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Business Analysis

5 Ways the Workplace Must Adapt to the Coronavirus Era

The “new normal” will force the office as we know it to change. Here’s how

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The office as we knew it before the [coronavirus pandemic](#) hit is a distant memory. As some companies reopen, office workers find themselves entering a far different space than the one they left behind. At this moment of transition, organizations need to think deeply about long-term strategies to bring people together in a safe and healthy way, Meena Krenek, interior design director at Perkins and Will’s Los Angeles studio, points out. “We need to evolve.... Let’s really think about the employees and what they need, what work is really purposefully getting done in the office, and why we need the office,” Krenek says. “Do we need the office in the same

way we did in the past?” AD PRO takes a look into five aspects of office life that will change.

Office culture

Many employees have settled into the rhythm of working from home and meeting their colleagues virtually on a regular basis. Julia Leahy, a design director at IA Interior Architects, however, notes that not seeing each other daily dampens collaboration, and she worries that companies may suffer from an innovation slump. “What’s being lost in all of that is the interaction outside of your immediate team and those ad hoc conversations that happen in the hallway, catching a glimpse of what somebody else is doing and working on and contributing to that.”

Leahy’s colleague, design director Sarah Brophy, adds that a set of surveys undertaken on behalf of a client shows that while many people reported enjoying remote work, for many junior professionals, working from home is a negative experience. “They’re sharing an apartment with four or five roommates, they’re setting up their monitor on their tiny, little dining room table in the morning and taking it down at night—or they don’t even have that type of workspace,” she says. “Their social networks are purely driven with their work experience and so they’re getting depressed because they don’t have access to that anymore.” The partners predict that companies will adopt a hybrid model that enables employees to work remotely at least two days a week for focused work, and to go into the office to touch base with coworkers and engage in social and creative interactions.

Krenek conceptualized a social area, called the Host Bar, to provide a solution for meaningful *and* safe interactions for coworkers. She designed a space with touchless beverage and coffee machines, as well as individually wrapped snacks to meet hygiene standards. The space is larger to accommodate social-distancing requirements and also features two sinks spaced well apart.

“[When] you start thinking about the kinds of social hubs that we built in the past, we have to be really conscious because we were all touching so many things,” Krenek reflects. “We would share fruits and vegetables, we would have jelly beans on the counter. There were so many things all of us were touching that now we started thinking, with the host area, we’ve got to create a larger space for that because we’re going to be socializing in there but we’re also going to keep a distance.”

Companies can also organize off-site outings. Raquel Sachser, a New York-based designer at M Moser Associates, says that her firm has taken clear and intentional steps to maintain company culture by organizing park meet-ups. Teams gathered together in small groups, wearing masks, and keeping the recommended physical

distance from each other. “In a sense, meeting up with groups of coworkers in a park setting helped to rip the Band-Aid off—providing a casual way to be comfortable leaving home to meet people outside of your quarantine circle,” Sachser says. “We were able to meet up with our work colleagues to air our frustrations [and] talk about our daily stress and fears. It was a way of providing a sense of normalcy to our employees.”

Workspace design

To ensure that the workplace was ready to receive employees, Sachser says that her company instituted very strict cleanliness protocols. On entry there is a cleaning station—a former pantry area that was decommissioned to maintain physical distance rules. “So you come in, wash your hands, wash your phone, potentially.” Sachser also notes that as a result of research findings on the potential of infectious particles to be collected on the soles of people’s shoes, no outdoor footwear is permitted. “You also have to change your shoes, so our company has provided everyone with indoor Moser shoes that you wear when you’re in the office.”

As the workplace hasn’t returned to full capacity, the firm reorganized its lounge settings for people to work more comfortably as they social distance and psychologically adjust to being in the office after working from home. “I think everyone is really happy about that. It feels a little bit more casual, it’s also a bit more comfortable,” Sachser says. “I’ve heard a couple of people say that they hope the desks don’t come back.”

Krenek notes that technology can play a huge role in creating user-friendly, psychologically safe spaces as employees reenter the workplace. Sensor technology, she points out, enables one to maintain good hygiene whether grabbing coffee, engaging with tech such as video conferencing, or using an app that can measure air quality in a room. Tech and health need to be “married together,” Krenek says, to provide “psychological safety for our employees. And that’s going to make our employees feel they can be more innovative because they just feel safer.”

