As lockdowns in some countries start to ease and workplaces reopen, it is only natural that employees might be anxious about a return to work.

Until the development of a vaccine or medicine, the virus is likely to continue circulating in our communities. Because of this, maintaining economic activity and employment – to secure livelihoods – while safeguarding public health will remain a policy dilemma for governments.

So how can you, as a journalist, advise your audience, and employers, about what preventive measures they can take to prepare themselves for a safe return to work and a gradual restart of their business activities?

It’s important to always listen to the questions you are receiving from your audience and to what they are naturally talking about. By responding to the actual questions and concerns that are unique to your audience and your context, you will build trust and be a more valuable information provider.

You could consider running a poll or looking at social media discussions to see what questions concerns and misinformation may be circulating in your community.

We have pulled together some general guidance, sourced from the region and around the world to respond to some of the common questions you may see. This information is intended to be a starting point only - any information should be localized to make sure it suits the context and culture where you work.

1. “Is it safe for me to go back to work?”

This will be the topmost question your media audience will pose. Another common response from your readers and viewers might be: “I wasn’t happy to go back as I feel it’s way too soon.”

Of course the ‘safety’ of returning to work depends largely on the occupation of the person and what measures their employers have put in place, if any, to keep them safe. Because of this, it is a good idea to ensure employees look at what different challenges are posed by different occupations in the context they might be facing in this change.

It is also important to recognise the power imbalance between employers and employees. Many workers might feel they have not much of a choice about whether they return to work. Importantly, they may need to continue earning money to support themselves and their family and they fear they may lose their job if they don’t return when their employer asks.

If an employee does have concerns about workplace safety and feels not ready to go back to work, the concerns should be shared with the employer.

For more information, contact: covid-19@internews.org
If measures are not put in place to remove the serious and imminent danger at the workplace, the employee can seek legal help and not return to work until that safety issue is resolved by the employer.

As a journalist, you can help these employees by pointing out occupational safety and health regulations in the labour laws of the country. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has published a policy brief on a safe and healthy return to work during the COVID-19 pandemic which can be used as a generic guide for your audience.

Consumer Reports, an independent, nonprofit member organization, recommends that employees need to ask the following basic questions before they head into the office:

- Will social distancing be practiced?

The World Health Organization states that COVID-19 spreads mostly through close person-to-person contact and respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

That’s why social distancing is one of the best measures to limit its spread.

Whenever possible, employers should ensure that workers can maintain a 2-metre distance from one another, which could mean physically moving furniture or desks to separate workstations, operating at a reduced capacity, or staggering shifts to decrease the number of people who are in the workplace at one time.

- What other precautions will be in place?

In addition to spreading through respiratory droplets, it’s believed that COVID-19 can be transmitted through contaminated surfaces.

Scientists have found that the coronavirus could stay up to four hours on copper, up to 24 hours on cardboard, and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel. For these reasons it’s important that companies also regularly disinfect communal areas and surfaces.

There also must be regular cleaning of counters, door handles, elevator buttons and appliances. Consumer Reports specifies that employers must make sure cleanings occur in the morning, before everyone comes in, again in the mid-afternoon, and then again before people leave.

Employees should also be provided with essential cleaning materials to keep their own workspace clean (for example wipes/disinfection products, paper towels and waste bins/bags).
Is good hygiene encouraged at the workplace?

Employers must make it easy for employees to follow good hygiene practices by keeping plenty of supplies on hand and must stock up on items such as:

- Disinfectant wipes and/or spray
- Hand sanitizer
- Hand soap
- Paper towels
- Tissues
- Face masks

It is the responsibility of employers to ensure they clearly communicate basic protective measures to their employees. This could mean putting up posters that clearly show simple steps employees can take to protect themselves and holding meetings to verbally explain measures and provide the opportunity to ask questions. It is important to ensure multiple communication channels are used to spread and reinforce this information to ensure that staff with literacy or language difficulties are included and that staff have the opportunity to clarify any responsibilities that are not clear.

