



PRESENT



A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Wellbeing Team 20 Office Re-Entry: Foundations for Building Employee Confidence

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As we begin our re-entry into the office, we aren't returning to the office we left pre-COVID, we are moving forward into a dynamic work environment that will be designed to prevent the spread of disease. Our re-entry begins *during* pandemic and at a time when unemployment rates are increasing every day.

Re-entry protocols will pull from CDC|WHO-based recommendations and OSHA-EU (or similar) guidance. Strategic re-entry plans will be tailored for specific business needs and hinge on variables such as region, building & transit infrastructure, employee roles and their connection to the building, and even corporate culture. Not all changes we'll encounter will linger post-pandemic. We must remember that this is a fluid situation.

What's the single most important aspect of the re-entry strategy? It's the physical and mental wellbeing of the individual employee. Without addressing this foundation, re-entry strategy will crumble. Most office-based workers [43%](#) are fearful they may contract COVID on the job.

Back to the basics: Architects, designers, and workplace managers have historically fostered employee's higher-level needs for social interaction, esteem, and even self-actualization through the built environment and specifically office design. The global pandemic has shifted the focus to the foundation of [Maslow's](#) Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow's Pyramid). Basic needs such as physical and psychological safety are now under a microscope.

As facilities re-open, understanding fundamental employee needs, those at the pyramid base, will be critical to a successful and sustainable re-entry process. Outside the basic [CDC|WHO](#) and [OSHA](#) -EU (or similar) guidelines, how can employers be sure these basics are addressed? As Peter [Drucker](#) once said, "Don't speculate and assume you know what hinders your employees the most—ask them."

Deep listening through surveying employees: Now's the time to return to the fundamentals of the employee experience. Involving employees in the development of their workplace experience demonstrates compassion and the willingness for deep listening, and surveys are a great way to gather feedback from a large number of individuals. If done properly **and acted upon** it will provide company leadership with the pulse of the organization and ideas about how best to customize re-entry.

Example Survey:

For each line item, please rank the following in order of importance to you during the re-entry into the interim office environment (1=least important 10=most important). Please add additional line items.

Thermal scans

Enhanced and increased cleaning

Visible air quality displays

Phased in re-entry

Face coverings for all building occupants

Bathroom schedules

De-densification

Telecommuting

Distancing protocol and markers

Sensors for building occupancy

Visible cleaning indicators

Elevator protocol

Holding area for co-workers who become ill at work

Physical separation from co-workers in office

Dedicated work points for office workers

Additional Questions:

What other measures are important to you?

What do you fear most?

What are milestones that would make it easier?

How would you address the return?

Has your temporary work from home experience been a productive one?

Customized surveys will check the mental pulse of both the employees slated to re-enter the office and those work from home (WFH) employees who may remain in that environment at least for a period or permanently. A comprehensive survey will provide management with a true read on their workforce and armed with data from their most valuable asset, their people, actionable and thoughtful re-entry plans can intelligently focus on how we “get back to work” while keeping employee wellbeing in the forefront.

Recent lessons learned: Common threads that are woven into each workplace re-entry conversation seem to all include six-foot rule, sanitizing stations, handwashing, elevator distancing, hallway protocol, cloth masks, distancing markers, bathrooms, and other health related elements. Pausing to ask employees what is occupying their minds will unlock a new level of understanding for leadership and allow apprehensive employees to have a voice.

Our collective experiences during this time are about many changes to the workplace as we know it. While we thrive on being together and benefit from human connection, social distancing and stay-at-home orders have reoriented how we work. During the pandemic, we are now more in tune with our capabilities – and limitations – than ever before. A day in the life of an employee as they return to the workplace will be pragmatic and purposeful. Each of us have experience to contribute to the solution.

Future of Work: Employees have vetted their ability to work on the go, juggling personal and professional responsibilities. There will be an increased amount of flexibility as employees can choose the setting or environment that complements the tasks at hand on a given day. The *work product*, not *hours spent in the office* will emerge as a common gold standard.

Leaders will re-visit the allocation of personal workstations and shared collaboration spaces to address distancing protocol. Unassigned “clean” space will give people the freedom to move within the office environment if they feel uncomfortable with their surroundings. Sensors will most likely become commonplace in aiding in the overall office flow. They may become commonplace in signaling cleanliness of space.

Trending now: Technology will be leveraged to support a more autonomous workplace, with automated doors and appliances, virtual conferencing tools and the ability to check when spaces have last been sanitized with the click of a button. Cleared surfaces will be the norm.

Plan-Do-Check-Act: Survey results from surveys similar to the above short version will drive leadership to not only listen to employee responses but to coordinate and communicate re-entry strategies WITH employees. What are the key findings in employee surveys? Are we providing on-going feedback to address employee concerns? As the fundamental needs are assessed and addressed, bathroom cleaning protocol may outweigh assigned seating as the top concern. Surveys may reveal that the “unseen” is more important to employees than the “seen”. O+M of HVAC mentioned in the new [ASHRAE](#) guidance as well as comprehensive cleaning schedules both historically remained in the background. These “invisible” activities will likely move to the front and center of critical and “visible” employee communications.

The reality: Most companies and organizations are anxious to return to the workplace for a variety of reasons. “Getting back to business” is a vital imperative. Making the best use of the [physical office](#) is a major driver in collaboration and culture. Signature buildings represent landmarks of the community. However, for now, the physical office will remain mostly [under-utilized](#). This is a good reminder that a building is not much use if employees are not comfortable occupying it.

The big shift: Employees are “getting back to business,” remotely. Some employees never missed a beat. While remote working has its own challenges, the virus itself is not the primary fear. The psychological wellbeing of these employees is primarily one of separation from others, isolation. The management of [virtual teams](#) and the technological tools required will present another opportunity for advancement and even the potential for cost saving to offset the loss in productivity that we’ve experienced globally.

While the full impact of COVID-19 on the workplace is evolving, one thing is certain: the pandemic is driving innovation and making way for a new workplace and employee experience. By embracing the new interim work environment and accepting the fluidity of the future, we can ultimately transform this challenge into an opportunity.