



CORENET GLOBAL

# VIRTUAL POP UP

A pop in community for **corporate real estate professionals**

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**Pop-Up Webinar: Key Takeaways**

**24 June 2020**

**It is interesting to see how different parts of our region are starting to manage the return to the workplace. In New Zealand, restrictions have been lifted. In Australia, some of the states are going through a second wave which we all predicted a few months ago. Now that we have some areas starting to return to work, how are you managing that? If you had plans in place, have you had to pivot those plans once you have people back in the workplace?**

- For us, we obviously pay attention to local governments. We have plans to resume, of course, and have done so already in some countries and some jurisdictions. But we certainly also wait a period of weeks just in case. Any resumption plan that we have is subject to changing conditions. We have our utilization capped at a low utilization rate by site, by country and certainly by region.

**On the locations where you have people going back to work, have you had to change your plan at all, or has it gone to plan?**

- It is a mixed bag. The ones we have done later benefited from some learnings along the way, such as here in Southeast Asia. We were ready to go a month ago in Singapore, and then we had another wave, and all that was quashed for the moment. Now we are starting to have discussions around Singapore, and in a week or so we will resume in New Zealand, given that New Zealand removed their restrictions over a week ago.

**Would anyone else like to share an update on where you are in returning to the office?**

- I will share mine from an Australian point of view. Our head office is in Victoria, in Melbourne, and we had done all our surveys with our staff and received all the responses and had a clear return to work plan which we were kicking off on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July. But now we have had a second wave come through and the government has absolutely said if you can work from home, stay at home. We have put our plans on hold for at least another month to just see what this means. Victoria seems to be the hot state for COVID-19. It is a wait-and-see situation from a government regulations point of view, and we will make some decisions from there going forward.

**I understand that India is still struggling, and there are new cases in China.**

- I think you are correct around India. I have got one of my people working there, and different areas of India are still very much in lockdown. They have had some new cases that they are

trying to manage. I know Beijing has had another wave. They have gone back into big restrictions in Beijing while they try to stop the spread going forward.

**What is the latest from New Zealand? At last word, restrictions were being lifted, and there were no new cases of the coronavirus.**

- We have had 10 new cases, but they are all from people traveling back to New Zealand from overseas and are supposed to be in quarantine. They are not actually community transmissions; they are people coming back to New Zealand who have brought the virus with them that are sort of in isolation. We had a bit of a hiccup in that a couple of people went out accidentally and came back again. Predominantly, we do not have any cases in the public arena; they are in isolation only. Everyone is pretty much going about business as normal. We have our first CoreNet Global event this Thursday, and we have about 230 people coming along. On a day-to-day basis, it is sort of business as usual. But it has highlighted the vulnerability of people traveling around and coming in from overseas. It is going to be tough to keep it safe within the country.

**When you say business as usual, are you saying absolutely no restrictions whatsoever and no social distancing? Will you be hosting this event just like a normal event?**

- Yes, totally. All we have to do is keep a record of who's coming to the event just in case, God forbid, there is any resurgence. There are no social distancing requirements at all in New Zealand. We are back to normal shaking hands, hugging people, and all those things we were used to doing at the beginning of the year.

**That is amazing. And the workplace, I am guessing, is also back to normal. I suppose there was a perception that it would not ever go back to normal.**

- Every company is taking its own approach. People can still work from home if they feel more comfortable. But more and more people are going back to the office and realizing that is where they want to be. A few organizations with leases coming up will reduce space because more people will want to work a day or two a week at home and they are allowing them to do so. So, it has not gone back to identical working patterns before COVID but equally we have not all stayed at home either. A lot of people have realized that we are all quite social and we do like having our colleagues around and seeing them face to face and having meetings. I have noticed that there are a few more Zoom meetings going on where we are not necessarily racing around Auckland traffic. We are just catching up by Zoom, and a couple of people go to one office or another, rather than all of us trying to get into one office. That is what we are seeing and what has changed. People are being a bit smarter about travel.

**It sounds like our new normal will be slightly different. I am pleased to hear that people have adopted this work from home approach. I have been doing it for about 10 years, but I think some regions are less ready to do it. But I think the pandemic has obviously helped change that mindset around what is important.**

- Definitely. Before COVID, you always got pushback whenever you were trying to move people from one style of working to activity-based working, desk sharing or collaborative working. Everybody said, 'We are special, we can't do it, it won't work for us.' But COVID has pretty much put all that to bed. We have done it. Now the question is, 'How do we want to use remote working moving forward, and how can we get better?' It is all those negative people who said it could not be done who have been proven wrong. Now we must extract what is the best way of working moving forward: what work is separate, together, in teams, what works best for each business unit or company.
- I am managing the Asia-Pacific region, and I can see that it really seems to be dependent on the government regulations and how they lift those restrictions. We can overlay this with the fact that

there are groups of people who do not want to come back to the office. I think putting people first and supporting them to be safe is really coming to the fore – allowing them to make that choice for themselves and then supporting them from a workplace point of view. I think it probably will be six months before we see some normality, and I think we will have less commercial space used by a lot of companies. That is what I am hearing from my clients.

- I am in the Singapore Chapter. I am not speaking for my company per se, but more based on people I have spoken to in our community. I have heard that some companies are offering a stipend of some type to help their employees kit out their home office, to get an ergonomic chair, desktop monitor, and so on. And they are taking into consideration that there are people who will prefer to work from home and want to be a little more cautious and are anxious about returning to the physical workplace. There are organizations in fintech that have decided on a more global level that work from home is the way forward for most of their employees globally. From what I have heard, at least, there is a strong look toward 'Let us continue to work from home as long as possible.' Or 'This is now the way things are going to be moving forward, and you are only going into the office one or two days a week, perhaps to see a client, and the rest of the time everything else can be accommodated working from home.'

#### **Any further updates from Singapore?**

- We are still looking toward the government for further direction. We have only entered phase 2 out of three phases. Phase 2 in our lockdown means that food and beverage outlets are open, and retail outlets are open. We are still exercising that physical distancing. Workspaces are open, but gyms and cinemas are still closed. There is a slow re-emergence of the public back to those consumer-led activities. This past weekend was the first weekend that we experienced a little bit more freedom, and I think the entire country of Singapore went a little bit crazy. A lot of people were out and able to gather in a restaurant in groups of five and be with friends. There was almost a palpable shift in energy around Singapore – a celebration! Depending on their companies' policies, I think this will also hopefully impact having work colleagues come together. Perhaps some will now be able to have some initial face-to-face meetings and to have a coffee instead of meeting online. There is that virtual meeting fatigue. We are expecting to see a spike here as well. But the government is going to wait on entering phase 3 until we see what the outcome of that spike is.
- I saw a new [article](#) that Erwin Chong, group head of corporate real estate strategy and administration for DBS Bank, wrote for HRM Asia. It is titled "Put Your People First in Rethinking the Post-COVID Workplace." The article states that about 80 percent of the bank's Singapore workforce is currently working from home.

#### **What will be the long-term impact of COVID-19 on the corporate real estate portfolio?**

- For us, it is not about reducing our footprint materially, but rather validating that working from home or elsewhere, and having the flexibility to turn on and off the requirement for space as needed and when needed, is viable. Utilization of our sites will decrease. In terms of when our headcount in the office might reach pre-COVID levels, it is a six to 12 months' window at best, given the resumptions we have. Certainly, the holdings of our spaces and our countries will be realigned.

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