



# Five COVID-19 workplace safety lessons from leading experts.

Navigating employee health in tomorrow's workplace.

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For employers of all sizes and industries, a healthy workforce is essential to employee morale and for sustaining a productive business.

The healthcare costs associated with employee illness can be immense. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Integrated Benefits Institute estimated that US employers spent over half a trillion dollars (\$575 billion) annually on poor employee health.<sup>1</sup> In addition, out of every dollar companies spent on healthcare, they lost \$0.61 due to illness or injury. These costs can lead to increased employee healthcare premiums, added economic pressure on employees, the potential for dissatisfaction, and even further negative impacts on wellness. Employers who want to maintain a vibrant and productive workforce must invest wisely in the health of their employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced our understanding that workplace interventions—from educational programs to changes in protocols and procedures—can prevent the spread of infectious diseases and have a significant impact on employee health. It has also taught us how such interventions can help improve the health of the community at large, with benefits that extend beyond controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. We have learned valuable lessons from COVID-19 about how to adapt the workplace to increase employee well-being and improve wellness for workers.

“This is by no means the last infectious disease outbreak we’re going to experience during our lifetime, even during our work years,” said Dr. James Phillips, MD, a Fellow of the American

## Meet our experts.



**Dr. James Phillips, MD, FACEP**, is a board-certified Emergency Medicine physician and an Assistant Professor at George Washington University Hospital, where he serves as Section Chief of Disaster and Operational Medicine in the Department of Emergency Medicine and Director of the Disaster and Operational Medicine Fellowship. He was hired as a CNN Medical Analyst during the COVID-19 pandemic, and his pandemic-related works have been published in the New England Journal of Medicine, the Journal of Prehospital and Disaster Medicine, the New York Times, and the Boston Globe.



**Dr. Tenagne Haile-Mariam** is the Medical Director for George Washington University's COVID-19 reopening support services. She is board-certified in Emergency Medicine, Internal Medicine, and Infectious Disease and holds an appointment as Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine. Dr. Haile-Mariam is the GW Medical Director for the Pan-American Health Organization and previous director of the GW Wound Center.



**Dr. Neal Sikka** is a professor and practicing emergency physician at George Washington University. He has over 12 years of experience providing and developing telehealth services as the Innovative Practice Section Chief. Dr. Sikka is the fellowship director for the George Washington Telehealth and Digital Health Fellowship program and has led several grant-funded projects related to technology-enabled care.

1. "Poor Health Costs US Employers \$575 Billion and 1.5 Billion Days of Lost Productivity Per Integrated Benefits Institute". Integrated Benefits Institute, December 8, 2020. [www.ibiweb.org/poor-health-costs-us-employers-575-billion/](http://www.ibiweb.org/poor-health-costs-us-employers-575-billion/)

College of Emergency Physicians and Section Chief of Disaster and Operational Medicine at George Washington University Department of Emergency Medicine. “COVID is not unique. It may be unique in its severity in our lifetime, but just in the last two decades, we’ve experienced the outbreak of the first SARS virus, we’ve experienced H1N1, the pandemic flu, we’ve experienced the Ebola scare that we all dealt with.”

Discover five key lessons companies have learned from COVID-19 that will apply long after the pandemic has ended, with advice from leading medical experts on how to create a safer, more productive workplace on the road ahead.

### **Lesson 1: Protective measures reduce other infectious diseases.**

The measures we took to protect people from COVID-19—like masks, additional hand sanitizing, physical distancing, and improved ventilation—can have a positive impact on other diseases. Just look at what happened last year with another common airborne respiratory disease: influenza (i.e., the flu).

“What I think companies are going to realize is what we’ve done with flu this year as a country: we’ve eliminated it,” Dr. Phillips said. According to the CDC, flu activity during the 2020–2021 season has been “unusually low,” with confirmed influenza hospitalizations at a quarter of the rate seen during the 2011–2012 season, which was considered a low-severity year.<sup>2</sup>

“We’ve seen what we can do. We’ve eliminated those 400,000 annual hospitalizations and those 20,000 to 60,000 annual deaths from flu,” Dr. Phillips said. He expects people will use what they’ve learned this year, every year. “Come cold and flu season, it’s going to be mask season. It’s going to be hand-washing season. If these measures become part of our culture, it will have a major impact in our health system.”

By adopting protective measures during future cold and flu seasons and encouraging sick employees to stay home, employers can drastically reduce the spread of disease through the workplace.

### **Lesson 2: Employee health begins with workplace wellness.**

Companies have never played as prominent a role in employee health as they have over the past year. Organizations embraced new virtual work policies, implemented social distancing and ventilation measures in facilities, and encouraged masking and vaccinations.

“COVID has exposed us in so many ways: overwhelmed public health resources, health disparities, other inequities. It’s shown us that maybe we can’t just rely on public infrastructure and that we must partner with public resources to enhance our response,” said Dr. Neal Sikka, professor and practicing emergency physician at George Washington University, where he specializes in telehealth. “It may change an employer’s outlook on their role in health, beyond just being a provider of health insurance.”