Washing hands frequently with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Washing hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand rub kills viruses that may be on hands.

Maintain social distancing of at least 2 meters (6 feet) distance between oneself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing. When someone coughs or sneezes they spray small liquid droplets from their nose or mouth which may contain virus. If you are too close, you can breathe in the droplets, including the COVID-19 virus if the person coughing has the disease.

Practice respiratory hygiene. This means covering one’s mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze. Then dispose of the used tissue immediately. Droplets spread the virus. By following good respiratory hygiene, you protect the people around you from COVID-19.

What happens if an employee has COVID-19 or shows symptoms?

Some companies may choose to screen employees before they enter the building, a process that might include screening questions—such as asking about symptoms like chills and fever—or taking workers’ temperatures.

If a temperature check is to be performed, the International Labour Organization recommends it should be carried out for all workers in a uniform manner (irrespective of function, type of contract etc.) and with reliable equipment (e.g. infrared thermometer) by persons who have received appropriate instructions.

Some countries do not recommend temperature screening as COVID-19 does not always involve the presence of fever. Additionally, screening may lead to unintended consequences – people with fever may be more likely to conceal their condition by taking medication (e.g. paracetamol) to suppress the high temperature and this can give a false sense of security.
If workers fall ill, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends they stay home until at least three days have passed since recovery and at least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared. For workers who have been in close contact with someone with COVID-19, the agency advises they remain at home and practice social distancing for 14 days.

2. “I’m in the high-risk category to contract COVID-19. What should I tell my employer?”

Some of your readers and viewers might have a pre-existing condition, such as lung disease, impaired immunity, or many other health issues that increase the risk of severe COVID-19 and it is important that the right advice be given.

Older people and people with chronic conditions, including diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, have faced higher mortality from COVID-19. In China, the death rate was less than 0.5 percent among people under 50 years of age, 1.3 percent among those 50 to 59, and 3.6 percent among those 60 to 69. People with diabetes had a risk of death three times more compared with the rest of the population.

The risk for people with HIV getting very sick is greatest in:

- People with a low CD4 cell count, and
- People not on HIV treatment (antiretroviral therapy or ART).
- People with HIV can also be at increased risk of getting very sick with COVID-19 based on their age and other medical conditions.

The ILO's Safe return to work – Guide for employers on COVID-19 prevention advises workers that if they belong to a group that can be more vulnerable to COVID-19, they should consult with their doctors. The doctor can assess the case and make recommendations for particular preventive activities. Preventive measures can also include e.g. telework or reassigning workers to tasks entailing lower risk of contracting COVID-19.

For those living with a condition that might increase their risk, the best way to ensure that they have legal protection is to tell their employer. As an employee, they can request that such information is kept confidential and that it is shared amongst the minimum number of people necessary for them to be assisted to carry out their role.

An employer should not subject any employee to any discrimination if they have a condition that may increase their vulnerability to COVID-19. As a journalist, you can help your audience in the following ways:

- Pointing out what laws are in place in the country that make discrimination in employment illegal
- Challenge myths and stereotypes of those living with a condition that make them a high-risk group for contracting COVID-19
- Avoid damaging and disrespectful language when reporting on this high-risk group
- Avoid sensationalist language that could make people more fearful
- Never reveal a person’s identity in the high-risk group without their consent.

The US CDC in its Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to COVID-19 states that if an employer knows that an employee has a medical condition that may put the employee at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19, the employer can make the following provisions:
• Providing additional or enhanced personal protective equipment, including gowns, masks, gloves or other protective equipment

• Taking additional or enhanced protective measures, such as erecting physical barriers or increasing space between employees

• Temporarily modifying work schedules to reduce contact with co-workers or relocating the employee’s personal workspace to increase social distancing.

