

REDUCING EMPLOYEE'S COVID PUBLIC TRANSPORT FEARS

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Workers are concerned about contracting COVID-19 if they use public transport to get to work, preferring to work from home than commuting to work. As governments begin to lift lockdown restrictions more and more people currently working from home will have to return to work which will mean commuting to work again. The issue is not all jobs are suitable for working from home and therefore, many employees will have to return to work.

As we start to digest the idea that we have to co-exist with COVID-19 until medication or a vaccine found, the reality is that this will mean using public transport particularly for those without personal transportation.

So, how do employers and the human resource departments (HR) address these concerns? The first point of action is to develop a strategy to return employees to work safely. This “return to work safely plan” should include a section on how employees can safely transit from home to work and vice-versa.

I decided to look at some of the options available and how employers can reduce the risk of an employee's contracting COVID-19 whilst travelling by public transport to work.

The following table lists the options available and the potential risk level for COVID-19 for each option based on risk assessments taking into account factors, for example, the level of ease to implement social distancing and the risk management practices to control commonly touched surfaces in the vehicle.

Table 1. Public transport risk analysis

Description	RISK			COST			Social Distancing (the level of ease to implement social distancing)	Risk of commonly touched places/contaminated surfaces/
	High Risk	Moderate Risk	Low Risk	Low cost	Moderate cost	High cost		
Bus (e.g. tro-tro)	✓	-	-	✓	-	-	Difficult to implement	High risk/low control level
Train/trams	✓	-	-	✓	-	-	Difficult to implement	High risk/low control level
Taxi (e.g. black/yellow cab, uber), rideshare, limo	-	✓	-	-	✓	-	Highly Possible (one passenger per journey)	Moderate risk/High control level
Coach (e.g. VIP bus)	✓	-	-	-	✓	-	Difficult to implement	High risk/low control level
Motorbike (self-drive)	-	-	✓	-	✓	-	Highly Possible without back passenger	Low risk/High control level
Okada (motorbike transportation)	✓	-	-	✓	-	-	Difficult to implement	High risk/low control level
Cycling	-	-	✓	✓	-	-	Highly possible	Low risk/High control level
Walking	-	-	✓	✓	-	-	Highly possible	Low risk/High control level
Personal vehicle (driving alone)	-	-	✓	-	✓	-	Highly possible	Low risk/High control level
Hired vehicle (self-drive)	-	-	✓	-	-	✓	Highly possible	Low risk/High control level
Hired vehicle (with an external driver)	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	Highly Possible (one passenger per journey)	Moderate / High control level
Hired bus/coach (by Company to be driven by Company driver)	-	-	✓	-	-	✓	Highly possible as the company can control social distancing, cleaning and disinfecting of the vehicle.	Low risk/High control level

Following the risk assessment, it was determined that the level of risk per the mode of transport was dependent on how easy it was to apply social distancing and the level of exposure of the employee to commonly touched surfaces which may be contaminated. It is also dependent on the level of control the employer and employee have over implementing or applying safety measures in the vehicle being used. The more control the employer or employee has over the vehicle, the lower the risk.

It is clear from the table above that the employer cannot completely remove the risk of an employee contracting COVID-19 whilst travelling on public transport. This is because an employer cannot control the external variables outside its control such as other passengers who may have the disease or infected surfaces in public vehicles. However, the employer can attempt to reduce the risk by adding additional safety practices to ensure the safety of employees travelling by public transport to work.

Travelling on buses, trains, trams, and coaches

The factor creating a concern for employees when it comes to using these types of public transport is the fear of being infected by an infected passenger. This anxiety is based on the fact that the spaces in public transports tend to be enclosed and passengers tend to travel in close contact. To address this issue as part of the employers travel to work safely plan, employees could be asked to sanitize or wash their hands with soap and running water as well as to wear their mask before boarding a public vehicle. Also, an employee could be directed to wear disposable gloves before boarding the vehicle and remove and dispose of the gloves safely once they exit the vehicle. The wearing of the masks protects them from any droplets from an infected passenger that may sneeze or cough during their journey to work.

The gloves ensure that their hands do not touch the surfaces of the vehicle which may have contaminated surfaces. When an employee arrives at work or returns home, they should be required as part of the safety policy to wash their hands with soap and running water before entering the workplace or their homes. Where there is no soap or running water they should use an alcohol-based sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol to sanitize their hands. Employees should also be trained on social distancing and be required to practice social distancing when using public transport in as far as possible. Employees should also be advised to ensure that whilst they are in the vehicle they open windows, position themselves by open windows or ask the driver or the conductor to open windows to allow ventilation into the vehicle.

Travelling in taxis and hired vehicles with a driver



The same principles would apply as described above, an employee using a taxi or a hired car with an external driver should wear a mask, gloves and should apply social distancing by sitting at the opposite side of the driver at the back seat and ensuring that there is good ventilation by opening the window. The use of the vehicles air condition should not be used because it is recirculated air. An alternative would be to use the air vents in the vehicle to bring in fresh air from outside into the vehicle. The gloves should be disposed of immediately they exit the vehicle as well as sanitize or wash their hands with soap and running water.

