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A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Workplace Wellbeing 22

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As we emerge from this pandemic, workplace wellbeing will be critical to a company's success. While this current crisis will eventually subside, it has daylighted issues that must be addressed - **mental and emotional wellbeing is a baseline requirement in the workplace**. Our main takeaway for CRE professionals is to begin by looking at policies, protocols, and change management adjustments before expensive, more permanent solutions. Based on this general forecast, we have the following recommendations.

People First

The lasting effect on people and their mental and emotional wellbeing won't be fully known for decades. However, we do know that at the core of holistic wellbeing is a personal need to feel safe before a more expanded balance of wellbeing can be realized. A culture that is centered on employees' mental and emotional wellbeing will attract and retain the best talent.

- **Mental Wellbeing** - Companies must address significant fears regarding community health so employees are able to refocus on work. Be aware of post-traumatic stressors, and ensure that proper healthcare resources are available. There must be a push to reduce stigmas about mental health, and implement more enhanced EAP services with online resources.

- **Emotional Wellbeing** - Emotional wellbeing can thrive when there are positive social ties and team connections. New HR roles may be created to focus on employee wellbeing and programs to support training and engagement. Leaders should be required to participate in continuous training, equipped with tips to manage a stressful environment, and activities to regularly engage their employees.
- **Restoration Practices** - Restoration spaces should be included in new office designs to encourage mindful, meditative, and self-care practices. Companies should consider policies to promote employee wellbeing, such as “max PTO” - a defined amount of consecutive days an individual may work before being mandated to take time off. Additionally, simple survey technology could be used to remind employees to take breaks, and ensure they are taking the time.

Physical Considerations

The physical environment will be different when people return to the office. Much of the change will be around new guidelines, signage, and lessened capacities, but some more permanent changes could be considered. Square footage may reduce for workstations and conference rooms, but the increased need for enhanced technology infrastructure may balance the overall trend.

- **The New Open Office** - The open office will survive this pandemic, but it must be reevaluated. Upon our immediate return, companies must clearly identify areas or remove furniture that should not be used, such as soft seating, excess conference chairs, shared appliances, and workstations that do not meet the 6’ minimum. Beyond this current crisis, it is unlikely that workplaces will have any adjoined work surfaces less than 6’ wide to maintain physical distancing recommendations from the CDC and WHO. However, with creative design - pinwheel pods instead of linear benching, glass dividers between desks to maintain connection with physical separation, and standing tables to make walkways wider yet divided - the open office can thrive.
- **Circulation Patterns** - There is evidence that one-way traffic creates less air turbulence, so many corporations are planning for that upon re-entry. We recommend all CRE professionals evaluate their plans to understand if, and where, one-way traffic patterns are plausible. Stairwells should be designated as either up or down, and “pinch points” should be identified with proper signage, and how employees should react. In the meantime, all common spaces should have social distancing reminders. When planning, designers will be tasked with creating visual reminders and cues that are seamless with the overall design.
- **Collaboration & Meetings** - Meetings will not be what they once were. We fully expect that more people will choose to occasionally work from home than ever before, and meetings must be conducted in a way that makes that possible. As we first reenter the workplace, all meetings must be “virtual” whether attendees are in the office, or not - meaning that everyone joins from their own laptop or tablet instead of through a room system. As companies choose new furniture for their conference rooms, they should consider several tables that can be easily detached to allow for more flexible collaboration. For long-term planning, meeting room capacities must reduce, distance must be improved, and CRE professionals should consider more smaller conference rooms for digital conferencing instead of large-scale training rooms.

- **Engineering Considerations** - Proper air filtration can be an effective mitigation strategy for airborne illnesses like COVID-19. Mechanical systems must be properly installed and maintained, which includes higher efficiency filters, more frequent filter changes, increased ventilation rates, and UV lamps installed in the air handler unit. From an electrical standpoint, there needs to be an infrastructure to support automated features to reduce high-touch points, sensors to track space usage, and an increased usage of cloud computing. It's possible that some larger corporations could require more IDF and MDF rooms, and possibly even on-site data centers to run dedicated cloud computing systems. The square footage saved by having fewer people in the office may now shift to these kinds of core spaces. Not to mention, the increased need for more janitorial storage, and possibly furniture storage.

Policies + Procedures

Within days of Americans being quarantined, there were floor plans showing how to design around COVID restrictions, and how to re-populate our offices. As we stated at the beginning of this document, CRE professionals should focus on protocols and guidelines first. Policies need to be clearly communicated and ingrained in all employees. There will be a delicate balance between maintaining a welcoming culture, and ensuring that everyone is doing their part to follow the new protocols.

- **Clean “Desk” Policy** - Whether free address desks, assigned stations or offices, conference rooms or general common area - when you're done with the space for the day, everything must be removed. This allows for regular cleaning and disinfecting by trained janitorial staff. In addition to enhanced cleaning protocols, disinfecting wipes will be available in every meeting space for employees to clean the space before and after use.
- **Remote Work Policy** - Sick employees are coming into the office due to optics and managerial pressure, which will ultimately reduce productivity for much of the workforce. The remote policy must address any job function restrictions, what technology is required in the home “office”, what equipment or stipends the company will provide, what “core hours” are employees expected to be available, and what software the company will provide to allow seamless remote work. This will not only be useful during normal business, but will prepare all companies in the event of a COVID resurgence. The remote work policy will also allow employees the option to attend meetings virtually without penalty.
- **Free Address Policy** - With more people opting to work from home, companies are expected to drastically cut their portfolios. Employees who are not required to be in the office regularly, should not expect to have an assigned space in the office. There must be a clear, and policed, free address policy to ensure employees feel comfortable with this arrangement. Without assigned seats, there are no personal items left on desks, and fewer items means it is much easier to maintain a clean desk policy. Free addressing policies will shift to hoteling, where reservations are required. Using existing conference reservation systems, employees must reserve a desk for an entire day to ensure that janitorial staff have time to clean after hours between users.
- **“Take What You Need” Policy** - While never explicitly written, some company cultures have discouraged taking sick days, or required employees to take unpaid leave when they are ill. There are “unwritten rules” in every culture, but rules like this can be detrimental to the organization's survival. Moving forward, companies will encourage their employees to stay home when they (or their family members) are not feeling well.

This could be a seismic shift from some corporations, but leadership must lead by example to ensure the behavior is accepted.

Purposeful Technology

Technology has become ubiquitous in our workplaces and our lives, and that presence will continue to grow exponentially. From automated doors and voice-activated conference systems, to biometric screening and workplace apps - we foresee a drastic increase in “smart” workplaces to improve employee wellbeing. Here are several technologies that will serve this purpose.

- **Occupancy Sensors** - Occupancy sensors can track which spaces are over or under-utilized, and where changes need to be made to ensure that employees are not compromising distance requirements.
- **Automation Sensors** - Touchless doors, faucets, soap dispensers, and water fountains, just to name a few. The fewer touchpoints, the better.
- **Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)** - Your personal device is now your key to your office, and everything in it. With integrated technology, employees can use their phone for everything from building access to vending, and reduce touching anything other than their personal devices.
- **Biometric Screening** - There are devices to measure body temperature, and immediately alert the necessary parties if someone measures above normal.

This pandemic will create a shift from “crazy to common” - products, places and policies that people once considered unfathomable. Will we microchip humans to eliminate touch points and increase health screening? Will offices as we know it disappear? No one could possibly know what the aftermath will be, but we know that human wellbeing will be the compass for what’s next.