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A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: **Workplace Wellbeing Team 9**

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

1. What is the psychological impact of physical distancing on the workplace?

Forecast

People are not ready to go back to the office now and those that are returning are nervous about it. There is a sense that we will not be able to jump back into our new reality without careful planning and clear new “rules” in place.

All of this isolation is impacting our mental health. The cost of mental health conditions (and related consequences) is projected to rise to \$6 trillion globally by 2030, from \$2.5 trillion in 2010, according to a study published by the World Economic Forum and the Harvard School of Public Health. As people around the world contend with stress and social restrictions related to COVID-19, mental health has become a particular area of concern. COVID-19 will have an impact on our society for years to come.

Not everything is negative! Positive impacts to work from home include no commuting, being with family, and less disruptions. Work from home is here to stay and will no longer be perceived as a benefit for a privileged few, but a universal strategy for improving productivity and wellbeing.

Solutions

- There will be a migration back to the office to meet physical distancing guidelines and keep employees safe and comfortable – many workplaces are just not set up to accommodate the 6-foot rule - working from home may be the safest solution physically and psychologically until a vaccine or treatment protocol becomes widely available. *Note: Colliers International notes that 60% of the UK's 11.8 million desks will be unusable when a two meter gap between staff is introduced.*
- Employers will find creative ways to support the well-being of a virtual workforce, such as: virtual fitness and wellness classes, remote ways to connect with nutritionists and counselors, company-wide support for discouraging or prohibiting meetings over lunch hour to help combat “Zoom fatigue”, giving employees an extra company-wide holiday, hosting virtual happy hours, and having managers call and reach out to staff more often, just to check in on well-being.
- The workplace will need to support the mental health of workers by providing them a safe place to work as well as consideration of biophilic and psychologically restorative features such as water, plants, sounds of nature piped in, places for meditation, or more investment in outdoor workspaces.

2. What investments in our workplace should we make short term versus long term? What solutions are likely to stick?

Forecast

Short term planning is largely focused on measures to get some staff back into the office over the coming months: testing, hygiene, distancing, behavioral protocols, and “quick fixes” like signage, sneeze guards, vendor agreements, and operational changes (food service, cleaning, etc.)

Medium term planning will involve revisiting space allocation strategies for the office, expanded remote work policies, investments in employee mental health, and interior design and engineering renovations to meet new healthy building criteria. Companies will spend more time on updating or developing business continuity plans, establishing or refining their emergency and risk management teams, enhancing employee relations, and collaborating across departments.

Longer term, depending on the business and how essential it is for employees to come to work, real estate footprints may decrease or increase. Business leaders will likely insist on more flexible terms, shorter leases and possibly rely more on trusted coworking providers to accommodate surges over time.

Solutions

- Employers will focus greater investment and time into workplace cleaning and building operations and employees will expect it. Companies will need to invest not only in executing cleaning and operational changes to foster a safe work environment but also in communicating the work being planned and to demonstrate that it has been completed.
- Pandemic response and business continuity plans will be developed inclusive of all stakeholders (references: [Cushman Wakefield](#) and [JLL](#))
- Working at home, shift work, and staggered work will be more widely acceptable and perhaps required at times. Policies will be developed to support this and to provide structure.
- Phase the order in which employees return to the office and focus resources on preparing only those facilities vs. preparing the full portfolio.
- There may be a shift from “shared” workplaces to individually assigned spaces to promote workplace cleanliness.
- There is and will be a desire for staff to move out of open offices and back into enclosed office spaces (perception of the enclosed office space as being private and safer).
- Companies may invest in home office technology and ergonomic furniture in an effort to promote employee comfort and productivity.
- An emphasis on no-touch or voice activated fixtures and technology, such as doors you open with your arms or feet, no-touch elevator buttons, as well as no touch coffee makers (robotic or those that can pair with a mobile device).
- Building owners will review, monitor, and make changes when necessary to air quality, filtration, humidity levels, air change rates, pressurization and available sensor technology in building systems.

- Workplace cafeterias will provide more grab and go and made fresh to order food options while eliminating self-serve options.
- There will be an emphasis on signage in the workplace. Digital signage may promote greater reach and flexibility (digital signage gets 400% more views than static signage according to Intec Corp).
- Companies may complete temperature screenings and health declaration processes at designated building entry points.
- New antimicrobial materials for surfaces, coatings, door hardware, fabrics and textiles will be developed to inhibit the spread of pathogens.

3. What does change management look like? How is change management different?

Forecast

The evolution of workplace experience has been augmented by the recent pandemic. Employee health and wellbeing will be at the forefront of every employer across the globe.

Early studies indicate that all corporate functions will have a critical role to ensure a safe and healthy workplace. A preventive and responsive business continuity protocol will need to be transparent to all stakeholders for assurance moving forward.

Helping people evolve their thinking and adopt new ways of working will take a more comprehensive approach than typical, in order to ensure physical and psychological safety as well as worker productivity.

What is now crisis management will evolve into more ongoing change management engagement. Support will be critical from company leadership and executive sponsors, but also significant involvement from HR, IT, EHS, Risk Management and other key expertise across organizations.

Solutions

Full transparency of measures implemented upon return to office (i.e. enhanced cleaning, display of health performance metrics in lobby, sensor technologies that allow occupants to see Health Performance Indicators (HPI) in real time, and environmental graphics to influence behavior.

- Companies will create a robust associate wellness program to proactively identify, holistically treat, and permanently cure underlying health conditions.
- More healthy nudges will be designed into the workplace. Plants, wall graphics and signage, carpet color or lines on the floor, will encourage path of travel, physical distancing, and space use.
- Companies and leaders will provide more frequent and regular communication to help employees with change.
- Employers will look for more integrated responses rather than departmental responses (more opportunities for departments to collaborate on change management efforts as a true team).

- Change management will not be a one-time thing. It will be ongoing as more and more employees return to office. Change management will need engagement from all partners (HR, IT, CRE) and strong and visible leadership support to be successful.
- It could be argued that much of our experience to date is crisis management or business continuity rather than change management, but the outcome will be adapting to the crisis through change.

4. What are the new measures of success for the workplace?

Forecast

Having a healthy workplace moves from a “nice to have” to a “must have,” which will change how leaders prioritize and invest in employee wellbeing. It’s possible that healthy building certifications, like WELL and Fitwel will be mandated or become standard, similar to the way LEED has established itself.

Businesses will continue to comply with federal and local Executive Order mandates and codes. They will also be closely monitoring OSHA, CDC, and World Health Organization guidance and recommendations.

“Health Performance Indicators” will become better understood and implemented including regular measurement of buildings and engagement of building occupants.

Solutions

- New frameworks emerge to better understand how to plan for and maintain healthy buildings such as [Healthy Buildings: How Indoor Spaces Drive Performance and Productivity](#) (Joseph Allen from Harvard School of Public Health)
- Emphasis on hygiene elements, cleanliness of the workplace, and measures that demonstrate it. Enhanced scope of work that defines cleaning task and frequency, measures performance, and documents deliverables (see WELL building best practices).
- Continuous indoor air quality testing to ensure acceptable levels at all times. [Recent studies](#) note a correlation between poor indoor air and outdoor pollution in urban areas as a root cause of increased COVID-19 fatality.
- Employers soliciting anonymous feedback and responding to accommodate employee perception and needs.
- Buildings sharing health indicators via sensors and dashboards, employees tracking building health data through mobile applications and outside data sources.