

Work bubbles can help businesses reopen while limiting risk of COVID-19 outbreaks

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Creating "work bubbles" during the COVID-19 pandemic can help reduce the risk of company-wide outbreaks while helping essential businesses continue to function, as the example of Bombardier Aviation

demonstrates in an analysis published in *CMAJ* (*Canadian Medical Association Journal*).

The need to keep essential businesses open during the pandemic has resulted in large outbreaks in factories and other locations where employees work in close proximity, jeopardizing the safety of employees and the community as well as disrupting supply chains.

"Employers have a responsibility to provide a safe work environment for their employees," says lead author Dr. Jeffrey Shaw, a critical care physician and fellow at the University of Calgary's Cumming School of Medicine, Calgary, Alberta. "Creating company cohorts, or work bubbles, can reduce the risk of a company-wide COVID-19 outbreak that could affect the larger community."

Bombardier Aviation example

The authors describe how Bombardier Aviation, a large Canadian company that employs 22 000 people at 7 factories across 4 provinces/states in Canada and the United States, adjusted to the pandemic. Most office staff worked from home, ensuring that only employees who built or supported aircraft delivery were on site. Essential employees were organized into cohorts that interacted only with each other to minimize contact with other staff.

Cohorts were organized on the principles that work bubbles should:

- Include the least number of people required to do the job
- Be designed to allow business continuation if another work bubble is removed from the workforce
- Be strictly separated from other bubbles in time and/or space to prevent virus transmission between groups.

Scheduling rotating workdays and disinfecting shared spaces after use by a work bubble can ensure physical separation of employees. Daily symptom screening and rapid isolation of infected employees is also key to containing and preventing outbreaks.

"Adjusting our operational activities to the pandemic was challenging, but we are extremely proud of how proactive and efficient our teams were in adapting to their new working conditions. Keeping our employees safe is our number one priority," says coauthor Nancy Barber, COO, Industrialization, Footprint and Central Planning, Bombardier Aviation.

Despite some challenges, work bubbles offer benefits including:

- Reducing the reproduction number of the disease
- Increasing efficiency of contact tracing
- Protecting employees from contracting severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) at work
- Increasing [employee](#) confidence in workplace safety
- Allowing for business to continue in the case of positive cases

"As we begin to relax the public health measures brought in to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Canada, we must think of how to limit the risk of becoming infected at work," says Dr. Shaw. "Using a work bubbles strategy can help businesses continue to function and ensure the safety of employees."

Listen to a podcast with coauthors Dr. Jeffrey Shaw and Hayley Wickenheiser discussing work bubbles and their practical application to factories, schools and sports.

More information: Jeffrey Shaw et al. Working in a bubble: How can businesses reopen while limiting the risk of COVID-19 outbreaks?

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