COVID-19 Employer-Based Testing

Key Decisions Every Employer Faces When Testing Their Workforce

Introduction

COVID-19 has forced businesses of all sizes and across all segments to reimagine workplace safety with an intense focus on mitigating the risks of COVID-19.

Employee testing for COVID-19 is an essential component of any return-to-work strategy in order to identify infected (and often asymptomatic) personnel before the virus can spread and lead to health risks as well as potential business shutdowns. Employers are navigating uncharted territory, with unique questions and decisions that must be addressed before implementing an effective employee testing program.

These include identifying realistic goals for this testing based on population size, working conditions and risk factors, along with outlining response plans for when positive cases are identified. Also crucial to any plan is understanding the accuracy of the tests used in terms of the ability to have confidence that all true positive cases have been identified as well as the risk of falsely identifying a negative case as positive.

> Employee testing for COVID-19 requires a long-term commitment from employers but is key to protecting employees and their workplaces.

By applying its industry-leading base of experience and real-world learnings in COVID-19 workforce testing, Matrix Medical Network has identified the following as the most important considerations for any employer looking to implement a testing and mitigation strategy.

Employee testing is not a one-time event but rather an ongoing commitment

Many businesses focus on performing an initial screen of their entire employee population, especially when reopening or when exposure to COVID-19 is suspected. This "mass" testing unquestionably has an important role in revealing the current state of employee exposure. But it provides only a snapshot of what infection levels look like today. As employees are exposed to potential COVID-19 infection in their daily lives, a business that has no positive cases amongst employees today could easily have positive cases days or weeks later.

So while mass testing approaches have their place, they must be supported by a surveillance testing process to keep an eye on potential positive cases in the future. The nature and design of a good surveillance process will vary – there is no single "best" approach. Key considerations in designing a surveillance testing strategy include identifying risks by worker location and job type (e.g., how exposed are they to others in the workplace, what is the nature of the physical environment of the work place).

Another key consideration is what is happening in the community around the worksite. If it's in a COVID-19 "hotspot," more frequent surveillance testing may be needed compared to areas without high levels in the community. And individual worker risk can be a consideration as well, with efforts focused on helping to protect those most vulnerable. For example, many manufacturing and food processing plants have particularly high-risk employees in their populations, as revealed by a recent CDC report[1]. It stated, "many workers live in multigenerational settings and sometimes share transportation to and from work, contributing to increased risk for transmission of COVID-19 outside the facility itself." Our experience in serving these populations has also confirmed the unique challenges of surveillance within these high-risk segments. As such, more frequent testing of individuals at risk for greater exposure to the virus, which can be ascertained via employee surveys (while maintaining rigorous privacy protections), may be an important strategy.

Employers with effective surveillance testing have protocols that vary based on the factors above and implement surveillance testing that varies in terms of frequency and percent of employees regularly tested based on an assessment of risk and exposure.

Testing Accuracy is Crucial, But So Is Timing

There are a wide number of COVID-19 diagnostic tests in the market today, with more than 30[2] currently approved by the FDA for use in this country, and more expected to become available. But the accuracy of those tests can vary significantly.

Test accuracy boils down to two main concepts. The first is how often and accurately a test identifies a truly positive individual as positive. This is referred to as the **sensitivity** of the test, with tests in the market ranging[3] from 70% to virtually 100%. If you are screening employees with a goal of identifying positive cases so that you can protect your workplace, any test with a sensitivity of below 99-100% makes little sense.

The second concept is how often a test identifies someone as having COVID-19, even though they really do not. This is called the **specificity** and again, the tests in the market vary in their levels. Identifying an uninfected individual as having COVID-19 (due to low test specificity) risks not only the peace of mind of the individual (and those they are exposed to), but risks disrupting business operations unnecessarily.

While "virtually 100%" sensitivity and specificity tests may seem desirable, tests with lower sensitivity levels may play a role in the right surveillance strategies.

