

As States Reopen, the Boss Wants to Know What You're Up To This Weekend

Employers worry that workers' off-duty activities could risk infection in the workplace

Companies have a new question for employees: Any plans this weekend?

As U.S. states reopen, sending residents back to work as well as social life, employers are urging workers to be cautious when they are off duty, and at least one local official has begun advising employers to ask staffers about activities in their off hours. Some companies are concerned that the many safeguards put in place at work to limit the spread of the coronavirus—from policies requiring masks on the job to separated desks—could be undone if workers are taking risks off the job.

Yet employers have to tread carefully, legal authorities say, making sure to exert influence without violating employee privacy.

Protecting workers as many cities begin to loosen restrictions is only the latest challenge employers must navigate as businesses settle into a new normal rife with uncertainties.

Neil Blumenthal, co-chief executive of eyewear seller Warby Parker, held an employee town hall last week in which he also reminded the New York company's roughly 3,000 employees to be on guard during the Memorial Day weekend.

"I ended it with: Hey, I hope you have a great weekend, remember, please stay vigilant. We all have cabin fever, we all want to be out enjoying ourselves. But this is not over," Mr. Blumenthal said. "There are new cases everywhere in the country."

As the weather warms, reports of [large gatherings](#) have emerged from North Carolina to Hawaii and places in between. [In St. Louis](#), the county executive is pushing for companies to ask workers about off-work activities over the weekend in reaction to crowds apparently [violating government guidelines](#).

Companies have limited sway over employees' lives outside the workplace, legal experts say. Bosses can educate workers about the potential risks and ask them to stay away from the office [but can't bar them](#) from going to a bar, a party, or using mass transit in their personal time.

The New York Stock Exchange has asked those [returning to its historic trading floor](#) in lower Manhattan to avoid arriving via public transportation. Floor traders must also sign a liability waiver that prevents them from suing the NYSE if they get infected at the exchange.

"I have some concerns with the states opening back up and people, I'll say, not properly watching their behaviors and violating some of the safety expectations and then potentially getting Covid-19," said Cary Dunston, CEO of cabinet maker American Woodmark Corp. on a conference call with investors Tuesday morning. The Winchester, Va., company employed more than 9,000 people across 18 manufacturing sites as of last year.

"I've been worried about this from the start," said Jay Timmons, CEO of the National Association of Manufacturers, a sector that has largely kept operating through the economic shutdown. "Now that we are getting the economy open," he said, "we have to double down because if we don't we could potentially have a significant rebound of the infection rate."

Employees generally have [no legal obligation to disclose](#) information such as how they spend their personal time, employment lawyers say. But there are ethical considerations when it comes to things like whether a family member has become ill, workplace experts say, so that managers can alert an employee's colleagues.

In a roughly 40-page guide published for employees, [VF Corp.](#), owner of brands such as Vans and the North Face, advises staffers to avoid close contact with people outside of their homes and to stay away from mass gatherings to maintain proper distancing. It also recommends they avoid ride-sharing, car-pooling or public transportation, if possible, and to steer clear of lunch and after-work gatherings. The company does temperature screenings and asks employees a series of questions verbally as they enter its distribution centers and other facilities.

Steve Rendle, VF's chief executive, said the company has debated how to best keep employees safe as more regions reopen, while balancing privacy concerns. The Denver-based company could ask employees where they traveled and whether they came into contact with anyone with a confirmed case of the virus, he said. The company is exploring how to reduce risks of an employee's personal travel, but so far hasn't implemented new policies. VF operated four manufacturing sites, 23 distribution centers and more than 1,300 retail stores as of March 2020.

"We're not just responsible for ourselves, but my actions have a direct relationship to your comfort and safety, so we need to think about each other, and those team members that we will come back in contact with," Mr. Rendle said. "It does apply when you go somewhere on a weekend: Where did you go, who did you come into contact with—anybody test positive?"

What's more, employers must trust that staffers will be truthful about their behaviors before arriving at work. Many likely will, said Larry Gadea, CEO of workplace software platform Envoy Inc., but he warns that some employees may make mistakes or outright lie.

Envoy is developing a questionnaire product for companies to inquire about workers' symptoms that day and whether they have recently been near someone diagnosed with Covid-19. The company's technology is already used in many offices to check-in visitors, track packages and assign meeting rooms.

Employers want to take necessary precautions, Mr. Gadea said, but risks exist beyond the employee's own behavior. If a household has two adults going to

separate workplaces, each company could have different protocols for preventing infections. “If you go to your workplace, and your spouse goes to their workplace, how do you know that everything is OK at their workplace?” he said. “None of this is perfect. It’s all about minimizing risk.”

Warby Parker doesn’t ask employees how they spend their personal time, Mr. Blumenthal said, but it has deployed daily questionnaires and safety checks at a manufacturing facility in Sloatsburg, N.Y. Employees are asked if they have recently been in a medical facility that is treating coronavirus patients, for instance, or if they share a household with somebody known to have a confirmed case of Covid-19. But the company knows there are challenges to keeping employees safe beyond its own retail stores and facilities.

“Asking someone a question of, ‘Hey, did you hang out with a group at the beach?’” he said. “Unless we were advised by a public-health expert to ask that question, I probably wouldn’t.”