Employees travelling alone in their vehicles or hired self-drive cars

Employees travelling alone to work should be trained to safely use disinfectant wipes to wipe down commonly touched surfaces by others who may have entered or used the vehicle. Commonly touched surfaces include door frame/handles, windows, seatbelt buckles, steering wheel, gearshift, signaling levers, and other vehicle parts. An employee should be required to practice good hand hygiene by washing and sanitizing their hands each time they exit and enter the vehicle. They should also carry gloves, disposable wipes or cleaning and disinfectant spray as well as disposable bin bags with them in the vehicle. It should be a policy that employees using personal vehicles should not be allowed to pick-up or give lifts to other employees. Employees travelling to work alone should ensure they bring masks with them to work.

Travelling on a company bus or coach

The employer has better control when the bus or coach belongs to the company. This is because the drivers are likely to be employees of the company and therefore the employer can have better control over how the vehicle is safely cleaned and how employees travel on the vehicle safely. All company drivers should be trained on preventative cleaning and disinfectant of commonly touched surfaces in the vehicle.

Employers can require employees to also wear masks and gloves when travelling on the company vehicle. There should be a cleaning schedule and cleaning routine for drivers. The temperature of employees boarding the company bus/coach should be taken before employees board the vehicle. The company drivers should also carry

gloves, disposable wipes or cleaning and disinfectant spray as well as disposable bin bags with them in the vehicle. An added protection could be the creation of a partition between the driver and passengers.

Cycling, motorbike (self-drive) and Okada (transporting passengers)

Employees with motorbikes can be allowed to use it on the condition that they do not carry passengers. They must also be trained to clean and disinfect the motorbike safely as well as practice the required hand and mask hygiene practices. Employees should be forbidden to take “okada” which is a form of motorbike transportation. This mode of transport does not support social distancing as the passenger is transported in close contact with the motorbike rider.

Walking to work

Employees walking to work is properly the safest mode of transporting themselves to work. Employees who can walk to work should be encouraged to do so. They should be trained to observe social distancing, good hand hygiene practices and also be required to wear their masks before they enter the workplace.

The following table lists the default preventative measures and additional measures the employer could consider to help employees feel safer to travel on public transport to work.

Table 2. Summary of preventative measures for travelling safely to work

Description	COMPULSORY PREVENTATIVE MEASURES			ADDITIONAL PREVENTATIVE MEASURES				
	Wearing of Masks to work	Washing of hands with soap/ running water or 60% alcohol-based Sanitizer before the journey starts.	Social Distancing	Disposable wipes	Disinfectant spray	Disposal bin bags	Partition	Gloves
Bus (e.g. tro-tro)	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	✓
Train/trams	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	✓
Taxi (e.g. black/yellow cab, Uber)	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	✓
Coach (e.g. VIP bus)	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	✓
Motorbike (drive alone only)	-	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	-	-
Cycling	-	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	-	-
Walking	-	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-
Personal vehicle (driving alone)	-	✓	-	✓	✓	-	-	-
Hired vehicle (self-drive)	-	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	-	-
Hired vehicle (with driver)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hired bus/coach (by Company to be driven by Company driver)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The employer is responsible for the safety of its employees. To ensure the safety of employees travelling on public transport and to minimize their fears is key but it comes with additional cost. Some companies are finding it financially difficult to sustain the cost of the constant supply of compulsory COVID-19 safety resources (e.g. soap, portable running water bays, sanitizers and masks). The implementation of the additional measures discussed above would come with additional costs. Therefore, additional measures may not be attractive to some companies.

However, the cost of a company partially or fully closing down due to infected employees could be a far higher cost than the company investing in additional preventative measures. The focus should be on the benefits of additional measures rather than cost in as far as possible. Employers can also consider staggering working hours by Varying the start and end working hours in a manner that works best for employees.

This may mean reducing the usual working hours (e.g. 8 hours) with the expectation that the job responsibilities can be completed within the staggered hours. By this I mean, employees could start work later in the morning (e.g. 10 am) to avoid rush hour in the morning and also leave work early (e.g. 3 pm) to avoid rush hour in the evening.

The issue of employees being anxious about using public transport can also be minimized if governments made it compulsory for all public transport, whether privately managed or managed by the government, to ensure proper cleaning and disinfecting of public vehicles and to practice social distancing. Currently, every country has a directive on safety practices on public transport but not all governments have made it compulsory. In Africa, for instance, there are directives for privately-owned public transport operators to implement preventative measures in the management of their vehicles to ensure the safety of their customers. However, implementation is inconsistent because the directives do not come with strict enforcement procedures.

In conclusion, companies could add additional safety measures for employees using public transport to minimize their anxieties and risk of infection. The additional measures would not remove the risk completely but would further enhance preventive measures.



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INFORMATION SOURCES

- Centre for Disease Control & Prevention
- OML Africa risk assessment report

IMAGES

- Quartz Africa
- Pexels.com