



HACKATHON



CONNECT



PRESENT



A **COVID-19** Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Distributed Work -- Team #8

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

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Input your submission below. Please remember that you have 1500 words to share your insights.

CoreNet Hackathon: Distributed Workforce in the Post-Pandemic Era

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has unexpectedly thrust the corporate world into the largest remote-work experiment ever undertaken. Millions of employees representing countless companies are working in ways never before thought possible. How will this phenomenon change the way we think about distributed work, both in the near future and long-term? Will geography become less relevant if remote working becomes a norm and distributed workforce becomes location agnostic?

We looked at distributed working through the lens of Workforce, Workplace, and Workflow - three elements of distributed working. Our analysis looks at the expected changes through the framework of these 3 W's.

Return to work in the post-pandemic era will be done in two phases. In the short-term we will react to the situation and health and safety guidelines. While long-term, once the pandemic has receded, some habits and ways of working will remain, while others may be abandoned to return to a more familiar way of working.

Phase 1 - Short-to-Medium Term

This first phase is defined by external environmental factors: a COVID-19 vaccine has not yet been developed, and herd immunity has not been broadly attained. Local stay-at-home orders can be expected throughout this phase as COVID-19 outbreaks occur. Given these conditions, most companies will adopt a phased, partial return-to-work posture, following evolving governmental and regulatory guidance for physical distancing, and industry best practices which are currently being developed.

WORKFORCE

Key considerations for company culture and values:

- Employee wellbeing and mental health
 - Provide appropriate PPE following local health guidelines
 - Develop clear messaging to ensure employees understand company policies, health benefits and protocols including short term policies created to address phased re-entry
 - Encourage leaders to model optimal work-life integration behaviors
- Team cohesion and sense of belonging
 - Managers establish regular check-ins with remote employees and facilitate regular team events, whether virtual or in-person
 - Introduce new ways to reinforce company mission, values and brand. Counter prohibitive and intimidating character of restrictions with 'can do' activities and positive messaging

WORKPLACE

- Limit traditional workplace occupancy
 - Determine capacity of the workspace adhering to social distancing guidelines
 - Modify the physical environment to support proper distancing
 - Update norms for common areas such as meeting rooms, break rooms, shared desks, etc.
 - Increase use of virtual meetings
 - Notify employees of service amenity changes and availability (cafeterias, fitness centers, daycares etc.)
- Develop or rework an existing remote work policy
 - Develop process and timeline for identifying which employees return to the workplace, balancing business requirements with individual needs and preferences

- Document and communicate the level of company support for individual home-office environments: furniture, technology, internet reimbursement, etc.
- Define and communicate changes to sick leave policy, commuter benefits, and others

WORKFLOW

Key considerations for skills, training, and enablement include:

- Setting up a productive home office
 - Publish best practices for outfitting home-based workspace: location, furniture, technology etc.
 - Provide ergonomic guidance and support
 - Guide employees in establishing positive remote-work habits, such as following a schedule and establishing behavioral expectations with others in the home
 - Training and best practices for conducting/participating in remote meetings with coworkers and customers
- Managing a remote workforce
 - Train managers on best practices for leading remote teams
- Tools and technology
 - Provide access to collaboration tools, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack, WebEx, etc.
 - Ensure employees have appropriate technology literacy to enable remote work
 - Host team and/or All Hands style meetings periodically with employees to ensure they are connected with the work environment and each other
- Remote learning and development
 - Modify the on-boarding process
 - Shift learning and development programs to be delivered virtually

Phase 2 - Long Term

Adopting long-term change is also defined by external environmental factors: a COVID-19 vaccine being developed and widely available and/or herd immunity being broadly attained. In this phase, society will establish a “new normal” operating state. Companies must now expand on the operational shifts achieved in Phase 1 to align their workforce and workplace strategies with the realities of the new business environment.

