State of the Response:
Employer Actions to Address the Pandemic
Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way many Americans work. Employees are now working from home or in plants, warehouses, or office settings with extremely different operating and safety protocols in place. The National Safety Council (NSC) launched the SAFER: Safe Actions for Employee Returns effort to give employers the tools and resources to ensure their workplaces are safe for employees, contractors, and the public. In addition to providing guidance, NSC wanted to understand the types of COVID-19-related safety protocols organizations were actually using and how those protocols might affect different health and operations outcomes.

In July 2020, NSC launched a national employer survey targeting safety and health decision-makers for organizations with at least 250 employees across several different U.S.-based industries. NSC asked respondents the extent to which they had implemented more than 20 COVID-19 safety practices and how doing so was potentially affecting their productivity and relevant COVID-19-related outcomes (e.g., confirmed cases). Additionally, respondents were asked to estimate the amount of money invested in their COVID-19 response as well as some key open-ended questions around their strategies related to testing and contact tracing, employee mental health and wellbeing, use of technology and recent successes and challenges.

Across nearly all industries, organizations are doing the following to mitigate COVID-19 risks for their employees:

- Providing means for their employees to practice good hygiene by investing in hand washing and hand sanitization stations throughout their facilities
- Implementing procedures to increase the frequency of cleaning and sanitization
- Providing proper PPE, including face coverings and face shields, to help protect their workers from exposure to the coronavirus
- Facilitating physical distancing by enabling remote work arrangements for non-essential workers and installing signage and other visual reminders of proper traffic flow and spacing for workers still reporting to facilities
- Investing most of their response dollars to institute remote work arrangements for people in their workforce who can work from home

Results from this survey also hint that positive coronavirus cases were on the rise as organizations started to ramp up operations and bring more employees back to the work sites. Therefore, investment in better surveillance protocols such as testing and contact tracing will be crucial aspects of the COVID-19 response for employers moving forward.

One key area for investment moving forward is focusing on employee mental health and wellbeing. Workers are under more pressure now to balance the needs of work and life with much more blurred boundaries than ever before. Employers are doing a lot to help their workers get through the pandemic, but there is always more to do to increase safety, health and wellbeing.
Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, as the country was beginning to grapple with the idea that life would look very different for the foreseeable future, employers were faced with a pressing question. How can we maintain our business operations and keep our workforce safe from the COVID-19 pandemic?

At first, the recommendations from public health entities such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) on how to effectively mitigate risks associated with COVID-19 were focused on preventing community spread of the virus with an emphasis on keeping obviously sick persons from coming into contact with others. As long as sick people stayed home, there should not be much risk for spread beyond the immediate family of an individual with the virus. However, as knowledge of the virus grew, including its ability to spread rather easily from person to person – even from people who were asymptomatic – the challenges for employers grew exponentially.

In response to the growing need for workplace guidance on safe operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, NSC created tools and resources to help employers ensure their workplaces are safe for employees, contractors and the public. In April, NSC established the SAFER: Safe Actions for Employee Returns effort with large and small companies, nonprofits, legal experts, public health professionals, medical professionals and government agency representatives. The SAFER initiative developed guidance and tools for organizations across the United States, releasing several playbooks, toolkits, assessments and issue papers on a range of COVID-19 workplace topics.

The SAFER resources provided comprehensive guidance split across different operations types (e.g., office versus open-industrial setting) and different general topic areas (e.g., physical considerations versus communications considerations) to be applicable to a broad range of organizations and across several industries. Although the recommendations were well received, the question remained as to whether organizations were implementing some of the proposed guidelines and what impact they might have on operations, safety, health and wellbeing.

To answer these questions, NSC conducted a survey of organizations to ask, among other topics:

- What types of COVID-19-related safety practices they were implementing
- How much they were spending on these practices
- What effect these safety practices had on productivity, performance and health and wellbeing

Methodology and Results

To get a snapshot of how employers were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, NSC surveyed 302 industry professionals who had oversight into the inner workings of their organization’s COVID-19 response. NSC utilized ROI Rocket data collection and recruitment services to collect

2 https://www.nsc.org/safer
3 https://www.roirocket.com
data from industry professionals who had significant decision-making influence or final decision-making influence regarding safety issues within their organization, which had to consist of at least 250 employees. Additionally, only participants from workplaces within the United States qualified for participation. To get adequate representation of different industries, NSC recruited a minimum of 25 participants each from closed-industrial (e.g., manufacturing), open-industrial (e.g., construction), storefront (e.g., retail) and office operations types.

