



PRESENT



## A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

**Team Topic and Number:** Workplace Wellbeing 4

**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.**

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## **The new normal doesn't have to suck!**

No matter which country we live in, we have all experienced the wonders of the COVID-19 crisis. The rules, the restrictions, the do's and don'ts, the social and physical distancing, the anxiety and fear for our families, the mixed-up communication and contradictory messages. Oh, we are so not going to miss it! As governments start to lift crisis measures, the new normal is becoming closer. But what will it be? Can the new normal be *normal* or will it be an extension of restrictions and anxiety? Will we be happy in the new normal and can it be fun? Well, the new normal will be different but it doesn't have to suck!

We must never lose sight of the full human experience as we design the return to office experience or extended working from home. It helps to think about "new normal" in terms of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Keeping staff safe is just the base, and we must do far more than that. We must ensure that the psychological and self-fulfillment needs are met or the experience will fall flat.

Workplace wellbeing will become even more health-related, with physical and mental wellbeing equally important. Innovation in real estate can contribute significantly to wellbeing, happiness and fun at work with design and technology being the strongest vehicles.

## **Workplace wellbeing: physical and mental wellbeing**

Any successful workplace wellbeing programme requires engagement, time and commitment and the situation amidst COVID 19 is no different. We believe any response to a post COVID environment must be a tailored approach that considers an organization's location, size and culture. Adopting a one-size-fits all solution to this or any future crisis response may compromise your organization's agility, responsiveness, and ultimate effectiveness. Whilst a 'sneeze guard approach' is currently being adopted by many in the short term, there is a realisation that this will pass, and the true question is: what will post COVID normality look like?

In terms of short-term physical wellbeing measures being introduced we are seeing a wide range of solutions being adopted – these vary from hygiene improvements such as enhanced cleaning and sanitation stations, touchless dispensers/access control, to replacing porous soft surfaces with cleanable and antimicrobial ones.

Health improvements such as additional biophilia, certain plants like Sansevieria, English Ivy and Ficus are well-known for their ability to clean indoor air. Providing immunity boosting foods in workplace cafes and pantries including fruits and other foods high in immune-boosting vitamins all aid our physical wellbeing. As opposed to closing office gyms, perhaps provide well-spaced exercise equipment in an existing room to encourage healthy activities and stress release throughout the day. Instead of having a guard at the entrance taking temperatures, invest in thermal cameras for temperature checks operated from a control room connected to your BMS.

Increased physical distancing such as adjusting workstation densities (by simple measures such as removing seating to encourage the appropriate utilisation) mean that desk layouts largely remain the same whilst reducing density. Instead of harsh separation markers in meeting rooms, use softer finishes and touches that don't look like a cordoned off school playground. For the graphics, posters and appliques used to convey rules and physical distancing, consider making them playful and interesting versus just correct and clinical.

If short term dividing screens are necessary between staff, perhaps using a plexiglass instead of opaque solid screens that limit interaction. For those advocating that this will lead to a return to workplace cellularization, think again! In our opinion this will reinforce the workplace as a reviving tool of our businesses and enhance collaboration, whilst killing the old ideas of the workplace as an overseeing space and presenteeism checklist.

In relation to mental wellbeing in these isolated times, transparency, communication and engagement are critical to maintain a positive culture and ensure our colleagues' mental wellbeing. HR will also need to set up robust employee assistance programs and managers toolkits to enhance mental wellbeing support.

For flexible and remote working, companies will need to provide a range of possibilities to ensure employee situations and concerns can be accommodated offering options such as flexible starting times, equipment for ergonomic and productive home working, or setup satellite offices to facilitate office work outside the bigger cities.

In short: 'HAVE A PLAN!' in uncertain times, people like structure and often seek stability.

**Communicate** - all the positive steps being introduced, and the rigorous planning going on behind the scenes. This provides reassurance.

**Train** – remember this is a new situation for everyone! Provide change management training prior to, and as staff re-enter the workplace to discuss best practices. Everyone learns differently, so make the training material as visual as possible by including photos with information overlays.

**Encourage Dialogue** - Providing staff with the information and resources they need to maintain good mental health is a positive step. However, encouraging honest, open conversations about the effects of the current situation including stress, anxiety and depression and offering routes to addressing these.

## **Technology and design solutions to make the new normal fun**

Experts in the Real Estate industry have been aware of the huge potential that technology and design have on general performance and wellbeing in the built environment. The current crisis will be looked at as a time, when the usage of innovative tools has speeded up tremendously. When implementing new technology and design approaches, the underlying goals and strategies have to be clear in order to add value in the short-, mid-,

and long-run. We identified two major topics that need to be on decision-makers' minds now more than ever:

## **1. Putting the human being in the centre of attention**

A user-centric approach to look at technology in an office building is to use it to empower users within the provided spaces. A smart building, equipped with all sorts of technology is, at its essence, a tool to adapt users' environments, for their comfort and well-being. Technology used simply for its own sake does not help – neither the building performance, nor the user's wellbeing. Technological impulses need to be carefully balanced and integrated with the physical and natural structure of buildings and their interiors, avoiding overexposure of the senses. This creates a natural interaction with the technologies at hand and enhances the users time spent within the buildings.

Mental and physical wellbeing in the field of technology and design are closely correlated to users' perceived individual control. In a time when people feel they have lost control, any opportunity to give them back control will be comforting. Office users who are enabled to have individual control on their surroundings will be a key factor in implementing a successful and long-lasting “back-to-the-office strategy” after Covid-19.

## **2. Visibility of performance and enabling people to own their office experience**

While raw (building) data is only considered “fun” for a very specific group of people in the workforce, including technology and the positive outcome of its usage on each and every individual reaches a much wider mass of people and can positively influence one's perception of what buildings, employers, and co-workers are working on for the wellbeing in the new normal.

So, first, what can and should be measured?

It's the building performance as well as the ability to perform for humans in the given surrounding. This includes e.g.: noise levels, amount of daylight, air quality, temperature, humidity, occupancy, cleaning schedules, room booking options, and also energy consumption. Combining these measurements with data from surveys on employee satisfaction and perceived productivity provides many insights - in the context of this paper it especially provides visibility and a positive feeling. Employers as well as building operators will have to enlarge the group of people having access to this data (including the working from home colleagues).

To spice things up and use technology and design elements that both help to be Covid-19 proof and are fun, implementing touchless entry- and elevator-systems as well as using robots to serve coffee as already in use in the hospitality market can quickly be realized. Why not make it an internal competition to come up with the coolest gadgets and tools - it will make the group of people that want to own their own office experience larger. And inform, share and publish the data in a simple and easy dashboard on smart devices and screens.

## **Conclusion**

These are unprecedented times, meaning no one has the playbook for what works best or what will come next. This is a time to engage with your employees, listen to their concerns, network externally, look for innovative ideas, leverage technology and be creative, but to never lose sight of the human experience. Of course, “new normal” has to be made to be safe, but it must also cater to the wellbeing of the whole person, be engaging, enjoyable and fun in some ways or it will suck.