WORKFORCE

- Talent can be sourced “anywhere”
 - With time, leadership of some companies will become comfortable with the idea of distributed work and workforce, and look to source talent outside of their normal hiring geography
 - Companies with a strong culture and sense of purpose, and are able to communicate that effectively, will more easily adopt a distributed strategy
 - These will be “connected” companies even without a physical connection with their employees
 - Companies that are not able to sustain a cohesive culture, perhaps because they never had it in the first place, may be unsuccessful in keeping their workers motivated and productive when they are not located together. These will be

“disconnected” companies that require physical presence to manage their employees.

- Geography may become less relevant for the connected company. Hiring efforts can search for talented individuals nationally or internationally, rather than be restricted by company location
- Millennials and GenZ who are increasingly choosing to live in Edge Cities and smaller towns, escaping the high cost of major metros, will welcome this change and accept lower salaries for a higher quality-of-life location.

WORKPLACE

- Enabling employees flexibility to work from “anywhere”
 - Will traditional workplaces be as relevant for a distributed workforce? Perhaps not, however, the physical office will remain. Certain functions require in-person presence and face-to-face contact, even with social distancing norms in place. This footprint may become smaller in the longer-term as talent is accessed remotely.
 - Some workers will choose to go to the office, supporting their need for face to face interaction.
 - “Work Anywhere” policy may also be the end of a dedicated workspace for some companies. Even in the office, if a large mobile workforce is enabled, space will have to adapt to that way of working. Workers who need to be in dedicated seats or choose to be in such an arrangement may have to work in “pods” that are an exception, not the norm.
 - On the other hand, even flexible workplaces may have many privacy booth type spaces that allow separation and audio-privacy.

Workplace strategy elements may include:

- Changing amenity ratios more focused on event-driven experience vs. daily operations
- Revised standards accommodating new norms for social distancing
- Less medium and large size conference rooms
- More 1-1 style enclosed rooms
- More spaces designed around seamless video or telepresence connecting in support of effortless real time co-creation
- Shift to more enclosed offices vs. open environment
- New roles for Workplace Managers as they learn to support employees in multi-environment settings

RE and Portfolio Strategy may include:

- Potential to shrink footprint as fewer workers occupy the office
- Increased use of serviced space/co-working offices
- Increased use of larger collaboration spaces (moveable walls) to accommodate periodic group meetings
- Reduction in dedicated office space

WORKFLOW

- Provide support to leverage tools and technology for virtual meetings versus face to face
 - High quality virtual work technology that a company will be essential to supporting distributed work. Technology affects the level of worker productivity and connectivity employees feel to each other.
 - Beyond virtual meetings, technologies that simplify work process, minimize “paperwork”, and integrate all workflows will be essential to make distributed workers successful and connected with the company culture

In the long-term, companies now comfortable with the idea of a distributed workforce will leverage learnings from this current experience to source from a distributed resource pool no longer constrained by geography. Businesses will be better able to manage the cost of talent managing tradeoffs between quality and price, drawing from a labor pool that will demand greater workplace flexibility than ever before.

Changes to RE portfolio

- Strategies based on densifying offices may need to be re-evaluated
- Space allocation ratios formerly focused on personal space may need to concentrate more on employees coming to the office primarily for collaboration
- The look and feel of the space may change, along with size allocations for the various types of spaces supported in the office, to support new occupancy limitations

Conclusion

There is no “return to normal” scenario here, only a New Normal is still unfolding. Already the pandemic has proven:

- It’s possible for workers to be productive outside the confines of the corporate office
- Companies can trust that work is being done
- Technology is being utilized more than ever to support work

The organizations that leverage this newfound knowledge beyond the current situation may find themselves at a distinct advantage in what is sure to be a challenging market for years to come. Certainly they will be better prepared to weather the storm when faced with the next such disaster.

The current pandemic has caused companies to look at the way employees work, both in the short and long term. The workplace of the future will not be hosted only in brick and mortar offices, but rather in a multitude of settings and locations. Real Estate professionals need to quickly adapt to servicing employees in these various settings, in a way that adds value to the company and enhances the workplace experience.