

Tech Solutions to COVID-19 Safety and Contact Tracing

By Cristina Rouvalis

November 19, 2020

As wary employees return to offices, factory floors or even motion-picture lots during a pandemic that has dragged on for eight months, some companies are instituting high-tech personal protection measures to try to keep them safe.

New apps, gadgets and wearable devices are on the market to help employers with tasks like electronic contact tracing and taking temperatures. Other wearable devices beep when two people come within six feet of each other—a high-tech force field to remind people to abide by social distancing guidelines.

At Cozen O'Connor law firm, about 10 percent of the 1,500 lawyers and other employees have returned to work across all 31 of their offices—enough for the company to buy a prescreening app that employees download to their phones.

Before they come to work, employees punch in their temperatures and any activities they participated in over the past two weeks, such as dining out at a restaurant. Depending on the risk factors, the employee will get a message: cleared to come in, stay home and check the next day, or contact your physician, said Erin Bushnell, chief human resources officer at Cozen O'Connor, SHRM-SCP.

"If we can get people before they leave the house, that is the best measure for us. By the time they get to work, it's too late," she said. "We are relying on our employees being truthful. We trust our employees."

To allay privacy concerns, she said all the raw data goes to a third party before the law firm receives the reports.

Domo, a cloud-based software company in Utah, offers an entire suite of "Get Back to Work" apps, including one that allows employees to record their temperature at home and then again at the entrance to the workplace. It also offers a Safe Worker App, which companies use to communicate directly with their employees.

Other companies are buying electronic tracing apps and wearable devices. Since unveiling its "Check In" contact tracing app in April, Pricewaterhouse Cooper (PwC) has sold the system to more than 60 companies. They range from airlines to production facilities to television shows and movies, said Rob Mesirow, principal of Connected Solutions at PwC.

The app tracks employees' time, distance and frequency of contact with co-workers. It also alerts each employee of his or her risk level with a proximity score. Employers can use proximity scores to determine who should stay home from the office or get tested. The app only works on company property. "It's very privacy-centric," Mesirow said. To help track employees who work in warehouses or factories where they don't carry phones, PwC is unveiling a lanyard with a tracker. Mesirow said that he developed the app after talking to HR officials who are overwhelmed with the nonstop job of contact tracing.

"That's always been the inherent problem with the old-fashioned way of doing contact tracing—relying on people's memories, relying on potentially a phone tree. What we found is that it might take an HR professional 15 hours to make a single trace. We're able to do that in 15 seconds."

Other innovations may be on the horizon. Kenzen, a New York City-based company, makes wearable devices that track physiological changes to keep employees safe from heat and overexertion. It may expand its service into early illness detection next year. The company is in talks with large corporations about the possibility as it works to address worker privacy concerns.

Some small companies, such as Wigle Whiskey, a Pittsburgh-based microdistillery, have introduced technology such as air filtration systems to keep workers safe even as the number of cases of COVID-19 spikes.

For all the high-tech solutions, other companies are going back to basics and becoming more insistent that both employees and customers comply with masking, social distancing and sanitation. "I think it became clear that the customer is not always right, and first and foremost, we have to take care of the employees," said Anne-Marie Roerink, founder of 210 Analytics, a research firm and consultancy for food retailers.

Scott Warrick, an employment lawyer and human resources consultant based in Ohio, said some employees may suffer from claustrophobia and may be medically excused from wearing a mask. He recommends a plexiglass cover in those cases. But leniency shouldn't extend to others who merely find a mask uncomfortable or feel it violates their rights. "If people don't want to wear masks, they don't come into the office. If clients don't want to, they can't come into the building. You meet them at the parking lot."

Employers may not want to impose restrictions or invest in safeguards, but ignoring guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention could land them in court if employees don't feel they are adequately protected at work, said Darlene M. Clabault, SHRM-CP, senior human resources editor at J.J. Keller & Associates, a Wisconsin-based consultant firm.

About 900 COVID-19 lawsuits have been filed since March, including ones for workplace safety and disability, she said, citing the JacksonLewis COVID-19 Employment Lit Watch (<https://www.jacksonlewis.com/covid19-litwatch>).

"They are not regulations, just guidelines," Clabault said. "That's true. But you might get sued."

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