CoreNet Global | Hackathon
CONNECT — PRESENT
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A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Work Distribution / Team #1 (Dream Team)

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

We are emerging from a pandemic which has profoundly disrupted the workplace. One day we were in our offices. The next, we worked from home. Household dependents abruptly required more supervision. Face-to-face encounters of our Monday-to-Friday lives were halted with little warning. Past changes, and even disasters, were not like this in the world of CRE. The uniqueness of COVID-19 resonates in the forecasts and recommendations for corporate real estate professionals.

To date, we are seeing an unprecedented amount of planning to ensure safety is maximized before staff return to the office. But what workplace will we return to? If the *Crisis* and *Emergence* stages were frightening and disruptive to lifestyles and the economy, the 3 subsequent phases are promising as we address the issue head-on.

To provide a focused perspective, the context of our team's response is through the lens of Office use in urban settings of the Americas.

FORECAST IN THREE PHASES

Following the *Crisis* and *Emergence stages*, there are 3 phases to consider in forecasting COVID-19's impact on Distributed Work and establishing recommendations. These contain a framework for assessing the evolving CRE response to the pandemic, although the lines between each will at times be blurred.

Phase I – Re-Entry (Into Temporary Normal)

Timeframe - Where we are today; planning for re- entry; issues from days 1 through 60; select cities', states' and countries' governments initiating Re-Entry timing

Focus – REACT

All re-entry policies must comply with local legislation and regulation. Key dates issued from governing bodies, such as when shelter-in-place or stay-at-home orders are lifted, must be identified and understood. CDC guidelines, additionally, must be reviewed with internal re-entry committees and incorporated into communication to staff.

Impact Beyond the Office

Bringing workers "Back in Office", once allowed, will require more than facility preparation. Many factors, some beyond organizations' control, must be considered:

- **Home** - potentially the single most influential factor in employees' ability/inability to return to the office; situational contexts must address productivity (dependents at home, suitable workspace, personal health status).

- **Commuting** - how safe will people feel about transit options?

- **Building(s)** - how safe is the broader facility and its infrastructure? Descriptions of safe practices must be provided and communicated to occupants.

- **Site Selection** - which location options are acceptable? Criteria must be established by organizations.

Each of the above are critical criteria to consider. In Phase I organizations will defer to local government guidelines on whether facemasks will be necessary as well as other safety guidelines. In the Re-entry phase we may see the following:

- New **occupancy strategies** will regulate in-office schedules by strategically determining employee presence and when to maximize teaming.
- New **HR policies** will address future pandemic situations and more formalized work-from-home procedures.
- **Behavioral guidelines** will be communicated, posted and monitored (e.g. masks and physical distance).

- Property managers will impose new **visitor guidelines** for buildings, enhanced building cleaning schedules, and quarantine protocols for tenants.
- **Remote work enhancements** must improve collaboration technologies to enhance productivity.
- **De-densified space** layouts will include personal work area, relaxed conference densities, and dramatically reduced usage of large auditorium and multi-purpose space.
- **Cafeterias and auditoriums** will only operate on a very limited basis to control occupancy density.
- **Food service** will be delivered to floors to reduce elevator usage during peak time.
- **Hand sanitizing** stations throughout the office may be added.
- **Stairwells** may be renovated to increase lighting, improve design appeal, and have additional air flow.
- **Restrooms** and **break areas** will be modified with contactless features.

Gradually re-entry "shock" will become the new (ab)normal.

Phase II – Daily Life Up to Pandemic Resolution

> **Timeframe** - From several weeks (differing by organization) into initial Re-entry until Post Pandemic period; pre-vaccine
> **Focus** - ADAPTING

Having enabled employees to safely repopulate the office, organizations will turn increased attention to managing and operating the business or the organization, with health concerns still heavily influencing decisions. Flexibility and fluidity will be a key collective skill as the business drivers and employee engagement are balanced. Activities include:

- **Optimizing In-Office Employee Schedules** - decisions regarding who can and should be present, and for what purposes employees utilize the office.
- **Phase II Decisions Refined Continuously** - HR policies regarding who works in the office based on experiences during Phase I.
- **Cost Reduction** - employee and contractor reductions the most immediate, followed by supply chain/vendor pressure and discretionary operating expenses. Fixed real estate rent based on space occupied will be challenging to adjust in this transition period.
- **New Guidelines and Standards for Property Management** emerge.
- **Remote Work Enhancements** - improved collaboration technologies and best practices emerge from within and outside of organizations, and are tested.
- **Future Planning for Post Pandemic i**nitiated, including:
    - Overall organization strategy - recovery, priorities and adjustments to overall business direction.
    - Staffing - changes in headcount with different skills and training needed.
    - Interaction protocols and need for more/less/different customers.
    - Real estate footprint - size, location and type of facility; model (lease or own); operating agreements.