To supplement the data collected through ROI Rocket, NSC also recruited an additional 32 participants through the SAFER task force and other affiliated NSC member organizations who fulfilled the same prerequisites as the ROI Rocket sample. Therefore, a total sample of 334 industry professionals from organizations with at least 250 employees who had significant decision-making influence for COVID-19-related safety measures participated in the survey. Data collection took place from July 14 to August 4, 2020.

**Demographic Snapshot**

A majority of sample participants came from manufacturing, construction, educational services and retail industries (see Figure 1). Most participant organizations had operations across

![Figure 1. Sample by Industry (N = 334)](image-url)
multiple settings with closed-industrial and office operations being the next most frequent operations types (see Figure 2), located mostly in the South and Midwest regions of the United States (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Sample by Operations Type (N = 334)

Figure 3. Sample by Region (N = 334)

A majority of our sample represented specific work sites or corporate headquarters with 500 or fewer employees typically in attendance pre-pandemic (see Figure 4) with annual revenues of $10 million or more (see Figure 5).
Impact on Attendance

To gain perspective on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted employee attendance, participants were asked what percentage of employees they have had on-site on average over the previous two months (roughly June and July 2020) and over the previous two weeks (roughly early to late July 2020). On average, employers have had about half of their employees on-site over the previous two months. Interestingly, there was a slight uptick in the percentage of employees working on-site over the previous two weeks compared to the previous two months, suggesting that during our data collection period, many organizations were starting to bring more employees back to the workplace (see Figure 6).
One goal of the employer survey was to gain a sense of which COVID-19-related safety practices were being implemented in different organizations across different industries and operations types. NSC created a list of 23 pandemic-related safety precautions that were recommended through the SAFER effort and included many best practices recommended by the CDC and other public health organizations. The safety practices included cleaning- and hygiene-related precautions, testing and tracing precautions and human resources and communications tools to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in the workplace.

Participants were asked to indicate whether they had finished implementing, started to implement, planned to implement or did not consider implementing each of the 23 COVID-19-related safety practices. Overall, the most commonly implemented safety practices were making hand sanitizers available throughout facilities; requiring mandatory face masks, shields, and/or other PPE; and requiring workers to clean and sanitize workstations before and after use (see Figure 7 for list of top 10 implemented practices). The least implemented COVID-19-related safety practices included increasing pay for frontline workers and instilling coronavirus testing either at home or at the worksite.
NSC also examined the top five COVID-19-related safety practices implemented based on industry and operations type. Across the top five industries and across all operations type there were only two industries with an implemented safety practice in their top five that was different from the overall top 10. Organizations in the construction (see Figure 8) and retail trade (see Figure 9) industries both reported implementing temperature screening at site entries more so than other industries. Although many industries are implementing temperature screenings, that practice did not break the top five for any other industries.
**Figure 8.** Construction Top 5 COVID-19-Related Safety Practices (N = 37)

- Hand sanitizers throughout facilities and near workstations: 79% finished implementing, 13% started to implement, 5% planned to implement, 3% did not consider/no action taken.
- Deployment of signage to educate employees on COVID-19 prevention and hygiene: 79% finished implementing, 16% started to implement, 5% planned to implement, 3% did not consider/no action taken.
- Require operators to sanitize work surfaces of machines, stations, and tools at the beginning and/or end of each shift: 71% finished implementing, 24% started to implement, 3% planned to implement, 3% did not consider/no action taken.
- Remote work for non-essential employees: 68% finished implementing, 29% started to implement, 3% planned to implement, 3% did not consider/no action taken.
- Temperature screening at site entry: 66% finished implementing, 21% started to implement, 11% planned to implement, 3% did not consider/no action taken.

