

Getting Back To Work: How to Prepare Workplaces for the “New Normal” After COVID-19

With the first case announced on March 11th, 2020, COVID-19 pandemic has started to show certain impacts on, among others, business life in Turkey. At the writing date of this article, Turkey is going through a normalization phase. Indeed, on May 28th, the president announced that regular curfew imposed on weekends will be terminated, inter-provincial travel restrictions will be removed, and the age limit subject to be under continuous curfew will be lowered from 20 to 18, as of June 1st. These conditions are to be re-evaluated, if the circumstances change.

Throughout the entire process from the announcement of the first case up to this normalization process recently entered in, several measures and restrictions were progressively brought into force to combat the negative results of the outbreak. Before the Ministry of Internal Affairs imposed a curfew on all citizens living in metropolitan cities for two whole days for the first time during the pandemic on April 10th, a curfew had been put in place for the citizens under the age of 20, citizens over the age of 65, and citizens who have chronic illnesses. In parallel to the warnings as to staying at home to minimize the risk of transmission, private sector also implemented several measures, notably *home-office* practice.

For the workplaces that remained open during this process, the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Services published a guideline titled *Guideline on Measures to Combat against New Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak at Workplaces* on March 20th, 2020. Five days later, the Ministry published another guideline titled *Guideline on Measures to be taken by Occupational Health and Safety Professionals at Workplaces in Scope of New Coronavirus Outbreak*. The latter includes recommendations on measures to be taken for the proper use of service vehicles, appropriate arrangement of travels, entrances to & exits from workplaces, working environment, meetings and trainings, and the use of cafeterias and recreational areas. Both guidelines introduce general principles to be adopted at the workplaces in regard to hygiene, and highlight the importance of social distancing rules.

Recently, on May 26th, 2020, Scientific Advisory Board also issued a comprehensive study named *Guidance on Outbreak Management and Working Principles* (“the Guidance”). This study aims to provide guidance for various sectors, consisting of workplaces at shopping centres; hair dressers and beauty parlours; shoe and bag sellers; grocery stores; buffets and canteens; food retailers including butchers, greengrocers, fishmongers, dried nut sellers; bookstores and stationery shops; clothing stores, haberdasheries, and variety stores; jewellery stores,

bijouterie and watch sellers; toy stores; marketplaces; tailors, shoe repair stores and dry cleaners; commercial cab services, and taxi stands; minibuses; mines; construction sites; white good and furniture stores; cosmetic stores and perfumeries; gas stations; markets and supermarkets; carwashes; car services, repair shops, and tire sellers; car showrooms, and car renting shops; any businesses operating as offices and bureaus; real estate agencies and real estate consultancies; electronic and telecommunication stores; plumber's shops. After the president announced in his statement of May 28th that diners, restaurants, cafes, patisseries and similar workplaces offering food & beverage services would be reopened as of June 1st, an updated version of the Guidance was published on May 30th. As well as the measures to be taken in these workplaces, those to be taken in personnel service vehicles were also introduced in this update.

The Guidance differs from the previous guidelines, as it specifically stipulates measures on sectoral basis, rather than providing general principles to be embraced at the workplaces. Some of the noteworthy measures that are promoted under the Guidance consist of abiding by social distancing principles, proper using of medical masks, complying with hygiene rules, all of which aim to minimize the transmission risk of COVID-19.

It must be noted that the General Directorate of Occupational Health and Safety, established under the body of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, also provided certain check lists and information sheets as to the measures to be taken for combating COVID-19 on sectoral basis. For further information, you may visit the web-site of the Ministry's Information Platform for Combating COVID-19 at Workplaces, by clicking [here](#).

All of the guidelines drawn by governmental authorities should be regarded as measures to be implemented at the workplaces at minimum level, and employers should ensure that they comply with the principles set out in these guidelines. Nonetheless, they should take additional protective measures to the possible extent, in regard to the activity field, number of employees, working environment or organizational structure. We would like to note that, with the normalization process where businesses start to re-operate, occupational health and safety inspectors are expected to conduct regular inspections in regard to supervision and audit of compliance with occupational health and safety obligations. Also, in the event where the provisions under the above-mentioned guidelines are violated, employers may be subject to administrative fine in scope of their occupational health and safety obligations, depending on the nature of their breach. In certain cases, even the operation of business may be interrupted at the workplace, partially or in full.