, limiting the bathroom to two people and food breaks are advised.
- Clean and sanitise aircon filters regularly and ensure they are in perfect working condition.
- For industries that cannot function without office bound staff, move desks to the perimeter of the office into screened cubicle layouts. Moving desks closer to windows for better ventilation also lowers the risk of continuously contaminating the space with airborne particles.
- Dividing the office up into individual offices or converting, even partially, to a work-from-home system might be a better long-term solution.

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How to comply in retail:

- Start with instituting a new policy and procedure that includes an express dry-cleaning service between people fitting on and employees re-hanging on the rail or when people return clothing to a store.
- Jewellers and optometrists must have sanitising stations where they can sanitise the product after it is fitted on a customer's face before it goes back on the shelf.
- Consider investing in online or e-commerce branches of your store to eliminate the risk posed by human interaction.

Applying social distancing in design means that business owners should consider changing their interior spaces as a permanent precautionary measure. Ultimately, one needs to eliminate all the risks which may spread the virus, including using existing technology to its fullest extent, and making products available online.

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