**Figure 9.** Retail Trade Top 5 COVID-19-Related Safety Practices (N = 32)

- Hand sanitizers throughout facilities and near workstations: 82% finished implementing, 18% started to implement.
- Mandatory face masks/shields or other PPE equipment: 76% finished implementing, 18% started to implement, 6% planned to implement.
- Temperature screening at site entry: 70% finished implementing, 21% started to implement, 3% planned to implement.
- Require operators to sanitize work surfaces of machines, stations, and tools at the beginning and/or end of each shift: 67% finished implementing, 21% started to implement, 12% planned to implement.
- Increased frequency of deep cleaning in common areas: 67% finished implementing, 21% started to implement, 12% planned to implement.
COVID-19-Related Safety Practices Spend

In addition to the types of COVID-19-related safety practices organizations are implementing, NSC asked how much each organization was investing in their coronavirus response. For those organizations who could provide an estimate of their COVID-19 spend, most were spending $100,000 or less (see Figure 10).

![Figure 10. COVID-19-Related Safety Practices Spend (N = 173)](image)

Of course, the size of the organization plays a role in how much spend is required to supply PPE or install plexiglass barriers in facilities as well as the number of safety practices a company decides to implement. Therefore, NSC also examined how much each organization was spending per COVID-19-related safety practice per each employee they had at their site. By doing so, NSC could make direct comparisons across industries in terms of average amount spent on each safety practice for each employee regardless of how many practices they implemented or how many employees they had on-site. Overall, the average amount of money spent on each practice per employee was $266. The industry with the highest spend per practice per employee was retail followed by educational services, healthcare and construction (see Figure 11). In terms of operations types, organizations with storefront operations (which is most retail) seem to spend the most per practice per employee, followed by open-industrial environments and office environments (see Figure 12).

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4 This figure includes employees who were working remotely as remote work costs were a significant proportion of COVID-19 spending for many organizations.
NSC also examined how spending was allocated across the different types of safety practices. To that end, NSC asked each organization to allocate in percentage points their entire COVID-19 spend across the safety practices they reported implementing. The COVID-19-related safety practice that used the greatest percentage of spend allocation was providing remote work capabilities for non-essential employees. The second greatest source of spend allocation was providing face masks/shields or other PPE, with expanding sick leave policies a close third (see Figure 13).
One potential barrier to COVID-19-related safety practice adoption is the perceived or actual impact implementing a specific practice can have on productivity. For example, some organizations, particularly those that provide essential services, cannot perform their job responsibilities and maintain suggested physical distancing in the workplace (e.g., repairing a large piece of equipment). Therefore, NSC wanted to get a sense of the impact that different safety practices had on productivity.

Employers were asked whether each safety practice had a negative, neutral or positive impact on their productivity, given the constraints of operating during a pandemic. In essence, these results can be interpreted as the degree to which each safety practice allowed operations to continue while adhering to suggested COVID-19 guidelines and protocols. Providing hand sanitizers throughout facilities had the most positive impact on productivity, followed by providing coronavirus testing at site entry and communication channels to address employee concerns and questions (see Figure 14).
Quarantined and Confirmed Case Rates

To produce an estimate of how hard organizations have been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, NSC asked participant organizations to report on a number of metrics related to employee self-isolation/quarantine and confirmed coronavirus testing. Organizations were asked to report the number of employees that were self-isolated/quarantined over the previous two months (roughly June and July 2020) and previous two weeks (roughly early to late July 2020). They were also asked to report the number of confirmed coronavirus cases over the same two time periods. NSC asked about the two time periods to get a sense of whether quarantine or confirmed case rates were changing over time.

