COVID-19: Inoculate Your Workplace Against Racism
COVID-19: Inoculate Your Workplace Against Racism

ARTICLE

POSTED ON 21 FEBRUARY 2020

Just it can stoke fears and anxiety, a pandemic — or even the looming potential of one — can fuel a wave of racism, discrimination and xenophobia. COVID-19, the coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan, China, is the latest example [1]. And the workplace is not immune.

While the World Health Organization recently labeled the virus a “public health emergency of international concern,” the immediate health risk to the general public in the U.S., U.K. and EU remains low [2]. Yet hostility against Chinese people and others of Asian descent has appeared in its wake, from South Korea to Australia, from the U.K. to the U.S. One Asian-American who boarded a train in Philadelphia reports that a fellow passenger gasped, covered herself with a jacket and typed into her phone’s Google search box: “How deadly is coronavirus?”[3].

There’s no shortage of similar tales on the job: In San Francisco, an environmental researcher was asked to stay home for 14 days after returning from his hometown in China (even though it’s far from Wuhan) [3]. A Canadian employee with relatives who’d traveled to an area where the disease was present was asked to leave the office and get a doctor’s note to return — even though he didn’t go there himself, nor did he have any physical contact with those who did [4].

This is not acceptable behavior. And unfortunately it’s not likely to stop; the spate of COVID-19 headlines is combined with the current flu season [5], recent testing mistakes [6], changing methods for counting cases [7], and online misinformation [8].

Now is the time to remind employees of the importance of workplace respect. To do so:

- Educate them about the facts.
- Avoid unintended biases in corporate messaging.
- Reiterate your company’s zero tolerance of discrimination and harassment.
- Prepare managers to reinforce this principle.

Use Fact-Based Communications to Avoid Stigma

“Historically, disease has been a really fast way to ‘other-ize’ a community. It’s a tricky balance, because we also don’t want as a society to minimize public health concerns.”

Vincent Pan
co-executive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action [3]
Don't make assumptions — and teach employees not to make assumptions — about the possibility of infection based on race, ethnicity, national origin or disability.

“Whatever you do, make it based on objective information provided by the CDC or another prominent public health authority,” Carol Miaskoff, associate legal counsel at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), told us.

These credible sources can keep you up to date:

- The Centers for Disease Controls and Prevention (CDC) has planning guidance and communications resources for businesses in the U.S.
- Companies with global operations can get educational materials from the World Health Organization that include a Q&A fact sheet and myth busters posters.

“One of the best things employers can do is to … let the workforce know, that this [disease] started in an area but is not … a genetic disease that people of Asian descent have,” said Katherine Dudley Helms, office managing shareholder at Ogletree Deakins. Helms specializes in employment matters and is the author of a National Law Review article about COVID-19 and Title VII of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination [9].

Katherine Dudley Helms
The EEOC also notes in its pandemic planning guidance that the foundations of the Americans with Disabilities Act apply when employers:

- Request information from an employee who calls in sick, in order to protect the rest of its workforce when an influenza pandemic appears imminent
- Take the body temperature of employees during a pandemic
- Require employees to stay home if they have symptoms of the pandemic influenza virus
- Require doctors’ notes certifying their fitness for duty when employees return to work

**Weigh Your Words to Reduce Unintended Hostility**

An official Instagram post from the University of California at Berkeley identified “xenophobia, fears about interacting with those who might be from Asia and guilt about these feelings” as one of the “common reactions” to COVID-19 [10].

It immediately drew criticism for this prestigious university (over 40% of its 2019 freshman class was of Asian descent). The school later apologized for the mistake and updated the language.

The take-away: Be careful. Words matter.

Running your message by a diverse group of colleagues can help expose potential issues. If you have a small team, it may be worth working with partners from HR and corporate communications.

Better examples of messaging:

- “This is a time when we need to be pulling together as a multicultural, inclusive and diverse community to support each other and people affected by the outbreak; and not use an event like this to promote division and xenophobia,” wrote John Bonning, president of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine [1]
- “It’s understandable to be alarmed by #Coronavirus. But no amount of fear can excuse prejudice & discrimination against people of Asian descent. Let’s #FightRacism, call out hatred & support each other in this time of a public health emergency.#StandUp4HumanRights,” tweeted the United Nations Human Rights office. [11]

**Clarify Your Zero Tolerance of Discrimination and Harassment**

Make sure you offer a clear and detailed explanation of discrimination and harassment in any situation, including the spread of a disease.

The EEOC notes that prejudice on the basis of national origin can take many forms that include:

- Treating applicants or employees unfavorably because they are from a particular country or part of the world, because of ethnicity or accent, or because they appear to be of a certain ethnic background (even if they are not)
- Treating people unfavorably because they are married to (or associated with) a person of a certain national origin
- Harassment can include offensive or derogatory remarks about a person’s national origin, accent or ethnicity
- The harasser can be the victim’s supervisor, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or someone who is not an employee of the employer, such as a client or customer
Prepare Managers to Promote Respect and Handle Issues

We’ve said it before and we’ll say it again: Managers closely interact with staff members and often wield more influence on direct reports than your department.

Share processes and talking points for supervisors to engage team members in discussions. Ask them to remind the staff of the multiple channels available for raising concerns — about the disease itself or misconduct related to it.

Refresh managers’ memories of the steps for appropriately handling employee complaints (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Tips for Managers to Handle Employee Reporting**

Source: Gartner

---

Remind Employees of Company Policies on Discussions of Sensitive Topics

As news about COVID-19 continues to come in, you may find employees talking about controversial topics such as the Chinese government’s handling of the new diseases. If your company has policies on political discussions at work, it’s a good moment to offer a reminder.

Meanwhile, help managers understand and be prepared to discuss the organization’s policies regarding such topics as:

- Ability to work remotely and applicable T&E policies
- Access to healthcare benefits and any virtual care services if applicable
- Performance (for example, loss of contracts due to travel restrictions)
- Personal hardship (for example, having relatives infected)
- Physical and psychological safety in the workplace
This complimentary research is part of Gartner's ongoing coverage of the business impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

Access additional free content and coverage at [gartner.com/smarterwithgartner](https://gartner.com/smarterwithgartner) and [gartner.com](https://gartner.com).

---

**Become a Client**

Get access to this level of insight all year long — plus contextualized support for your strategic priorities — by becoming a client.


U.S.: 1 800 213 4848
International: +44 (0) 3331 306 809

---

**About Gartner**

Gartner, Inc. (NYSE: IT) is the world’s leading research and advisory company and a member of the S&P 500. We equip business leaders with indispensable insights, advice and tools to achieve their mission-critical priorities today and build the successful organizations of tomorrow.

Our unmatched combination of expert-led, practitioner-sourced and data-driven research steers clients toward the right decisions on the issues that matter most. We are a trusted advisor and an objective resource for more than 15,000 enterprises in more than 100 countries — across all major functions, in every industry and enterprise size.

To learn more about how we help decision makers fuel the future of business, visit [gartner.com](https://gartner.com).