Workplace dining

In-office cafeterias have been specifically designed in recent years to encourage socialization and collaboration. Now, however, they must be reworked to ensure physical distancing. Working with a large financial client, pre-COVID-19, Melissa Panara, design director at IA Interior Architects, and her colleagues were briefed to design a food hall to service a workforce spread across a one-million-square-foot campus. The dining facility was designed to hold 400 seats with various

arrangements and options so that employees could use the space throughout the day to eat, socialize, and do focused work. Now, the seating has been reduced to 112.

“When everything happened in March, we really had to pivot and look at it through a very different lens that we hadn’t looked at before. Usually it was all about density—how many people can we fit? So to look at it in a completely different way was a little bit of a change,” Panara says. One of the adjustments was to redesign the dine-in sushi nook as a to-go bar, removing stools, taking preorders, and packaging food orders to go.

IA also developed a digital space planning tool, Quanta, to manage foot traffic and track capacity. “[Employees] can place their order on their mobile app and go down and pick it up when it’s ready so you’re really not getting the clustering of people ordering or waiting,” she says.

Bathroom redesign

Multiple-occupancy bathrooms are an area of the workplace to which companies need to pay special attention in order to ensure that the strictest of hygiene standards can be maintained. Harriet Harriss, dean of the School of Architecture at New York’s Pratt Institute, tells AD PRO that “Workplace bathrooms will need to rethink capacity, cleaning rosters, and in some cases gender allocation, in order to accommodate all workers equally and in a timely manner.” Harriss advises that low-touch technology solutions should be part and parcel. “For new buildings, self-cleaning bathrooms that wash the entire cubicle offer a less labor-intensive and more reliable form of disinfection,” she says.

Brophy agrees that technology that promotes touch-free habits is a core part of limiting virus spread in the workplace. “One of the lasting impacts of the pandemic, once there is a vaccine, will be that touchless technology will start to be more integrated into our workplaces. One of the places that will happen will be bathrooms,” she says. “It’s just really tactical stuff. Changing out your flushometer on your toilets, hands-free faucets, soap dispensers, hands-free paper towel dispensers.”

Leahy notes that there has been a push for years for single-stall restrooms, not only to increase privacy but to acknowledge that some employees are nonbinary and do not feel comfortable using gender-assigned bathrooms. She believes that the inflection point of the pandemic and the push toward single-occupancy bathrooms to maintain hygiene standards could result in building owners and building developers proactively incorporating them into design and building plans.

Air-quality ventilation

Architecture firm Leo A Daly posits that a building's humidity level can make a huge difference in curbing virus spread. According to researchers, dry air creates a very good environment for diseases like COVID-19 to spread. When the air is below about 40% relative humidity, infectious droplets float longer, travel further, and evade surface cleaning. Leo A Daly vice president and director of technical services Tim Duffy notes that "the sweet spot for infection control is between 40 and 60% relative humidity." He warns, however, that simply adding humidifiers to the interior of a building without accounting for the overall systemic effects can result in deterioration within the walls, floors, and roofs, reducing the building's lifespan, causing mold growth and other reactions that are harmful to human health. "Modifications include giving walls an additional layer of insulation, or having equipment added to reheat the air at the perimeter."

Indoor air quality is a critical component of containing the spread, and that means that many companies need to assess their air ventilation systems and adapt accordingly. Jianshun Zhang, professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering at Syracuse University, working alongside other academics and air quality researchers, proposes a three-pronged strategy to ensure good air quality. First, source control: Ensure everyone wears a mask and that partitions are used in offices. Second, ventilation: Fresh, clean air should be pumped into buildings, diluting pollutants in the atmosphere. Third, Zhang recommends an air cleaning strategy, which requires the installation of high-efficiency filters.

Zhang says that the future workplace should incorporate personal ventilation. This means each employee has an individual low velocity clean air supply directed across their breathing zone (mouth and nose), that displaces surrounding air that may be contaminated with the coronavirus.

In the nearer term as companies open up and need to consider costs, Zhang advises that organizations ventilate indoor spaces with outside air, as this can dilute the potency of the virus if it is in the surrounding space, reducing the chance of spread. In the context of office buildings, most systems take in 20% of air from outside, while 80% is recirculated from inside. "When we are in a pandemic situation, 100% of air should come from the outside," Zhang says. In conjunction with the ventilation system, partitions should be used and configured in relation to the air distribution flow to prevent cross-contamination.

And in terms of air cleaning, Zhang notes that for virus control, organizations should adopt the use of air filtration systems that use High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters, especially in buildings where a high amount of air is being recirculated. "It

can filter out 99.97% of small particles,” says Zhang. “Because for virus control, we need to deal with smaller particles.”