As the accuracy of test quality varies, so does the time it takes to get results. There are tests that provide results within minutes, but those tend to have lower accuracy. More accurate tests require processing at centralized labs which inevitably increases turnaround time to get results. Like all other aspects of COVID-19 management, businesses need to find the right balance and consider how the testing is being used and for what purpose (e.g. is the company waiting to open a facility until results are in or are they simply performing routine surveillance?)

The lab and testing industry is working furiously to develop new testing that is accurate with faster (ideally immediate) results. Matrix Medical Network is continually reviewing and monitoring advancements in testing to support the businesses we serve.

> Antibody tests which identify whether someone has been infected with COVID-19 previously (usually weeks prior) have yet to serve any real purpose in employer testing and are not generally recommended in this setting.

Understanding and addressing the costs of testing employees

As businesses plan to implement a testing strategy, naturally they need to address the costs involved. In the public discourse around COVID-19, there have been many discussions around free testing and health insurers covering testing at no cost to individuals.

There are indeed free testing events sponsored by local or state governments, but the times, dates

and locations of these events vary based on how local authorities perceive the needs at any given time. And health insurers do cover COVID-19 testing for their insured members at no cost, but it is unclear whether insurers will impose frequency limitations on how often someone can be tested. Most importantly, plans and insurers do not have to cover workplace testing under Section 6001 of the Families First Act, as amended by the CARES Act. The federal government reasons that Section 6001 requires the coverage of items and services only for "diagnostic purposes[4]."

And in these individual testing scenarios, the type of test used (and its accuracy) along with turn-around time is outside of the employers' control. Plus, unless employees decide to (and actually do) share their results the employer, the business doesn't have line-of-sight to the results and can't manage business actions accordingly.

Employers implementing testing strategies must understand that this is an incremental and ongoing cost for their business. But by taking this path, they are able to get the accuracy and timeliness important to their employees and their business, along with the insight needed to make the best possible decisions. Which after all, is what an employee testing strategy is all about.

Implementing procedures when positive cases are identified

Of course, once an employer embarks on a strategy to test employees, they must have a plan for addressing positive cases, as it is almost inevitable that an employer will see those within their employee population. Outlining, communicating, and implementing good procedures in advance on how the company will handle positive cases is essential to overall success. There are national (e.g., CDC) guidelines around isolation recommendations and return-to-work recommendations. There may be additional considerations to factor in beyond those general guidelines that are unique to the employer's situation as well. Relying on an independent, third party expert in the development and communication of those procedures can be an important step in building employee trust and ensuring overall program credibility.

The future of employee testing

Employee testing will continue to evolve and any strategy a business takes today must monitor and adapt to new testing capabilities and clinical learnings about COVID-19. As businesses enter the fall and flu season, employee testing will be even more crucial and businesses are looking at how to expand their COVID-19 testing to include influenza to understand and separate the impact of that on their workforce and business strategies. The landscape will continue to evolve and businesses committed to testing their employees will need ongoing strategies for the foreseeable future.

Matrix Medical Network is a leader in COVID-19 management

Matrix has developed an in-depth understanding of COVID-19 mitigation and the sound application of best practices to optimize employee safety and operational continuity. Matrix supports nearly 100 worksites across a variety of essential businesses and industries. Matrix has developed and refined best-in-class COVID-19 insight and specific expertise, making it a uniquely qualified partner to plan and commence a safe and healthy return-to-work.

We can help your business, too. Contact us about ways we can partner to maintain the health and safety of your workforce and the productivity of your operations: sales@matrixmedicalnetwork.com

Or learn more by exploring our Return to Work resources and Employee Health solutions.

[1] https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6918e3.htm
[2] https://hitconsultant.net/2020/04/23/in-depth-32-fda-approved-covid-19-testing-kits/#.Xwhyr5NKiCQ
[3] https://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/369/bmj.m1808.full.pdf
[4] https://www.healthaffairs.org/do/10.1377/hblog20200625.139207/full/#:~:text=Plans%20and%20insurers%20do%20not,people%20who%20have%20been%20exposed.