

Restarting the Economy: What workers in the telecommunications sector need to know

Revised July 14, 2020

Unlike many other sectors, telecommunications sector has not seen a significant slow-down or shutdown of operations during the pandemic. Considering the essential nature of the services being provided by telecommunications providers, the impact on job security has been fairly minimal on Unifor's telecommunications membership.

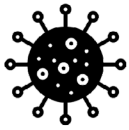
In some instances, many workers who had been previously working out of offices and call centres have had the option of working out of their homes. For technicians working in the field, additional precautions and protocols have been implemented to protect the health and safety of workers. This includes protocols to ensure minimal interactions with the public and customers in their homes.

Regardless, worker health and safety, and proper protective precautions remain a priority for those currently working in the field and will have to be a critical precondition for any return to on-site office and call centre operations.

What telecommunications workers can expect at work

As jurisdictions move through the various stages of re-opening, the situation in the telecommunications sector will change to a certain degree for some workers. Health and safety precautions for field workers will likely not change dramatically, but office or centre-based workers may face changes related to their location of work.

Companies will reveal their plans related to offices and call centres, with some employers potentially examining a longer-term model of home-based work for these workers. Each company and individual workplace may have their own operational plans, so there will not be complete uniformity within the sector. But the sector could see a shift in the way workers perform their duties and how companies manage their operations.



What telecommunications workers should expect from their Employers

Employers have a responsibility and obligation to ensure that workers' health and safety are protected in the workplace.

The union should expect employers to continue with the following:

- Where relevant, implementing a return-to-work protocol that is tailored to the specific workplaces through union and Joint Health and Safety Committee input.
- Ensuring that all workers have access to personal protective equipment (PPE) where necessary.
- Ensuring that workers are properly trained and provided accessible information on COVID-19 related hazards, hygienic practices, sanitization, proper PPE use, etc.
- Establishing increased cleanliness standards and protocols that are going to be needed in offices and call centres.
- Regularly communicating with workers about the transition to office and/or call centre activity and expectations related to health and safety practices.
- For any workers on prolonged layoff, ensuring the maintenance of health care benefits (including drug coverage) and following layoff/recall provisions in collective agreements.

What telecommunications workers need from Government

In addition to their role in the pandemic response and re-opening of the economy, government plays an important regulatory role in the sector, along with the ability to implement various supportive measures.

The union has a number of policy demands for governments:

- The provinces must ensure that public transit and child care services remain accessible for all workers.
- Allow workers on layoff to have access to Supplemental Unemployment Benefit (SUB) payments while receiving the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) / EI.
- There must be a responsive provincial body for workers to report unsafe working conditions or possible COVID-19 infections, and has the authority to suspend workplace operations and investigate matters.
- Penalize employers who violate health and safety guidelines and public health initiatives.

Additional Resources

Unifor has launched a hub for member information about the pandemic at unifor.org/COVID19 and encourages members to check the site regularly for updates.

Subscribe to Unilink, the union's weekly national newsletter at unifor.org/subscribe and download the Unifor mobile app on your smartphone.