Dr. Tenagne Haile-Mariam, the Medical Director for George Washington University’s COVID-19 reopening support service, agrees. “The differentiation between work as a place to go and do work versus work as a place of wellness is starting to occur,” she said. “When we think of the workplace as a place where wellness is maintained, it is not just going to be about whether people are vaccinated or not, but [about] a more holistic understanding of the workplace as a place where wellness is promoted. That may even extend beyond physical and mental health into environmental health and social responsibility.”

Companies that continue to embrace their roles as stewards of employee health will see positive impacts on overall wellness—and on the bottom line. A healthy workplace leads to healthy, productive, and satisfied employees, which in turn reduces the cost of employee illness on employers.

### **Lesson 3: Coordination and intelligence are essential to a quick response.**

In early 2020, the response rate to COVID-19 varied between nations, industries, and regions; but by and large, the world reacted quickly.

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2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2021. “Influenza-Associated Hospitalizations.” Weekly US Influenza Surveillance Report. Updated April 3, 2021. [www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/index.htm#S6](https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/index.htm#S6)

Nowhere was the speed of response more pronounced than it was for vaccines. “The fact that we have been able to get vaccinations so quickly is a testament to what we’ve done in terms of scientific discoveries and also our public health measures that have been in place,” said Dr. Haile-Mariam. “The science behind the vaccines is extraordinary...and it’s beautiful to see the work that’s been done and how it’s been brought up so quickly.”

Businesses have learned important lessons in terms of the speed of response to infectious diseases and our ability to slow the spread. With this, Dr. Phillips predicts that the next time a virus begins to spread, we will react even faster: masks will return, people will start working from home, travel will be restricted almost immediately.

Both employers and employees will drive an immediate response, said Dr. Phillips, “We have a general population that is so much more educated about respiratory viruses, transmission, safety, and prevention, and they’re going to be advocating for themselves to a much greater degree—demanding a safe workspace, demanding that their colleagues next to them with a cough are not there.”

#### **Lesson 4: Technology Is crucial to managing complex health situations.**

In just a few months, COVID-19 accelerated what so many organizations had struggled to do for the past decade—to be agile and adjust quickly to change.

Technology has played a crucial role in this speed of response and in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. From enabling people to work from home to safeguarding workers as they returned to the workplace, employers started using workforce safety solutions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and handle incidents as they occurred. These solutions offer capabilities such as contact tracing, employee health monitoring, vaccination tracking, and facility and visitor management.

Workforce safety technology solutions will continue to play an important role even after the pandemic. For example, Dr. Phillips says COVID-19 will likely require an annual vaccine or booster shot, which will make annual vaccination plans increasingly complex. Employers can use intelligent

automation to help their workforce, alerting them about vaccine availability each year and reminding them to update their vaccination status.

“We don’t really know what the future of vaccination is going to hold, but we can imagine that high-capacity and mass-vaccination settings are not going to be the long-term model,” said Dr. Sikka. “So employers are going to play a role in facilitating vaccines, just like we do with flu vaccines, helping people to get boosters or new vaccines that may be coming out.”

Technology plays an important role in helping companies manage complex vaccination campaigns and even track vaccination status annually to maintain a clear picture of their employee population health.

#### **Lesson 5: Shared information offers benefits for both employees and employers.**

The COVID-19 pandemic placed massive demands on workers. Employers asked their people to adopt a number of safety measures, shift to remote or hybrid work scenarios, and submit private health data.

Dr. Sikka emphasized that companies need to create a culture in which employees and employers both understand the benefits of adopting these measures and sharing their information, not just for themselves but for the whole organization.

“Sometimes the expected commitment from the employee is quite large and the implied commitment back from the employer may be quite small in return. We have to equalize that seesaw a little bit,” he said.

Employers should clearly communicate what benefits employees will get in return for their support and compliance. Highlight the importance of a healthy workplace and overall wellness. Don’t just say it once: repeat the benefits regularly, make sure they’re as clear as possible, and ask employees for their questions or feedback.

## **Conclusion: It pays to invest in employee health.**

Organizations have learned crucial lessons about protecting employee health over the past year. They've also seen a tangible return on investment in workforce safety.

"As a disaster doctor, I know that investing in mitigation saves you tenfold money than responding to a disaster," said Dr. Phillips. "The same is true in mitigating against infectious disease spread in your workplace [rather] than having people take time off from work and lose that productivity."

"Employers should really think about their approach to the long-term health of their company and its employees, not just COVID," added Dr. Sikka. "Look at the health of your workforce as an asset. Think of your investment as having some type of ROI."

## **About Appian Workforce Safety.**

Appian Workforce Safety is the only solution with a unified, automated, flexible approach for safely returning to onsite work. You get a single response hub to support contact tracing, case management, health monitoring, COVID-19 testing, vaccination tracking, and visitor and capacity management. Learn more at [appian.com/workforce-safety](https://appian.com/workforce-safety).

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