

# With Employees Anxious About Returning to the Office, New Tool Can Help Boost Confidence in Buildings' Health and Safety

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The health and safety of the workplace have always been a priority for employees, but the COVID-19 pandemic has put such concerns into sharp relief – and many Americans are still anxious about **their return to in-person work**.

Companies that have decided to reopen their physical office spaces are putting their buildings' health under the radar to support safer and healthier workspaces. And for an increasing number of them, the tool they lean on is the **WELL Health-Safety Rating for Facility Operations and Management**.

Launched by the **International WELL Building Institute (IWBI)** in July 2020, the rating is designed to help businesses large and small **prepare their spaces for re-entry** in the wake of COVID-19 and into the future. While it was adapted from the widely used WELL Building Standard (WELL) and informed by the IWBI Task Force on COVID-19, it has

broader applicability for supporting the long-term health and safety needs of people in a given space.

“One thing that the pandemic has put into the forefront is the need for healthy and clean buildings that prioritize health,” Rodolfo Perez, senior director of standard development at IWBI, who leads the team’s water and materials concepts, told TriplePundit. “While the practices the rating promotes are not new, they have grown in importance since the pandemic, with interest from businesses growing exponentially.”

### **Safety, health and well-being are top concerns for building owners**

Indeed, in a new survey focused on the facility management industry in the U.S. and Canada, **86 percent of building managers** responded that the safety, health and well-being of employees, occupants, and visitors is their leadership's top concern, according to Blue Skyre, a commercial real estate management company which facilitated the survey that was conducted by survey researcher HarrisX.

Perez of IWBI contributed to the cleaning and sanitization procedure requirements that are **one of five core areas** in the WELL Health-Safety Rating, along with **emergency preparedness programs**, health service resources, air and water quality management, and stakeholder engagement and communication. There is good reason to focus on cleaning and sanitization, Perez said, as these practices are critical components in the defense against the spread of pathogens.

It’s no wonder, then, that some 94 percent of building managers have reported that their buildings installed or plan to install improved HVAC air filtration systems and adopt advanced wellness programs, **according to the Blue Skyre survey**, while hand sanitizing stations, temperature checks and frequent cleaning of high-touch areas are now common.

### **From handwashing to reduced surface contact, simple procedures work**

These are among the practices suggested in the WELL Health-Safety Rating: handwashing, reduced surface contact, better cleaning practices, the selection of preferred cleaning products and reduced respiratory particle exposure. Handwashing may seem like an obvious and long-recommended procedure for a hygienic workplace, but today the simple act of handwashing **has gained enormous attention** as an effective way to reduce the spread of infectious disease – and studies show people often **still need a reminder**.

Reducing surface contact is another key tactic. While the main way people become infected with COVID-19 is through exposure to respiratory droplets carrying infectious virus, contact with **contaminated surfaces or objects (fomites)** are a known source of

spread for viral diseases, **according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, although the risk is generally considered to be low.

**Reducing the instances where people touch surfaces** can help to minimize one of the vectors of disease transmission. The first step is to assess all of the high-touch surfaces throughout a building and consider temporary or permanent strategies to reduce the frequency of touching those surfaces, or even the need for hand touch, Perez told us. For example, an automated soap dispenser that operates by sensor rather than touch, or a water fountain activated by a foot pump, would cut down the number of high-touch surfaces. Employers can also consider ways to avoid people touching door knobs, elevator buttons, faucet handles and security equipment, Perez suggested.

### **For a sensible cleaning protocol, the key is not to overdo it**

A key part of the arsenal to improve cleaning practices is a cleaning and disinfection plan that includes instructions, training and record-keeping, Perez told us. “You need to have a cleaning objective, establish a plan that will meet those requirements, and follow that plan,” he said. “The key is to do it right, but not overdo it”

One aspect of cleaning and sanitization that shouldn’t be overlooked is the type of cleaning products used and to avoid any hazardous or harmful ingredients in those products. Commercial cleaning products may contain ingredients that degrade indoor air quality and are suspected to be hazardous to human health. “It’s also a question of equity,” Perez explained, “for instance, we should work to protect the health of janitorial staff with significant exposure to cleaning products.”

The final component of the rating’s cleaning and sanitization procedures is minimizing people’s contact with contaminated respiratory particles. Here is where the now-familiar step of establishing physical distance between people in the office, or even building physical barriers to prevent respiratory particles, may slow the spread of pathogens.

While the approach will vary, every building owner or employer is seeking to create a level of comfort – physical and psychological – for those who decide to return to the workplace.

“Let’s not forget that we need to feel safe in the places where we work. If someone feels their personal safety is threatened in a specific setting, they are less likely to be comfortable there,” Perez said. “So in addition to the protection it brings against the spread of pathogens, cleaning and sanitization may play a very important role in making people feel welcome in a space.”

### **Streamlined accreditations to spur uptake of best cleaning practices**

With cleaning and sanitization as a critical line of defense, IWBI has joined forces with the Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC), a division of the worldwide cleaning industry association International Sanitary Supply Association (ISSA), in a **joint initiative** to accelerate the uptake of best practices that strengthen the role of buildings in the fight against COVID-19 and other infections.

Specifically, the GBAC Star Facility Accreditation Program is become a recognized path of partial compliance for cleaning and sanitization criteria within IWBI's WELL Health-Safety Rating. A GBAC Star accreditation can count toward five of the 15 points necessary to achieve the WELL Health-Safety Rating overall.

Proper cleaning protocols, disinfection techniques when necessary and infection prevention practices are all important components in the age of COVID-19 and beyond, Perez said – and it can't be a "one-and-done" type of approach.

"Cleaning plans are living documents, not paperwork that only collects dust," he told us. "The WELL Health-Safety Rating is meant to be operational. Building owners and employers need to continually assess their needs and adjust and update their cleaning and sanitization plans. More than ever, we need to take the precautionary approach, so that our buildings are equipped to meet the challenges of this changing work environment"

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