Team Topic and Number: Workplace Wellbeing

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

Work-life balance is not a new idea, but the proper practice of the initial concept has been lost and evolved into "work from anywhere – all the time". Due to the pandemic, COVID-19, work-life balance along with work from home has been a primary focus for employers, which has allowed the concept to have a re-introduction with a potential positive spin. Additionally, the physical effects of COVID-19 have been the central focus of the virus whereas the psychological aspects have not been fully addressed.

For people to return to work and normalcy they will need to feel safe, which brings us to Maslow's hierarchy of needs created by Abraham Maslow, which is a motivational theory in psychology. He refined his theory from 1943 until 1987 and it remains a very popular framework on how individuals are motivated through a hierarchical order, which is physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

Assuming an individual's physiological needs are met, which is having food, shelter, and water then the next four stages can be addressed in the workplace environment. We have broken up workplace wellbeing into three categories, which are:

1. People
2. Physical Space
3. Communication

Each of these categories will be applied to the four stages of Maslow's hierarchy of needs after physiological needs.

Safety Needs

Each person needs personal space in their daily lives including when they are in the office. The technical term for personal space and how a human uses the space is proxemics, which has four areas:

- Intimate Space – 1 foot away and involves a high probability of touching
- Personal Space – ranges from 2 to 4 feet away and is used amongst family and friends
- Social Space – ranges from 4 to 12 feet away and is used for business associates and to separate strangers using public areas
- Public Space – ranges from 12 to 25 feet away

Many offices with modern benching systems place their employees 4 to 5 feet apart, which is close to their personal space and potentially putting people "too close for comfort". Due to the virus, people's sense of comfort will require more distance, which will result in offices being reconfigured, using modified social spacing standards to separate employees.

Aside from physical space, a set of policies by each company will need to be instituted to allow its employees to feel secure. If we begin with a focus on the pre-vaccine, return to work scenarios that address the basic need for safety, we find ourselves looking at three constituencies; the employer, the landlord, and the employee. Policies and guidelines will vary for each organization, but a few straight forward concepts will likely be implemented to assure employees that they can feel psychologically safe. Below are the policies broken into each role previously discussed.

Employer
- Have a staggering work from home schedule to reduce the in-office population density.
- Employees should not be directly facing each other at their desks.
- Collaboration areas should be modified to encourage social distancing.
- All meetings should have a virtual way to join.
- Provide employees with their own set of equipment to reduce cross-sharing of germs. Equipment can include, but not limited to headsets, phones, keyboards, mice, pens, etc.

- Encourage employees to work from home when they do not feel well, even if for minor symptoms.
- There should be various options for work styles and encourage employees to use the setup appropriate for them each day.
- Increase cleaning presence and be conscious of the chemicals within the products and disinfectants.
- Create clean desk policies that allow surfaces to be properly cleaned frequently and update facility maintenance contracts to ensure these steps are taken.

Landlord
- Provide proper PPE (personal protective equipment), hand sanitizer, and disinfectants throughout all common areas of the building.
- Implement touchless sensors, where applicable, to reduce touching, especially in high traffic areas.
- Lobby and elevator crowding & social distance policies to be promoted.
- Security ingress and egress (potential staged timing) for employees, vendors & clients/customers.
- Improve air quality measures, enhanced filtration, and air distribution to improve circulation.

Employee
- Everyone should be prepared to work from home at any moment, which involves keeping files and the workflow as digital as possible.
- Abide by wellness guidelines for handwashing and sanitizing.
- Take an active role in cleaning your desk area, conference rooms, and/or shared spaces after use.
- Remove items from the desk area so that cleaning can be more intentional.
- Hold yourself and others personally accountable for their actions throughout the workplace.

The inability to disconnect is causing a dramatic increase in stress levels amongst workers today, with 70% reporting that they feel overwhelmed daily, and, in our current environments, we are even more connected and suffering from video fatigue. To help people function at higher levels and feel refreshed, some companies are creating quiet zones, tech-free days, or blocking emails from passing through their servers during off-hours. Companies will be challenged to provide for employees' wellbeing and could utilize technology for tele-doctor and/or counseling services as well.

The success of meeting the safety needs will be based on change management and communication strategies. Employees must be given the proper guidelines and training for the new way of working in the office. New protocols around entering the building, clean desk policies, circulation paths, conference room usage, and more will need to be properly communicated before an employee will feel safe coming back to the office. Communications on what cleaning and safety measures are being taken help to give occupants assurance and the feeling of being safe. Proper signage in the space should reinforce the new protocols.

Love/Belonging
The entire world felt the effects of the pandemic and most organizations had a work from home order in place, which did not only physically distance colleagues, but psychology and emotionally distanced themselves too. Even with full-time or part-time work from home environment, organizations have struggled to provide a sense of community and social interactions. Lunches, happy hours, company outings, zoom calls, etc., have evolved and reimagined to build rapport and teamwork amongst the organization, and create meaningful relationships. It's proven that rapport within an organization can increase employee retention and annual revenue.

Ways to improve camaraderie among colleagues:
- Virtual backgrounds can have a specific theme for specific meetings.
- Create fun and interactive surveys to learn about each other.
- Leaders conduct focus groups to unite teams and provide an ear for concerns.
- Provide a sense of value, self-worth, and purpose within the organization.
- Continual check-ins and feedback loops for a sense of connection to the entire organization.
- Develop new ways to build community & networks.
- Consideration of others professionally and personally and reach out to others with empathy.
- Reach out to your network & re-establish connections.
- Leaders should be authentic and focus teams on the company's mission.

Esteem
It's important to address any resistance to the work culture as it can increase negativity. It is important to identify the resistors and remember to communicate the "what's in it for me". Share professional and personal successes to foster your company's culture & comradery. Take the time to nurture and acknowledge the emotions of struggling employees.

- Some level of personal control of the environment.
- Empower employees to do their part with small and large actions.
- Companies to provide product and means for employees to get involved.
- Recognize those who put in the extra effort in giving back to others.
- Not just on performance but including things like caring in the workplace.
- Being sensitive to our employee base by guiding with empathy.

Self-Actualization
When balance is created in the above framework there is an opportunity for the employee to become more fulfilled with their environment and with their work. After all other basic needs are met then there is a need to find ways to become actualized to one's potential and be able to inspire others to do so as well. This moment leads to various positive outcomes in the workplace.
- Create opportunities to give back to build purpose and meaning.
- Finding ways to make meaningful contributions.

- Train managers on how to lead in-person and remote teams.
- Leaders should be authentic and focus teams on the company's mission.
- Provide appropriate resources for more resilient employees to help others.
- Being sensitive to our employee base by guiding with empathy.
- Share positive stories with an emphasis on story-telling.
- Take the extra time to nurture & acknowledge the emotional situation.

Conclusion

In the post-vaccine / COVID world, each of the constituencies will reset their priorities as to how they will work and socialize. There will be a gradual ramp-up to the new normal. There is not a clear game plan to go forward, it is evolving and will continue to do so during this transition. We believe that this will be a unique moment in time in which to innovate and remake the functionality of the work environment. The necessity of office space and its design will be examined through the prism of safety, technology, functionality, and productivity.