To make comparisons across industries, the quarantine and confirmed case numbers were converted to rates of quarantine and infection per 100 employees, similar to an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recordable rate calculation. The vast majority of organizations in the sample reported a self-isolation/quarantine rate lower than 10 and a confirmed coronavirus case rate lower than five (see Figure 15) suggesting that most organizations are doing a good job of controlling infection in their workplaces.
To obtain a more nuanced view on how coronavirus confirmed case rates vary across industry, NSC also analyzed the rate of confirmed cases over the previous two months by industry with the number of cases occurring in the previous two weeks as a percentage of overall cases for the previous two months. As shown in Figure 16, the construction industry had the greatest rate of confirmed cases at almost nine confirmed cases per 100 employees. Interestingly, nearly a third of those cases were from the previous two weeks, suggesting that cases in the construction industry were on the rise in the period that this survey was conducted. If cases were consistent across the two-month period, then the percentage of cases that occurred in the previous two weeks should be around 25%. In fact, only the educational services and accommodation and food services industries noticeably improved the over the course of time that was measured.
NSC also examined the relationships between COVID-19-related safety practice implementation and coronavirus confirmed case rates. Although the data are correlational in nature, NSC wanted to see if there were any patterns to uncover regarding the association between implementing a safety practice and actual case rate outcomes. Organizations that implemented employee self-reporting had significantly higher confirmed case rates than those that did not (see Figure 17). This was the only significant difference among all of the COVID-19-related safety practices. The most likely explanation for this difference is that organizations that did not implement employee self-screening likely used some sort of on-site screening tool, which would be a more objective way to assess COVID-19 symptoms (e.g., no need to rely on honest self-reporting by employees) and lead to screening out more potentially positive cases.

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5 Mean difference = 1.56, Welch’s t = 2.00, p = 0.047, d = 0.21
Four other safety practices had marginally significant differences that should be interpreted with caution. Organizations that required operators to sanitize machines, work stations and tools frequently had marginally higher confirmed case rates than those that did not implement such sanitization schedules.\(^6\) Organizations that implemented communication channels for employee concerns had marginally higher confirmed case rates than those did not implement such practices.\(^7\) Organizations that implemented coronavirus testing at site entry had marginally lower case rates compared to those that did not implement testing.\(^8\) Finally, organizations that restricted visitors on-site had marginally lower case rates compared to those that did not restrict visitors.\(^9\)

**Qualitative Responses**

In addition to the closed-ended survey questions discussed so far, the participant organizations in the sample were also asked a few open-ended questions about testing and contact tracing, mental health, technology, organizational culture and challenges/successes in their pandemic response. Although these topics will be covered in greater detail in the next NSC report on the Future World of Work, some broad findings are discussed below.

**Testing and Contact Tracing:** Most of the organizations providing a response mentioned following CDC or other public health guidelines and working with the local health department to facilitate contact tracing. A few employers mentioned implementing coronavirus testing on site and/or hiring third parties to conduct testing and establish contact tracing procedures.

\(^6\) Mean difference = 1.47, Welch’s t = 1.96, p = 0.05, d = 0.20
\(^7\) Mean difference = 1.41, Welch’s t = 1.69, p = 0.09, d = 0.18
\(^8\) Mean difference = 1.47, Welch’s t = 1.76, p = 0.08, d = 0.21
\(^9\) Mean difference = 1.89, Welch’s t = 1.68, p = 0.09, d = 0.21
Mental Health: The most frequently mentioned mental health benefit implemented in the sample was increasing or reiterating employee assistance programs for their workforce. Some organizations mentioned having counselors available virtually or on-site and a few mentioned making mental health resources and helplines available to their workforce.

Technology: By far the most frequently referenced technology adaptation was the use of web conferencing software such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Cisco Webex. Other investments included technology to automatically scan employee and visitor temperatures at site entrances and providing remote work equipment to enable smooth transitions to remote work and home office setups for employees who can work from home.

Organizational Culture: Of the many observed changes in organizational culture, the most frequently cited changes have been increases in general awareness of safe and unsafe behaviors in the workplace, increased adherence to non-COVID-related safety protocols, and greater receptivity to communication and messaging about safety and health procedures and protocols.

Challenges and Successes: Although there were several mentioned, some of the most frequent challenges were employee compliance with wearing face masks and maintaining physical distancing, as well as the cost of keeping up more widespread safety protocols (e.g., extensive cleaning). Some successes included finding new and effective means of communication in a mostly virtual environment and the ability to pivot to conducting business differently to change with the needs of the pandemic.

