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A **COVID-19** Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Space Utilization and Metrics BOMA

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

The recovery from the COVID 19 pandemic is going to take place in three distinct phases. Each phase will bring its own challenges and opportunities. Assuming a viable vaccine is introduced by the fall of 2021, businesses will return to some semblance of normal in 2022.

Phase I – Re-Entry (May – October 2020)

In the earliest days of re-entry, visitors will not be allowed in offices and we expect a significant portion of tenants to continue to telework with essential employees leading the way with perhaps 30% or less of tenants returning to offices. Occupancy levels and specific restrictions will vary based on local regulations and corporate expectations and policy. Initially, companies will restrict deliveries as ways to reduce person-to-person contact. As a hedge against infection, essential employees will be divided into A and B teams so only half the workforce is present at any time to guard against infecting the entire team. Companies will employ social distancing without making major facilities related changes. As examples, employers will separate employees by leaving some workstations empty, providing social distance markings and travel arrows on the floor, and removing chairs from conference rooms to reduce occupancy for in-person meetings.

Landlords and tenants will need to “over communicate” as they plan and implement returning to work strategies. They will lean on tenant councils and other collaborations to get the word out. During this phase, tenants will be hypersensitive at first about hygiene, and landlords will focus on cleaning high touch surfaces (i.e. elevator buttons, doorknobs, and restroom areas) more frequently. Hand sanitizer will be everywhere, and the janitorial focus will change from “cleaning” to sanitizing” perhaps using far-UVC (a specific type of UVC light) and electrostatic cleaning methods that have been used extensively in medical buildings. Some initiatives like assuring the tenants the landlord has replaced HVAC filters, will be “theater of the mind” to make employees feel more comfortable because they will do little or nothing to combat the actual spread of the virus.

Landlords will install touch free devices such as hands-free restroom fixtures, arm/foot pull doors, automatic door openers, occupancy and motion sensors, and hand dryers when it is easy to do so. Companies will evaluate their processes for checking in visitors to make them touch free.

While some tenants will be working to renegotiate and extend leases, we do not see any structural changes to commercial leases. In the retail world there is an emerging request for pandemic clauses, though we believe few of these will be successful except for very strong or in demand tenants. Most landlords will attempt to move/keep this to the insurer side of the equation.

Phase II – Coping with COVID 19 (November 2020 – December 2021)

Once businesses are back in operation, companies will focus on the long-term economic impact of COVID-19 and lost business revenues, disruptions to productivity, and opportunities to capitalize on the post-COVID environment. They will rethink their business models from staffing and administrative expenses to capital budgets. Companies will not focus on real estate-related costs – at least not initially.

Tenants will contemplate changing their workplaces to more permanently accept the short-term changes including furniture, layout and other physical aspects of their space utilization with one caveat, it must make business sense. Landlords will consider common area upgrades, but many landlords will defer those changes until the next planned renovation. The primary focus of landlords and tenants will be to use what is there while exploring low and no cost work arounds to maintain social distancing requirements.

There will be increased expenses (example: sanitizing and disinfecting instead of cleaning) and reduced expenses in other areas; reduced occupancy for a portion of the year will translate into savings in a few areas such as utilities. Managers will be talking with clients about revising operating expense projections for 2020 including possibly employing gross up calculations to keep the integrity of the operating expense passthroughs.

Expect layoffs, furloughs, salary and benefit reductions – at least temporarily – in companies that have been heavily impacted. Expect some companies to fail – or to reemerge as entirely different entities post-COVID. The impact depends on many factors, including when businesses reopen, and the degree to which they were impacted by the slowdown. Some companies will keep a percentage of their team at home and/or create shifts and workday alternatives to keep actual in office headcount low enough to fulfill social distancing requirements.

If leases expire during this period, companies might design the new space to maintain social distancing and to prevent disease transmission to a limited extent. Companies will not do anything permanent if the leases are longer term. They will re-think remote work policies and practices. It will be hard for executives to downplay remote working because it worked during the pandemic.

We will start to see large scale implementation of touch free systems. Items we touch will be impregnated with Micro-ban®-type materials. It will become commonplace for design to include surfaces that can easily be sanitized – or that do not require sanitization in the first place

Once we have herd immunity and a vaccine is available, things will really begin getting back to normal. Expect things to start/stop/start/stop over this period (called “adaptive triggering”). We will partially open, open some more, pull back, open some more, pull back, then open some more. We will see clusters of infection as we open.

Expect companies to create “real” disaster recovery and resilience plans – many were unprepared for COVID 19 because their existing plans either did not include pandemic preparations or the plans were “pencil whipped” or forgotten on the shelf.

Phase III – A New Normal (2022 and Beyond)

In 18 months, things will return to “normal” and resemble 2019. Over time, we will forget all about COVID-19. Design changes to make things easier to sanitize will become commonplace. Tenants will think about changes as leases renew, but as time moves on, this will become less important. Social distancing will likely be abandoned once the pandemic is behind us.

Even with increased telework in the future, we believe the trend to consolidate office space will continue. Businesses will look for opportunities to cut their space utilization to about 160 square feet per employee. There might be additional demand for more private space at the expense of some team areas, but design will remain more or less open plan. There will be some lasting impacts on materials used for cubicles (easier to clean) and on partitions to create some additional separation,

but nothing radical. The co-working concept will need to adapt as tenants will want more control over who is coming in and out of the common areas.

Cleaning specifications will be enhanced to increase cleaning frequency for all high touch surfaces. Good hygiene will be encouraged (hand sanitizers continue to be commonplace) and employees will be able to clean their personal workspaces with Clorox® wipes as an added layer of protection. Far-UVC lighting will be installed in restrooms, lunchrooms and other gathering places, and potentially around the entire building.

This is a generational opportunity for WELL Building, Fitwell and other health and wellness programs to take hold. Fitness facilities will be at a premium with shower facilities for an increase in exercise including biking to work. The trend to enhanced health and wellness including increased natural light, fresh air, and more outdoor spaces (balconies, finished rooftops, walking trails, etc.) will continue. Biophilic design will expand and landlords will install more plants to enhance air quality and the overall office environment.

We will be leveraging building Apps, sensors and other technology in an AI, 5G world to create high performance buildings that will be automated work environments. All conference rooms will have remote meeting capabilities (Zoom®, Microsoft Teams®, Skype for Business®, GoToMeeting®, etc.) but we also foresee meeting attendees participating from laptops, tablets and smartphones even from the same room. The efficacy of and human desire for true face-to-face meetings, conversations and dialogue will continue to keep a requirement for the office and other gathering environments

Conclusion

Large natural disasters and other cataclysmic events of the past centuries have provided us with lessons learned, some of which we need to learn repeatedly. Social distancing will be the norm in the short term but as vaccines and other medical breakthroughs reduce the risk of transmission, the human need for touch, closeness and emotion will prevail.

The trends of distance learning, work from home, remote meetings and other distance-based communication and work methods will become more commonplace. With the dominance of the Millennials and Generation Z in the workforce will come flexible, remote team environments leveraging technology to drive even higher performance and productivity. However, regardless of how remotely we work, from a fundamental human perspective, the need for (and efficiency of) in person human connection is still the best and most desired form of doing business.