# CoreNet Global HACKATHON

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## A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

**Team Topic and Number: Distributed Work**

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

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**Return to Office (RTO) strategy will vary by company.**

The change from office-based work to remote-based work (RBW) was an immediate response for most companies during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within weeks, the workforce across various industries vacated the corporate office.  As we plan for RTO, one thing we can be sure of is that "One

size will NOT fit all." Individual experience throughout this pandemic includes varying levels of comfort with the potential to return to the office.  In addition, a company's RTO strategy is largely driven by industry sector and company culture in terms of how conservative or progressive the strategy might be.  Given that companies utilize real estate as a tool to support enterprise goals and build and reinforce culture, the impact on the company's workforce, workspace, strategy, tools and technology will be critical.

Companies must clearly address anxieties and perceptions of their workforce, customers, and visitors. Engagement surveys, focus groups, and manager enablement tools can provide insight into key factors impacting perception, anxiety, and willingness to return to the office. Returning to the office should be an inclusive process, where no one feels obligated to self-identify as anxious, scared or in doubt to explain why they do not feel comfortable in returning. When devising a distributed workforce strategy, it will be extremely important to create and govern an equitable workplace experience across the board.  Equity among the workforce should include balanced performance measurement, productivity tools, and HR policies for in-office and remote-work associates.

Flexibility and choice were powerful trends in the workplace prior to the pandemic and will remain prevalent. Individuals included in the first phase of the RTO strategy will find a modified workplace modeled to support social distancing, significantly decreased building capacity, and heightened cleaning protocols.  Shelter in place orders have forced a swift adaptation to virtual working technologies.  Positive response and acceptance of such technologies have resulted in increased productivity for many companies. It will be important to accept and build upon the tools and resources discovered during the pandemic for a successful distributed work strategy moving forward.

**Strategy will evolve over time.**

The threat posed by COVID-19 caused a rapid shift in corporate real estate usage and strategy with an unknown duration, though most expected this shift to be temporary.  Organizations have been looking to the timelines of government health agencies and medical authorities to underpin an RTO strategy including some level of phased re-entry to the workplace.  However, now many companies appear to be taking a more conservative approach to their RTO plans with the safety of employees and risk reduction being the primary drivers.  Parts of our workforce have demonstrated the ability to successfully work remotely during this time.  Repopulation across various organizations considering a phased return will vary likely between a mid-year 2020 re-entry, to no re-entry until early 2021. The only goal is to have a safe return to a healthy workplace no matter how long it takes, nor how many interim steps there are in the process.

The phasing of RTO strategy will look something like this:

- **Short-Term**:  There will be a continued emphasis on remote working.
- **Mid-Term**: A hybrid model of RBW and RTO will be prevalent. During the short- and mid-term periods, organizations will likely make temporary changes to their real estate strategies such as decreasing seating capacity, creating more "touchless" environments, creating one-way traffic patterns, and requiring PPE.  These actions are primarily influenced by municipal orders and/or guidelines.
- **Long-Term**:  This will be dependent on individual organizations' priorities and is harder to predict.  However, we believe all companies must emerge with a well-defined RBW policy to survive in the post-COVID world. There will be companies that have determined their values and

culture are best lived out when employees are in the workplace engaging with one another, and they must keep policies in place for employees to feel safe doing so.

**Strategy changes will be lasting.**

COVID-19 has been a greater and more immediate disruptor to the workplace than anything else we have seen in our time. As we prepare for RTO, it is getting easier to envision what the first iteration of workplaces will look like. However, predicting the workplace of the future beyond the initial period is a much more difficult undertaking. It will be paramount that the industry collaborates to implement solutions that balance efficiency, safety, culture, and employee experience.

Areas of first impact:

- **Floor Plans:** The high focus on density in recent years directly conflicts with the concept of physical distancing. Creating more choice in work setting will be even more important.
- **Entrances:** Medical screening may take the form of current high-level security screening.
- **Common Areas:** Spaces such as pantries and bathrooms will be re-examined to minimize touching shared surfaces. Design solutions such as door-free entrances, foot contact points for doors, and voice and/or motion activated systems will likely become more standard.
- **Shared Amenities:** Spaces such as gyms may not able to be utilized in the same way, or even offered at all, and likely will include new attendance and maintenance etiquette models.
- **Dining Facilities / Communal Kitchens:** We will be required to re-configure shared amenities like kitchens and re-examine our communal elements like shared utensils. Spaces will be moving away from reusable dishware to disposable and moving to 'tap and pay'. New catering service restrictions to minimize points of touch will be put into place.
- **Air-Filtration Systems:** These will be scrutinized and held to higher standards and upgraded filtration will be expected.
- **Furniture**: While some solutions create perceived separation, it is important to acknowledge it does not create safety and may create a false sense of security to the user.
- **Interior Design:** Material use within a workplace will be closely monitored, ensuring materials selection will not pose a risk to human health. Overall corporate interior design decisions may start to be informed by healthcare and transportation trends.

Perhaps more noticeable than the physical changes to spaces, will be the change to company culture and policies. Areas that are most likely to be addressed are:

- **Communication**: Frequent and consistent messaging will be critical for ensuring everyone has the same up to date information about policies and expected behaviors within the workplace.
- **Outdoor Space:** Long valued as a space amenity, there is now an added incentive for building owners to create these spaces because they provide additional work zones with fresh air and allow for physical distancing.
- **Sensor Technology:** We will likely see the increase of touchless and sensor technology in the workplace, as companies seek a stronger approach to preventing germ spread across all functions in the workplace.
- **Sickness Protocols:** Handling employees with symptoms in the workplace will be critical. Isolation rooms with special cleaning procedures, air filtration, etc., will be needed to separate an employee who feels ill until they are sent home.

- **Density Protocols:** The number of employees permitted to occupy the physical office space is expected to be reduced for a long time which could result in shift working, staggered starts, or alternate workdays.
- **Robust Landlord Maintenance Policies:** Tenants will require these to be included in lease language. Likewise, landlords will re-evaluate maintenance protocols, products and service providers for building assets and use these as incentives for tenants in building selection.
- **Personal Health and Wellbeing:** Evaluating a building's health status through a performance-based system for measuring, certifying, and monitoring building features that impact human health and well-being will be greater emphasized in the months and years to come. Third-party entities such as the WELL will thrive.
- **Space Definition / Flexibility:** The delineation between work zones is blurring. Four key definitions of utilized space within a workforce are (1) Home; (2) Work; (3) Third Place; and (4) Collaborative Space. Planning and designing physical space to understand the uses and needs of each is imperative.

While we do not have all the answers on long term outcomes for the workplace, we will have a continuous evaluation process as we learn more. The planning process will help us evaluate scenarios and allow for better preparation. Workforce leaders should evaluate the positive changes and lessons learned and leverage these in order to facilitate long term enterprise goals. The future of workplace will include new approaches to collaboration spaces, a heightened awareness of employee emotional and physical wellbeing, and resiliency policies within all business sectors. This is an opportunity for workplace design evolution. The real estate industry has a great opportunity to take the lead in creating an environment focused on protecting employees, supporting productivity, and fostering collaboration by using smart and healthy design principles.