This is, of course, a best case scenario for how employers should react to and protect vulnerable employees. However, we recognise not every workplace has the ability to put in place these measures. It’s important to use your platform as a journalist to advocate for practices that protect the most vulnerable in our community and to work with local employers to highlight the challenges they may be having in meeting these standards.

3. “How can I safely use public transport to get to work?”

As the lockdowns are eased, your readers and viewers will also be looking at how they can safely get to work. More of them will be getting on buses, trains, sky-trains, trams and subways.

For many workers, public transport is their only option to get to their workplace. So how can you advise them to navigate this issue safely?

The main responsibility is keeping the virus transmission suppressed by behaving sensibly and responsibly as restrictions are relaxed.

Maintaining physical distance from others and washing our hands regularly are possibly even more important when we’re using public transport, given we potentially come into contact with a lot of people in an enclosed space.

The Singapore Public Transport Council has the following advice for commuters:

• Do not travel unless you have to – Leave public transport for those that need it, cycling and walking are great ways to travel
• Wear a mask to protect yourself and others
• Wash or sanitize your hands after touching handrails and grab poles
• Throw away soiled masks properly into trash bins
• Show care for other commuters and remain vigilant
• Keep cycling and walking if you can – ease the pressure on transport, stay fit and healthy and help keep the air clean
• Maintain a two-meter social distancing wherever possible with respect and patience – to keep yourself and others safe
• Avoid talking on the phone or to one another. These measures are aimed to minimise people from producing aerosolised droplets that go on to infect others or settle on surfaces.

In the context of your country, you need to ask how possible these measures can be implemented. Do commuters feel safe using the service? What role does the government have in ensuring these environments are safe for citizens?
What about wearing masks on public transport?

Where distancing is difficult, such as on public transport, the WHO advises that face masks should be worn. The WHO latest guidance states masks can be used either for protection of healthy persons (worn to protect oneself when in contact with an infected individual) or for source control (worn by an infected individual to prevent onward transmission). The WHO’s guidance on how to wear masks safely can be found here.

However, you have to remind your audience that while masks potentially offer some additional protection to them and others, it’s still critical to follow physical distancing and other hygiene measures.

Guidelines for employers

Your audience also includes employers and they should be reminded to take reasonable steps to ensure a safe and healthy workplace under applicable occupational health and safety legislation. Ensure you use your platform to have an open discussion with both workers and employers to ensure both have the opportunity to raise and resolve challenges they may be having in the COVID-19 workplace.

You might consider hosting a Facebook live panel session, running a poll or survey, or allowing employers and employees a hotline they can call to leave a message with their thoughts. Remember that both employers and employees each have very different contexts that they work in, so it’s important to try and ensure for a diverse representation of opinions. For example, highlight large and small businesses, unionised environments, self-employed workers and migrant workers.

In particular, employers who fail to take adequate steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace may be subject to inspections, compliance orders and significant fines imposed by occupational health and safety officials. There is also the potential for civil liability where the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace leads to illness or injury for employees and third parties who do not have workers’ compensation coverage.

ILO has the following advice for employers, in calling for a phased approach to employees returning to work:

- Determine which workers should return to work first. It is unlikely for most companies that all workers will be able to return to the workplace at once. Consideration should be given to which workers, departments, groups, or units should return first based on business needs.
- Workers who can continue to telework should do so. Flexible working time such as staggered hours or shift work can be considered to limit congestion in the workplace.
- Maintain an open dialogue with workers (and/or with trade unions when applicable). Workers can make important contributions when assessing risks and identifying solutions. Also, some changes, e.g. with regard to shifts or telework, may need to be negotiated with the unions or individually.

ILO recommends that employers monitor frequently the requirements and recommendations issued by relevant health and labour authorities in their countries. The Ministry of Manpower Singapore, for instance, has up-to-date advisories for employers on COVID-19. ILO and UNICEF have published guidelines on how employers can monitor and follow national advice from local and national authorities and communicate it to the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic.