



PRESENT



A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Distributed Work, Team 15

Team sponsor/chapter (if applicable): N/A

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a redistribution of where and how employees work. While organizations are currently considering workplace re-entry strategies - including limited occupancy, staggered re-entry, physical redesign, multiple work shifts, engagement etiquette, heightened safety, hygiene and security - employees are focusing on when or if they'll feel comfortable returning to the office in the short term.

Employee Agency of Choice

Employees are business' most important asset and post-pandemic, this will be no different. What *will* be different moving forward is the increased employee "agency of choice" when considering work environments and employers. The main drivers of employee choice will be safety (health, wellness,

cleanliness) foremost, followed by productivity and convenience. While today's governmental mandates for public health, security, safety and liability override most choice, there is a groundswell of personal factors and concerns relating to safety and health that will drive agency of choice in human behavior and impact the location where people work. This concern for safety, underpinned by the new awareness that working from home is possible and supported, will forever change how we think about our "workplace."

Though agency of choice isn't a new concept, health and safety will emerge as one of the largest factors in this choice, something that has previously had little bearing in the past.

The transformation of the workplace and its strategy will now be shaped by the evolving concept of employee "agency of choice;" the physical and technical components that are requisite to support it will evolve in tandem.

Categorically, there are three environments that are referenced as places to work: the office, home and third places. All are location choices in a distributed workplace, and employers must support employees in all places.

COVID-19 as the Catalyst

Pre-pandemic, agency of choice varied by company, workplace environment, role, manager, etc. For example, the choice of working remotely was previously controlled by the employer/manager and was the exception, rather than the norm. However, with health and safety suddenly becoming paramount, it's important to accommodate an employee's need for an environment that feels safe. As shelter-in-place orders remain and employees continue to work at home for longer periods of time, their comfort and productivity will grow outside of the office.

Employees, for the most part, have been forced to work from home as a reaction to the rapid spread of COVID-19 allowing no agency of choice in this urgent directive. Companies and employee alike have found that the technology tools available to them have been a large determinant of success and satisfaction. Companies have had to suddenly stress-test all varieties of remote working tools, such as laptops, shared drives, collaboration software, video conferencing, connection speeds and just-in-time communication platforms. Failure in any one of these can cause anxiety and decreased productivity. In all stages of the COVID-19 response, work-life technology will continue to play an oversized role.

Short Term Practicalities

As shelter-in-place orders are slowly lifted, agency of choice will increase. However, employers and external factors will predominantly still control employees' breadth of choice. External factors, like schools and daycares remaining closed, may impact employees' ability to choose where to work. Additionally, local governments establishing rules about occupancy of third places, their ability to reopen, along with the general populations' comfort with public space, will limit opportunities to work there. Company re-entry plans will also limit choice as employers create strategies that determine who can come back to the office, when and what spaces can be utilized. Major industry players, like CBRE, feel companies will take a balanced approach that provides greater resiliency and multiple physical and virtual solutions, based on business needs. (Source: CBRE – Whitepaper – Reopening the Worlds Workplaces 041620, www.cbre.com)

However, employees who do have the ability to return to the office (or third places) in the nearer future will expect certain standards before they feel comfortable returning. In addition to CDC and government guidelines, companies will need to ensure considerations are enacted to maintain distancing, health and safety protocols, PPE, cleaning requirements, travel – including public transportation, meeting guidelines, signage, etc. Only when these are in place, and communicated, will the office (and third place) become an option, allowing agency of choice to exist in a dispersed workplace. This burden will fall on the businesses and buildings to ensure a safe experience, but the decision to occupy offices and third places will ultimately rest with the individual.

The Key Driver: Health and Safety

The importance of health and safety, post-pandemic, will emerge as the greatest factor that contributes to employee agency of choice. If employees do not feel their company has health and safety as a priority, and if this isn't reflected in the workplace, employees will not be comfortable returning to the office, and companies will lose the trust of their employees. Additional factors, like public transportation, caring for elderly family members, pre-existing health conditions, etc. will also lend to a standard for health and wellness. Office and third places will require enhancements in cleaning strategies, the prevalence of sanitizers, partitioning of people and space, temperature readers, PPE availability, exposure tracking and rules to promote health and safety before employees feel comfortable choosing to work in an environment outside of their homes.

Recognition of a New Reality

The abrupt work-from-home experiment has been more successful than many anticipated. Technology was already largely in place and work practices, for the most part, morphed to accommodate physical distance. But employees and employers also realized that many of the past ideas that claimed remote work was not viable were false. They could be productive outside the office, with most reporting their productivity was not diminished or had increased. “53 percent of those surveyed believe their productivity has not changed as a result of working from home, and 24 percent believe their productivity has increased.” Additionally, many said they experienced a better work/life balance. (<https://www2.colliers.com/en-gb/news/02-04-20-COVID-1919-could-be-catalyst-for-remote-working-to-become-the-norm>)

In the longer-term future, when the re-entry strategy morphs into the “new normal” and there is full agency of choice, the dispersed workplace will look different. Employees will be more empowered and have the ability to choose where they want to work due to three main factors: access to technology, dissipating stigmas about remote work and a focus on safety and health.

Technology supporting a dispersed workplace, regardless of whether individuals are at home, in the office or a third place, will continue to evolve. Since early March, the prevalence of virtual meeting platforms has increased with over 50% of employees stating they're using online collaboration platforms to work from home. (Source: Forrester, “The Employee Experience Of A Pandemic”) Tools that seamlessly allow enhanced collaborative features, like virtual whiteboard sessions, will become more relevant for collaboration and connectivity, since shared office items will be discouraged and more employees will be scattered in different locations. Gaming technologies that bring people together on the same virtual platform could be repurposed for the workplace and the prevalence of virtual and augmented reality will become the norm. Additionally, enhanced technology will enable employees to choose their workday schedule. Email has allowed us to work at all hours and this might soon be the

case with collaboration platforms. Social media has enabled us to be creators and participants at any point in time; workplace technologies could also move to similar “timeless” platforms that support an agile, collaborative, virtual environment.

As a result of the extended time employees are working from home, previous stigmas about remote work, specifically productivity reduction, will be lessened or gone and the comfort level with working remotely will be increased. When polled, 52% of employees now cite home as their preferred location and 80% say they would like to work at home at least one day a week. (Source: Forrester, “The Employee Experience Of A Pandemic”) The at-home office will provide reassurance in safety, health and cleanliness, in addition to supporting employees’ productivity, while reducing potentially long commute times and encouraging a more informal and comfortable environment.

Because of the elongated time that employees will work remotely, combined with the increased experience and skill with remote work, the office will no longer be the de facto environment. It will morph into a location that employees visit for reasons they cannot achieve at home, i.e. in-person collaboration. Further, because collaboration will be better supported by technology, there will be a lesser need for physical meetings and desire to travel to an office. Virtual meetings have quickly become the only way to collaborate, and they will continue to be most prevalent in the future, whereas physical meetings will become the exception. The office will need to support this in-person collaboration, while ensuring that health and safety is also in play. As such, there will be more open collaborative spaces and enclosed collaborative spaces will support less employees in the same size space in order to achieve social distancing. Outdoor areas and spaces that promote greater air circulation will also increase.

However, the office will still need to support individual work for those who choose to work in the office or whose work requires them to be in the office. There will be significantly fewer individual spaces and while the workplace won’t likely revert to a 6’x6’ cubicle-driven environment, benches will be equipped with high partitions, like plexi-glass, and individual spaces will be dispersed throughout the office, rather than clustered in rows and neighborhoods. Unassigned seating will be the norm, as it allows for more thorough cleaning techniques and enables the agency of choice of individual spaces. Employees will not only be able to choose the location that supports individual productivity, but also the power to choose location where they feel safe.

While the distributed workplace will remain in the future, health and safety will become the key driver employees will leverage in determining where they will work. As such, remote working will be much more prevalent, while the office and third places – if they meet employees’ needs for health and safety – will decrease in popularity and be leveraged when in-person collaboration is desired.