



South Korean Workplaces Grapple with COVID-19

By Leah Shepherd

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Much has changed in South Korean workplaces since February, when that nation became a hotspot for COVID-19 cases. Aggressive efforts for self-quarantine, widespread testing and contact tracing helped South Korea quickly stop the spread of infection. The country was able to safely hold an election on April 15 with a relatively high voter turnout.

In part, South Korea's success in stopping the spread of COVID-19 came from following the lessons learned after the outbreaks of SARS in 2003, H1N1 influenza in 2009 and MERS in 2015.

Dean Foster, founder of DFA Intercultural Global Solutions, based in New York City, said on April 28, "South Korea has largely contained the spread of the virus, and deaths have been kept to approximately 240 with a steep decline being currently reported."

Help for Employers and Workers

In February and March, South Korea's Ministry of Employment and Labor made numerous policy changes to address the economic effects of the pandemic, including:

- Providing financial assistance to workers on unpaid leave.
- Paying subsidies to employers for workers taking up to five days of family care leave because schools and child care centers were closed.
- Providing financial assistance to small and midsize employers to continue paying their workers.
- Simplifying procedures for employers to apply for a subsidy to pay for implementing flexible work arrangements.

South Korea relaxed social-distancing rules and allowed the reopening of businesses on May 6. Gatherings and events may take place if they follow disinfection guidelines, noted John Hall, director of corporate communications for Velocity Global, an international HR consulting firm headquartered in Denver that serves businesses in South Korea.

Employers' Response

A number of employers in South Korea are mandating temperature checks, hand sanitizer and face masks. "Many have marked off with tape alternating desks and closed common areas," Hall said. "Korean business is still quite conservative, so the adoption of telecommuting has been measured, especially in larger companies, starting with one day per week."

Trent Sutton, an attorney with Littler in Marina South, Singapore, said, "Social distancing and aggressive disinfecting are the new normal at least in the near term [in South Korea]. Employers regularly post hygiene guidelines around the worksite.

Employers continue to prohibit employee gatherings, such as the common after-work drinking expectations or in-office team-building events. Though the wearing of masks in Korea was already more common than in the United States prior to the pandemic, for individuals who feel ill, mask-wearing and other face-coverings is generally expected."

Sutton noted a recent increase in employees using paid and unpaid leave as they deal with their own illness, family illness, or other disruptions to their lives and schedule. He said the extra reliance on telework is "a significant shift from pre-COVID-19."

Kyle Hegarty, Asia-Pacific managing director for TSL Marketing, based in Singapore, said, "My contacts [in South Korea] are working from home two days a week and tell me some groups are doing split A/B teams to reduce large group exposure."

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Coronavirus and COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

Next Steps for Employers

Employers continue to navigate difficult legal and social situations while trying to keep workers as safe and productive as possible during a time of high stress and anxiety.

Sutton said, "Providing regular assurances that the company is doing what it can to maintain the business, preserve jobs and/or provide support to its employees will help to assuage the workforce and maintain continuity and productivity."

Before taking any steps toward layoffs, HR leaders should understand the local laws and explore alternatives.

"Remember that Korea is one of the most challenging jurisdictions in Asia to implement adverse changes to employment terms and conditions," Sutton advised. "I have seen Western companies make sweeping decisions on a global basis only to realize that their plans don't work the way they hoped in South Korea. Companies should ensure their global strategies are ultimately drilled down to account for local nuances that impact timing and applicability of such initiatives. For example, layoffs in Korea are regularly challenged in expensive lawsuits, as employers are held to a high standard of evidence to justify the need for the layoff, as well as internal due process to demonstrate fairness in the selection."

Consider whether your employee handbook and employment policies need to be updated to comply with new regulations addressing COVID-19-related harassment.

"Korea recently adopted a workplace anti-harassment scheme to prohibit bullying," Sutton said. "An employer must make sure that an employee is not harassed or bullied for any reason, including any reason arising out of the coronavirus. Companies are adopting anti-harassment provisions in the handbooks and often providing training seminars on workplace harassment."

Although economic times have been rough, the coronavirus pandemic does not necessarily mean that employers should pull out of South Korea or avoid making new investments in South Korea.

"This is a time to align with your finance and operations teams to gauge the health of your South Korea business," Hegarty said.

"The [South Korean] economy is starting to move, so if you have a healthy balance sheet and money to invest, this may be a good market to bet on."

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