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How Companies and Communities Are Adjusting to COVID-19

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This communication is the latest installment of our Client Alert series considering the legal and business impacts of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus ("COVID-19"), commonly referred to as the "Coronavirus."

COVID-19 has disrupted everything from [financial markets](#) to [cruises](#) to the [world's largest trade show for the mobile phone industry](#). Even [China's Communist Party](#) was forced to postpone its annual full meeting. As the virus continues to spread on every continent but Antarctica, we can expect further interruptions to supply chains, public and private gatherings, and business continuity. Major companies, including Facebook, Amazon, Google, and Microsoft, and governments, such as Japan, Switzerland, and China, have taken action to limit transmission of COVID-19. Businesses, which along with their employees are an integral part of their communities, are on the front lines when it comes to decisions that could impact the pace and breadth of the outbreak. Many are responding by imposing limitations on travel, gatherings, and operations that, while difficult, demonstrate good public citizenship in the midst of what is now a global public health event.

Major Events Canceled

Mobile World Congress, an annual gathering of industry leaders in mobile operations and equipment, was scheduled to take place in February in Barcelona, Spain. Organizers announced on February 12th that the conference [would be cancelled](#), even though at that time there were no confirmed cases in mainland Spain. Companies and organizations hosting large public gatherings began to follow suit. CERA Week, an annual conference bringing together some of the biggest players in the oil and gas industry around the world, was [cancelled](#) in Houston. Facebook cancelled, among other events, its Global Marketing Summit, which would have brought 4,000 participants together in San Francisco—where the mayor has declared a [state of emergency](#) amid multiple confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Bay Area. Google and Microsoft, which planned to host large summits in the Seattle area, have adjusted plans and announced that their events will be "[digital-first](#)," meaning speeches, breakout sessions, and Q&As will be streamed online. Such alterations impact not only the hosting organizations, which generally are forced to refund tickets, but also airlines and surrounding hotels, which must deal with group cancellations. But bringing thousands of people together for a few days before they return to their communities around the world is a major risk for spreading COVID-19.

Other organizations are determined to carry on—with appropriate precautions. The Singapore Airshow, for example, continued as planned but instituted a [no-contact policy](#), encouraging attendees to refrain from handshakes as they networked. The Airshow also staffed a team of medics to screen temperatures at access points and treat any visitors who needed it. These adjustments may not be practical for all large events, however.



New Company Policies Introduced

Businesses are not just concerned about COVID-19 at big events. The virus is prompting employers to institute game plans for preventing employees' exposure and dealing with the logistical impact of an outbreak in the community. [Amazon](#), for instance, asked employees to postpone all non-essential travel, even within the United States. Many employers distinguish between essential and non-essential travel or personnel. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("CDC") in its [health travel notices](#) recommends that travelers avoid "all non-essential travel" to affected areas. The definition of "essential" will vary based on the industry and a particular company's needs.

For a discussion of employers' responsibilities with regard to employee travel, read Paul Hastings' update on [COVID-19 for employers](#).

To protect employees from exposure to COVID-19, [Facebook](#) has barred all "social visitors" to its offices. The company will conduct all job interviews over video conference. As the virus affects more regions, more companies are likely to adopt similar measures that minimize outside exposure and permit employees to remain at home.

Travel and Public Gatherings Restricted

In addition to travel notices such as the [U.S. advisories](#) on travel to China, Iran, Italy, and South Korea, some countries have instituted nationwide restrictions on public gatherings. In [Switzerland](#), the government has temporarily prohibited gatherings of 1,000 people or more through at least March 15th. For events with fewer than 1,000 people, organizers are required to work with local authorities to conduct a risk assessment and determine whether the event can go on. This policy resulted in the cancellation of the [Geneva Motor Show](#).

[Japan](#), where over 200 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed, canceled classes in all schools for most of the month of March, with the idea that the next several weeks are a critical juncture in the virus's transmission. [Italy](#) also closed schools in three affected regions. Japanese President Shinzo Abe has recommended that organizations refrain from holding large gatherings, such as sporting events—which could impact the upcoming [Summer Olympics](#) scheduled to take place in Tokyo in July. Currently, planning for the Olympics proceeds, though an influx of international athletes, support staff, and spectators could pose a significant risk for the spread of COVID-19.

What Your Business Should Do Next

1. Be aware of government restrictions on travel and events.

As described above, multiple governments around the world have instituted bans on travel and large gatherings. Check your jurisdiction's recent announcements to see if your company is required to refrain from travel to certain countries or from hosting events of a certain size.

2. Consider voluntary limitations to prevent exposure.

Evaluate whether your company can utilize video and virtual resources in higher risk areas or where travel is required. Consider whether large conferences with national and international participation are worth the risk. If the show must go on, develop a plan to meet medical needs and promote good hygiene, such as the no-contact policy and other measures adopted in Singapore.

3. Communicate expectations regarding telecommuting and the meaning of non-essential travel in the context of your business.

Plan for the possibility that employees may be quarantined, and develop a protocol to minimize business disruption in such an event. Company policies and systems on telecommuting should be reviewed to ensure that they are up to the task should large numbers of employees need to stay out of the office. Clarify for all employees what your company means by "non-essential travel." When



possible, arrange for virtual conferencing that will enable employees to avoid travel to high-risk areas.

4. Support parents when schools are disrupted.

As local schools cancel classes in response to COVID-19, employees will need to arrange for alternative childcare in order to work. Examine your company's existing family leave policies and other arrangements to assist employees dealing with unexpected disruptions of childcare.

For a discussion of employers' responsibilities with regard to employee leave, see Paul Hastings' update on [COVID-19 for employers](#).

Businesses are an essential component of the communities in which they operate. Now is the time to consider the steps that will help to ensure that the members of that community remain safe and healthy.



If you have any questions concerning these developing issues, please do not hesitate to contact any of the following Paul Hastings Washington, D.C. lawyers:

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