Each activity will consider myriad scenarios as well as the prototyping of space layouts, policies, and procedures with insights into emerging behaviors. These will evolve and be reviewed on an ongoing basis, in part due to potential resurgences of COVID-19.

The impact of an increased desire for work/life balance, driven by employees, will be factored into all areas.

Phase III – Daily Life Post Pandemic

> **Timeframe** - Pandemic "solved" (vaccines, treatment); COVID-19 no longer major health issue; all government restrictions lifted
>
> **Focus** - EXECUTE

Will pre-COVID-19 conditions return? No, but the future will have many similarities. Pre-COVID-19 remote work included 10% of the workforce. Some organizations were more remote, some less. The CRE industry had been moving toward a much more distributed workforce with space allocated for staff and collaboration as needed. COVID-19 accelerated this trend. During the crisis, CRE shifted to 90% remote work and no use of office space. Remote work Post-Pandemic will include an average of 50% of the workforce, with a range of scenarios including:

- Completely distributed workforce with no office - staff meet in person sporadically at third-party facilities like hotels.
- Completely distributed workforce with small offices - these serve as places for team meetings (platooning), brand showcasing, client meetings.
- Continued space reduction - driven by larger distributed workforce.
- Increased distributed workforce - some in office(s) as is appropriate for their job roles, skills and desires of where to work. Likely reduction in net space over time.
- Have space, need to reconfigure - best of breed tactics with focus on employee productivity and satisfaction, instead of cost reduction.
- Flex Space re-imagined - surviving providers focus on multi-sized workplace options emphasizing remote work and support features, rather than ad-hoc social open space settings.

There is momentum gaining that perhaps the density pendulum swung too far over the past decade, pushing office density to its maximum. This pandemic has taught us that a superior balance exists, which can in turn offset negative feedback and decreased productivity seen, at times, in such layouts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It's mid-May 2020, and a large percentage of the office workforce has been at home for weeks. This is an incredible acceleration of a trend that had continued at a slow evolution for several decades. We see the following:

- **Optimizing Productivity of Valued Employees:** Whether employees are in or out of the office, there will be a significant investment in technology and major changes to recruiting, training, supervision and retaining to support remote work capabilities.

- **Business Continuity Planning:** This is no longer just for natural disasters. It will now include plans for rapid switches to total remote work.
- **Shifts in Organization Culture**: This will be supported through Design, Technology and Change Management principles. Examples include: health and safety provisions moving to the forefront *(Leesman in 2018 had it ranked last in impacting factors of employee experience)*; a change to a results-oriented work culture from a "time in the office" culture; and, an increase in surveying and monitoring worker engagement, satisfaction and effectiveness.

Organization and workforce circumstances will vary for the foreseeable future, and maybe indefinitely. A large number of organizations with previous reluctance to embrace remote work will now view it as a viable option. Both management and staff are more confident working away from the office, having seen evidence that tasks can be completed remotely. This greater set of options makes much richer potential solutions available. The pre-COVID-19 workplace saw employees gaining a growing voice in workplace decisions - from location to layout to aesthetic. This voice has now grown even stronger and the priority has evolved to place a huge importance on health and wellbeing.

The role of the CRE professional will be more important than ever in the post-COVID-19 workplace. Challenges will be significant, and professionals rising to the occasion will play a more critical role than ever in ensuring that the workplace is a is a safe and performance-optimizing tool for organizations. The office has not disappeared, nor will it - it has simply been required to evolve and, most importantly, improve.

References/Resources

https://www.cushmanwakefield.com/en/insights/covid-19/recovery-readiness-a-how-to-guide-for-reopening-your-workplace

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https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/coronavirus-facilitate-return-to-work.aspx

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