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A **COVID-19** Virtual Ideation Experience

**Team Topic and Number: Workplace Wellness**

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

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How will a new workplace be designed for human wellness in, say, 2024, in a time that is (hopefully) well after the COVID-19 pandemic impact and is (again, hopefully) in a time of U.S. economic recovery? That

is the premise that frames this team's discussion about the future of the workplace. Representing International Interior Design Association (IIDA), our team includes commercial interior designers and educators from across the country, as well as IIDA headquarters staff.

As designers—not healthcare or economic experts—we chose to take the long view to a time that may be more settled. In the current moment, in May 2020, responses are largely reactionary and based on great uncertainty. This seemingly dystopian time, with COVID-19 remaining and economic upheaval, will likely last many months and perhaps more than a year. As humans, we need to look optimistically ahead to a future a few years from now. That is, though, with the understanding that we will have endured, adapted, and learned from a time of both global pandemic and extremely difficult financial conditions for many individuals and businesses.

One lasting impact of this moment is a heightened consciousness of human wellness in interiors. As designers, we believe that the best design is always sustainable and has wellness in mind—it's not an additive aspect. With that assumption, how will a new workplace be designed as the innovation hub of an organization, with human wellness at the forefront, in 2024?

## **Human Behavior and Culture**

Before we discuss design and real estate issues within an office, we'll focus on people. In a post-pandemic world, we believe a heightened awareness of personal responsibility, agency, and necessary mutual trust will drive many decisions in our lives and workplaces. Flexibility will be key, and smart employers will communicate this in action and policy with employees allowed to continue to work remotely when feasible. Employees who do come to the office will have increased personal agency over scheduled work hours. Remote work, flexible hours, and work during non-peak hours are also issues of social equity for all.

For a time, the future workplace will be reflective of the trauma of the pandemic and the economic conditions it had created. To combat this lasting impact, savvy companies will design their offices to reflect stability, safety, and confidence, emphasizing teams and encouraging all forms of collaboration, digital and in person.

For the employee in such a company, this will engender a higher level of mutual trust and commitment. Individuals will be more mindful of their personal space, cleanliness, and the impact that has on others. Like a good gym member, employees will be tasked with leaving their desks, meeting rooms, and communal spaces as clean as they found them, wiping down surfaces as they wrap up their time in a space. Rather than relying solely on an evening cleaning service, all office occupants will have shared responsibility for cleanliness and sanitation throughout the day.

## **Density**

Overall square footage per employee decreased in recent decades, driven largely by economic and regional commercial real estate conditions as well as a company's functional need. While a return-to-work-during-pandemic time in 2020 may require workplaces to limit capacity for a while, we look ahead to a post-pandemic future: Economic pressures for tighter density will likely continue, especially in dense urban cities like New York. With tighter budgets, companies will largely not have the luxury to expend more square footage per employee. The question is: how *flexible* is the space?

While we do not envision that the amount of square footage per employee will change drastically between now and a post-pandemic time, how designers program and plan a workplace interior will continue to evolve. The impact of forced remote working in 2020—and the resulting regularization of flexibility to work remotely—will encourage organizations to re-evaluate how they allocate real estate, increasing the shift from square footage for individual use to an increased square footage for collaborative, shared spaces. Coming to the office to actively collaborate will be a more purposeful decision that will require a different tool kit of policies for a number of companies.

## **Enhanced entry sequence**

For new or renovated workplaces where square footage allows, we anticipate the design of an enhanced transitional entry sequence. Analogies: a mudroom in one's own home where shoes and coats are taken off, or a gym where one changes clothes in a locker room prior to entering the active gym floor area. In an office, an enhanced entry might have ample closets or even lockers for coats, bags, and a change of shoes so that one enters the work area without bringing those items far beyond the office entrance. This can also be a place to check temperatures of employees and visitors and, ideally, a well-designed hand-washing station is incorporated here.

## **Open Collaboration Area**

In the past decade, the amount of casual seating has increased as a percentage of both an interior's square footage and of a project's budget. That will likely continue. As the workforce will be increasingly accustomed to working anywhere with portable technology, soft seating will remain appealing as both a change of pace from a desk as well as for comfort, aesthetics, and casual small meetings. How does the design of this area, with communal tables, soft seating, and shared spaces, change?

An open collaboration area will have extended benefit as a strategic buffer zone—seemingly breathing space—designed to be more integrated between desking areas. Touchdown areas for employees needing places to briefly work between meetings, flexible furniture that can be moved and reconfigured to meet changing needs, and stand-up conference areas for quick gatherings will all become regular features. Furniture with easily cleanable finishes/upholsteries will be key. The communal, standing

table, which has risen to prominence in the workplace, will be restricted in the immediate near-future. But, in a post-pandemic era, human nature will bring us to again gather at communal tables. Again, we are focusing on the long-term future.

### **Workplace desking**

The open office is not dead. But what changes? While we may see some impulsive overcorrection reactions in the 2020 time of pandemic to build partitions and regress to cubicle-like workstations, these are not long-term solutions for quality workplaces. Cheap, quick fixes are just that, and will not endure. Evidence-based savvy design principles will lead to systematic changes through research that can affect both short-term needs and long-term functionality, without sacrificing good design aesthetics.

The design of furniture components will likely adapt into revised configurations that respect distancing where square footage allows for it, and supports various workplace activities. Open workstations and benching will, very likely, continue in the long-term future, and the amount of space between individuals may be increased, again, where square footage allows. Modularity and flexibility will more regularly inform design and engineering of any systematic modifications. The process must include concerted research and development investigating material suitability, resiliency, and maintenance.

### **Hoteling and shared desking**

Hoteling and shared desking—agile workplace seating—will not go away, and may become more prevalent due to a more flexible workforce splitting time between office and home, and overall real estate density issues. Shared desking will continue in the long-term, coupled with the lasting pandemic impact of heightened personal responsibility for cleanliness after leaving a desk or table.

### **Phone/Huddle Rooms**

The need for privacy does not go away, but the quick turnaround of people using this small space will adjust. These areas will be outfitted to host small/individual video conferencing, connecting via one's laptop, tablet, or phone.

### **Conference Rooms**

Although conference room size will not largely change, capacity may be somewhat reduced compared to the current norm. Meetings will more regularly be a blend of attendees in person conferenced in with others remotely. In the room, comfortable distancing will potentially remain as conference etiquette, with chairs spaced between three and four feet apart. With the camera becoming more important, additional seating will be to one side of the room opposite the main presentation/monitor/camera wall. Furniture will be flexible to be configured for the needs of the meeting. Rooms will more regularly have integrated sound and video with touchless voice-activated features. The norm of back-to-back meetings

in conference room scheduling will be staggered with 15-to-30-minute intervals to allow for cleaning and increased air circulation.

### **Indoor air quality and the outdoor workplace**

In a building's design, the quality of air ventilation and filtration systems will be scrutinized more commonly. Premium indoor air quality will be paramount in all new construction, but building owners will also be pressured to improve existing building systems when possible. Air quality will be viewed increasingly as a human right and equity issue, not solely a checkmark for certification achievements. Designers will also maximize daylight and views, and create connections to nature through materials, plants, and select artwork. With that in mind, our desire to spend time outdoors will drive an investment in functional, comfortable, and accessible outdoor spaces wherever climate and real estate allow.