

Six Things to Know About Adapting to the New Workplace

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You are no doubt preparing to return to, or already returning to, a workplace that looks very different from the one you remember. To that end, there is some bad news and some good news. We'll save the good news for last.

1. Masks are in...but gloves are soooo April

Masks are very important. Not as much to protect you from others, (they do help to a small degree) [but to protect others from you](#). If you feel fine, you likely don't have COVID-19 ("COVID" for short). But many people who contract COVID show no symptoms. Some asymptomatic spreaders are responsible for a large number of new cases... Hence the masks.

[However, gloves are out as protective equipment](#). This is for several reasons.

First, the COVID virus lives [longer on smooth surfaces](#) than on hands. Latex gloves have smooth surfaces.

Second, people wearing gloves have a false sense of security and in turn touch door handles and other surfaces, such as items on a grocery shelf, more often. This may transmit COVID more readily.

This brings us to the third reason – this false sense of security seems to permit them to touch their face or itch their nose, right before they open that door.

The infection potential of face-touching is magnified by the likelihood that glove wearers are less likely to wash their hands. [They have a false sense of security](#).

Instead, try some more creative reminder devices. We had recommended marking a finger with a sharpie in an earlier post. Those marks do have a habit of wearing off, so we might suggest multiple reminders for your hands, like those little orthodontic rubber bands, or a latex cap. Or markings. Mix it up. Otherwise we tend to forget, which of course defeats the purpose of a mnemonic device.

Finally, remember that these are called disposable gloves, not just “gloves.” So, after touching hard surfaces, like tables and door handles, dispose of them and put on new ones. That’s what medical professionals do.

2. Indoor transmission is vastly more likely than outdoor transmission

Most business is conducted indoors. This is unfortunate because the [limited data we have](#) suggests most transmission takes place indoors. [Colds and flu](#) are the same. (“Colds” were so-named centuries ago, when it was noticed that they are more likely in the winter, for just this reason.)

Originally, we were going to post that interior doors should be propped open, so that people don’t have to use the door handles. But as you can see from the graph below, the virus can easily spread through open spaces indoors.

[In this display, asymptomatic](#) (or pre-symptomatic) carrier A1 infected people at his table and adjacent tables.

Before panicking too much, it is important to note that [this transmission took place in China](#), in January, *before* precautions were widely implemented. What was learned was that some combination of the following matters, though it’s difficult to pin down which:

- amount of ventilation
- direction of airflow/ventilation
- time of exposure
- physical distance

Hence your workplace is controlling for as many of these variables as possible.

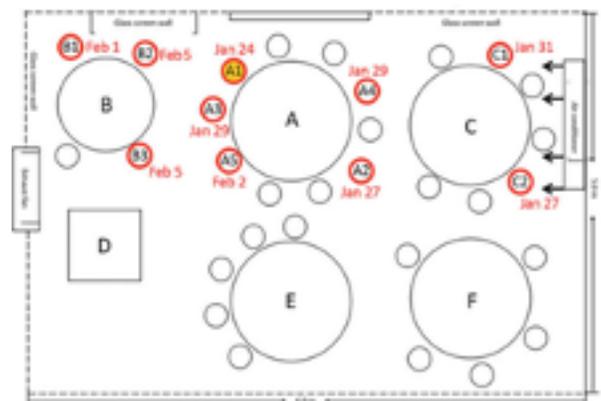
3. Taking temperature at the door is very overrated

Consider the example above of an asymptomatic carrier infecting a roomful of people, it is quite possible that [almost half of spread occurs](#) through pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic carriers.

The difference between the two is that pre-symptomatic carriers will develop symptoms, while asymptomatic carriers never do. ([It is now thought](#) that the former are a bigger risk to others.)

By definition these folks would not have a fever. Hence, a temperature check may miss exactly the people of most concern.

Further, a workplace that relies on this technique and gloves may find that employees let their guard down for the more reliable techniques of distancing, masks, and handwashing/sanitizing.



4. Good news: You can open your mail and read memos, to the extent anyone still sends memos

Yes, it is best to communicate online and frequently sanitize your keyboard, mouse and smartphones. Your mail is likely safe. Paper is porous and nowhere near as virus friendly as door handles, glass and other smooth (nonporous) surfaces. Once you are done with your mail, wash or sanitize your hands. Probably overkill, but a trivial risk of infection, repeated every day, adds up.

5. Good news: You can still eat

A recent *Boston Globe* article quotes someone as saying: “The big deli platter is a thing of the past.” You are way more likely to get infected opening the door (which itself should be redesigned so that it can be opened with an elbow push) to go into the break room (alone) than eating a sandwich from the deli platter. There has yet to be one case of foodborne contamination.

Having said that, we wouldn't be scooping anything out of any bowl with a common spoon. This “good news” specifically refers to discrete sandwiches, pieces of fruit, and, yes, brownies or cookies.

6. More good news: Exposure probably needs to be cumulative to lead to infection

The concept of the “viral load” has been studied fairly extensively. With conscientious commitment to all the steps, [as with Boston's healthcare workers](#), your risk of exposure can be low.

What about being reasonably but not obsessively conscientious? If you wear a mask near other people, wash your hands, and avoid touching your face, your odds of getting infected at work are still quite low. This is true:

- even if your workplace doesn't do everything exactly right;
- even if a few unknowingly contagious people come to work and the temperature monitor doesn't pick them up;
- even if your building hasn't reconfigured its ventilation system in the last few months.

[To be infected just on the basis of breathing in a shared space, you would have to spend extended time](#) in close proximity with a contagious coworker, in order for the “viral load” to be worrisome.

Be sure to register or play your July quiz. Finally, as Massachusetts enters Phase Three, we can focus on health hazards unrelated to COVID. Those haven't gone away.

Play now: <https://mass.quizzify.com>