



PRESENT



A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Workplace Wellbeing

Team sponsor/chapter (if applicable): N/A

Team Lead: Amy Faris

Team Members: Michael Bellaman, Tim Sullivan, Vance Walter, Samuel Winkler

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

Amid a global pandemic and subsequent state-mandated stay at home orders, the relatively healthy 2020 forecasts that many corporate real-estate economists predicted have been flipped on their heads, along with most industries' economic hedges pre-COVID-19-induced pitfall. Emerging from the chaotic spring months is a new paradigm for corporate real estate professionals, as the success of most service industry organizations moving to an exclusive work from home schedule is a direct threat to the current business model of the industry. Companies should acknowledge the changing winds of the American workplace and adapt to meet the challenge during and after the immediate effects of the virus have gone with the emergence of a widely available vaccine.

Further, the wellbeing of employees both at home and within the workplace come into question. How can wellbeing be kept paramount, and what important factors must businesses focus their attention on in order to keep workers happy and healthy? Good living conditions and employment are vital to one's wellbeing, as well as social interactions and positive

thinking. One's mental wellbeing is just as important as their physical wellbeing. The CDC gives a holistic view of wellbeing by categorizing different forms of wellbeing. The COVID-19 outbreak has made society focus primarily on keeping healthy but other issues of wellbeing must be addressed beyond physical wellbeing; social wellbeing and psychological wellbeing must also be considered.

Working remotely

As office spaces begin to reopen around the country, a great deal of disruption is expected in employee work locations. The [Pew Research Center](#) states that roughly 91% of individuals polled would feel uncomfortable going to a crowded place. Returning to the office is clearly a source of concern for many people, amplified by the recent efforts to reopen public spaces starting while the virus is still spreading.

Though not ideal, businesses can still operate while their employees are working remotely due to technological advances such as video conferencing and remote access to shared networks. Businesses need to proactively address health concerns by making sure that their work from home and sick time policies are structured to optimize employee flexibility and ensure continued productivity. This paradigm shift will necessitate new and unique policies for different workplaces and should be established at the executive level. Giving employees more opportunities to work from home allows for peace of mind for the workforce and their families, diminishes opportunities for the virus to spread and helps protect people most at risk of severe illness.

Common spaces

Working from home allows for those who are uncomfortable in the short-term to remain home and keep away from others. To some, working from home is not an ideal situation as it impedes their natural desire to socialize. With working from home as a viable option for employees that are able and willing, the amount of people in the office may be lower than a previously typical workday. For employees who must be in the office or choose to be, how can they function safely within their work environment?

Measures have already been developed to combat the virus and to keep people healthy. Things like social-distancing and an increased focus to keep hands and surfaces clean have already become the new normal. Insisting that these practices be followed and ensuring all individuals are equipped with hand sanitizer, surface wipes, masks and gloves can help employees maintain these newly placed measures.

Office spaces should also distinguish between what is meant for an individual and what is shared. Each employee should have their own set of office supplies that are strictly not shared. The shared items in the office space like the printers and coffee machines should be cleaned and sanitized regularly.

Meetings within an office space also come with their new challenges. One way to assist in having productive meetings is by maintaining the standard for what is personal and what is shared. Employees can bring their own chairs, laptops or anything else they may need to touch

within a meeting. Surfaces can be wiped down before and after every meeting and any shared tool can also be used by one person per meeting and wiped down before and after each meeting.

The landscape of offices could change by encouraging more people to work remotely, showing that there is little need to have companies occupying large amounts of office space. In the short-term, dividers between desks and directing foot traffic can help maintain social-distancing.

For corporate real estate companies, accurately forecasting the extent to which people and companies will return to the workplace is paramount. Companies will have to gauge how offices will be affected by the threats of working remotely and increased aversion to public places. Without evolving business models, corporate real estate companies could see reduced demand for office space. Some have suggested that it could mean the same amount of space, or even more, with office layouts designed to maximize wellbeing.

Technologies

Embracing technology, whether it is at home or in the office, is set to be the future of how business is conducted even more than was predicted in a pre-COVID-19 world. This experience has forced the use of new technologies that were barely used a year ago. Tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have flourished in this pandemic because they give an opportunity to communicate with others on a virtual platform. These apps are designed by engineers with efficiency as the number one goal. With continued technological advancement, employees will be able to work remotely with greater efficiency than ever before. This can bring a lot of security to workers and companies if a second wave of the virus occurred.

Touch-free technologies like Amazon Alexa for Business can offer an improved and automated experience for employees. Condensing work into a cloud and touch-free software can be set as the future for offices. On a larger scale, companies could consider installing automatic doors or facial recognition technologies to eliminate the constant touching of dirty, contaminated door handles. Installing improved ventilation systems could greatly impact the quality of air in the office, remove allergens and increase productivity and health of employees. It is even possible for new health screenings to be available. [Forbes](#) predicts that the government may soon release technology capable of determining who is likely carrying a virus, based on body temperature.

The Future

COVID-19 has already altered the nature of workplaces across sectors and could act as a catalyst to the emerging trend of remote companies, or businesses with no physical location. As concern over the spread of this particular infectious disease fades with the emergence of a vaccine (at some unknown time), there can only be an expectation for additional pandemics in the future. As many have pivoted to working from home out of necessity during the peak periods of the Coronavirus, there could be an increase of “work from home” or “work from anywhere” policies emerging throughout corporate America. [Research](#) has shown that companies that have fostered flexibility in where and when employees do their job, can increase productivity, reduce turnover and lower organizational costs.

In response, corporate real estate companies must adapt and brace for a shift in industry norms in the short- and long-term, possibly spurred on by some form of federal or local government regulation. It remains unclear how far the COVID-19-induced changes will affect building layouts or physical structures. Office spaces will need to be updated with technology that keeps people healthy and safe, with a clear emphasis on the wellbeing of users. It is also clear that there will be major changes; in past cases of disruption, companies that adapted their practices to fit the emerging trends have been the most successful. On the heels of the largest economic bail-out in U.S. history and an unprecedented yet temporary increase in employee sick and family leave, the path forward on workplace safety policy in response to COVID-19 remains murky. There have been conflicting calls to require infectious disease exposure control plans to cover all workers in America, and conversely for increased business liability protection from workers. Despite the unclear path forward, policies adopted in response to this crisis are certain to affect the wellbeing of workers across the country.

In the event of a COVID-19 recurrence in the short-term, companies should learn from the lessons of the working from home pilot test—meaning they should double down on the use of tools that have allowed for employees to be successful while working from home, while changing the practices that did not work. In the COVID-19-vaccinated-future to come, service industry workers will undoubtedly return to the office. However, to be ready for the potential re-outbreak and subsequent economic and psychological effect on American society, businesses and governments should ensure that individuals feel safe. Whether the goal is to protect lives or a business (or both), this can be done by utilizing emerging technology to maximize the wellbeing of the customer.