Employer Response Post Data Collection
As many organizations have already implemented their COVID-19 response protocols, employers are shifting attention to future developments related to testing and vaccination. In the time since NSC collected these data, employers have begun to more seriously consider testing at their worksites with increased attention on testing barriers such as cost, required medical infrastructure, efficacy and availability of adequate testing materials. Employers are also heavily considering how to address vaccination priorities and requirements for their workforces as multiple vaccines become available over the next six to 18 months.

Discussion
The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the way employers are operating and will continue to affect the ways work is done in the future. With the input of industry professionals, health and wellbeing experts, and many other stakeholders, NSC released several guidelines and playbooks through the SAFER initiative to help employers navigate the new risks created by the COVID-19 pandemic. To examine the extent to which employers are implementing these recommendations and other COVID-19-related metrics, NSC surveyed over 300 safety and health professionals with decision-making power on their organization’s COVID-19 response
from U.S. based organizations with at least 250 employees. Among the myriad of results, a few key findings emerged that are critical to understanding the employer response to the pandemic and how to move forward from here.

Employers are consistent in their implementation of some of the most heavily discussed protocols that can make workplaces safer. Across nearly all industries, organizations are providing means for their employees to practice good hygiene by investing in hand washing and hand sanitization stations throughout their facilities. This might seem like a simple change, but there are several industries – construction in particular – where hand washing is more difficult because of worksite location and other environmental factors that prevent workers from gaining access to even some basic hygiene equipment.

Related to proper hygiene, almost all organizations across most industries are implementing procedures to increase the frequency of cleaning and sanitization. Many are even requiring that shared equipment be cleaned and sanitized before and after use by each worker. Although some challenges uncovered in the qualitative responses of the survey indicated that workers are struggling with cleaning fatigue, ensuring at least shared workspaces are clean and sanitized is a critical component for reducing spread.

Employers across nearly all industries are also providing proper PPE, including face masks and face shields, to help protect their workers from exposure to the coronavirus. Although PPE is a basic tenet of workplace safety and may be viewed as a last line of defense for risk mitigation, there are many industries where PPE is not commonly used, so employers are adapting to the new demands of personal protection and making an effort to provide PPE to their workers.

The third area in which employers are making an effort to reduce spread of COVID-19 is facilitating physical distancing by enabling remote work arrangements for non-essential workers and installing signage and other visual reminders of proper traffic flow and spacing.

As helpful and crucial as these mitigation strategies are, there is still a need for employers to invest in mitigation strategies that can help identify and reduce the spread of COVID-19, such as testing and contact tracing. Rightly so, employers are investing most of their COVID-19 response dollars to implement remote work arrangements for people in their workforce who can work from home. Indeed, this is an area in which greater investment can pay off because remote work eliminates exposure from employee to employee.

For workers who must perform their duties on-site, proper hygiene, physical distancing and mask wearing only go so far to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. Evidence is mounting that the virus 1) can be spread via airborne transmission,\(^{11}\) and 2) often presents without symptoms,\(^{12}\) which means more stringent tools to identify who has the virus and their associated close contacts is crucial. The data from this survey hint that positive coronavirus cases were on the rise as organizations started to ramp up operations and bring more employees back to the work environment. Spread will likely continue to increase as organizations increase operations unless these more stringent surveillance protocols are put in place. Testing is a critical component and NSC is an advocate of an increased response at the federal and state levels for investment in testing for employers.\(^{13}\)

Finally, mental health investment is crucial. As we move toward the new world of work, changes are going to have to be made to allow for the new demands of working from home to coexist with the demands of work. Many employees are now tasked with monitoring and advising remote learning with their children or providing full-time care for young children or older loved ones. The extra demands on the workforce is palpable\(^{14}\) and workplaces need to do more to address these concerns from the employer perspective.

Employers are answering the call to provide needed occupational safety and health measures to their workforces. However, more can always be done as health and safety risks continue to evolve. Now, more than ever, organizations should choose to invest in their employees and keeping them safe.

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\(^{12}\) https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7470698

\(^{13}\) https://www.nsc.org/Portals/0/Documents/NSCDocuments_Corporate/Policy-Positions/covid-19/W-COVID-19-testing-159.pdf