

The Post- COVID Workplace

Returning to the workplace is like reopening the economy. It happens in waves and it can be stressful for both organizations and workers. It's hard to predict what may happen next.

But we still need to prepare.

Dear AmCham members,

During the past few months, organizations have demonstrated great resilience and leveraged technology to work remotely and keep things going. It wasn't easy, but we all did it. Now in Europe, as we begin to reopen factories, stores and offices, organizations are being challenged to quickly regain productivity and competitiveness, without compromising the health and safety of employees.

The crisis has created new challenges and new opportunities in almost every industry. To thrive in this new landscape, organizations will have to continue to understand their customer's needs, collaborate to identify solutions, prototype and quickly bring new ideas to market. What is the role of the workplace in these uncertain economic times and how can it continue playing its crucial role in helping organizations achieve their goals?

Work is a social activity. **Collaboration, and ultimately innovation, happen when people come together.** Through social connections, strong bonds are built. It is mostly thanks to the trust previously established face-to-face in the workplace that most of the employees succeeded in working effectively remotely. But in the long run, working from home as the one and only predominant work mode cannot be sustained. **Working remotely should and will remain**, but will have to be paired with a **physical workplace that is designed to foster relationships, build communities at work and create the conditions for high employee engagement.**

Of course, to fulfill its essential role, **the workplace will have to change.** Employees will not return to an office that doesn't feel safe and preventing the spreading of infection is a new priority. Businesses understand that underestimating this aspect might not only shut them down again, but also damage their brand and their ability to attract new talent. As we add physical safety as a new given, we must not "fix" the office in a way that weakens community, creativity or productivity but rather evolve it to a place that allows people not only to be *safe* but also to *feel safe* and thrive.

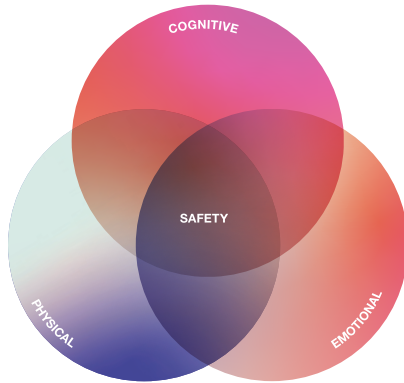
The opportunity for the workplace is to move forward, not backward. The office must immediately be made safe, but also more resilient and more adaptive to respond to any future crisis or unforeseen changes that could potentially be ahead of us.

In this document, we are sharing with you our first insights and learnings. As we navigate this crisis, we will continue drawing on the knowledge of our diverse network of global clients, thought leaders and experts to explore and understand the implications to work, workers and the workplace. Our commitment to you is to share as quickly as we learn.

Guillaume Alvarez
VP Europe, Middle East & Africa
May 25th, 2020

Planning for the unknown: safety first

As we plan to return to work, we need to make choices carefully and responsibly. Employee safety and wellbeing must be paramount — people need to *be* safe and *feel* safe.



Wellbeing happens when there is an intersection between our physical, cognitive and emotional health — safety is foundational to all three. Organizations need to take action to ensure that:

- **Physically:** People can work in places where they are able to stay healthy overall and minimize exposure to pathogens that cause illness.
- **Mentally:** People are not in fear for their personal safety because that distracts them from being focused and productive.
- **Emotionally:** Everyone needs to feel safe at work. They need to be confident that their employers have done everything possible to create a safe environment — especially for those who may be at higher risk.

Today's workplace challenges

The dominant characteristics of the pre-COVID workplace were designed to support new ways of working and high levels of human interaction to fuel creativity, innovation, speed and agility. These attributes now pose challenges for the post-COVID workplace, as organizations strive to limit physical interactions.

They include:

- **Open plan:** The open plan is the dominant form of office design around the world. The degree of openness varies, but within these spaces air and pathogens can travel freely.
- **High density:** Over the past decade, the allocation of space per person substantially decreased, yet high density increases the likelihood of spreading infections.
- **Shared spaces:** Organizations recognized that people wanted choice and control over how and where they work. This has led to a broad range of spaces that are shared by people throughout the organization.
- **High mobility:** Mobile technologies and power solutions enable people to move freely around the workplace. Workplaces have now become highly dynamic environments, with lots of energy.
- **Communal spaces:** Cafés and social spaces have been intentionally designed to bring large groups of people together — increasing density and the likelihood of spreading infection.

- **Residential aesthetic:**

Workplaces feel less “corporate” today and now include a wider range of sofas and lounge seating. The scale of these settings tends to be more intimate, bringing people together more closely.

These characteristics created a competitive advantage for organizations — a means to foster new work styles, build culture and attract talent. While many organizations prepared for employee safety in other ways, **the workplace was not designed to mitigate the spread of disease.** Companies around the world were not prepared to think about the workplace as an environment that needs to adapt quickly to health risks that can rise unexpectedly. Going forward, they cannot take the risk that rapid transmission of a virus could cause a facility or entire business to shut down.

The now, near and far

As we work with our global network of leading organizations and experts, we recognize the importance of looking at the return to work across the time horizons of now, near and far. For many organizations this will happen in waves and differ across geographies, as they bring segments of their workforce safely back into the office.

Now

This will be the first wave, with portions of the workforce continuing to work from home. Planning for now also means **retrofitting** the workplace, based on a common-sense approach that adheres to governmental and global health guidelines, including physical distancing, adding barriers, cleaning and safety measures.

Near

At this stage, organizations may be ready to bring back most or all of their workforce. Building on what we learn from our experiences and science, organizations can begin **reconfiguring** the workplace. This will involve new ways to lay out space and change work settings to offer longer-term solutions for enhanced safety.

Far

Work environments in the future will require **reinvention** as science-based evidence and emerging technologies offer new solutions. Planning paradigms of the past were driven by density and cost. Going forward they need to be based on the ability to adapt easily to possible economic, climate and health disruptions. The reinvented office must be designed with an even deeper commitment to the wellbeing of people, recognizing that their physical, cognitive and emotional states are inherently linked to their safety.

Key principles for these first two stages will be to focus on:

- Density of the workplace and its population
- Geometry of the furniture arrangements
- Division using screens, panels or other barriers

Design Considerations

Density. Geometry. Division.

Companies want to bring people back to the office because they know it's the best place for people to come together, align on priorities and get things done. People have grown weary of isolation and look forward to being able to speak directly to their colleagues and solve problems. As organizations plan for people to return in waves, they need a strategy for the physical work environment that follows new safety protocols and allows people to create, collaborate and be productive.

Three key strategies to consider when retrofitting spaces now or reconfiguring in the near term are:

Density: the number of people per sq. ft/m*

Geometry: how the furniture is arranged

Division: using screens, panels or barriers

These strategies should be used in combination to create spaces that, when supplemented with new safety guidelines, allow people to confidently come back into the workplace. Going forward, organizations will want to create a diverse range of spaces that are highly adaptable to allow them to navigate what's next.

**Rules might differ per country according to local legislation.*



Minimum Distance

Create minimum 6ft/2m distancing between people in open workstations, meeting spaces, cafés and lounge spaces. Reduce occupancy by removing desks, tables and seating, or use alternating desks.



Meet in the Open

Use open spaces for meetings of more than five people, leveraging flexible furniture with movable whiteboards and screens to create boundaries.



More Owned Spaces

Reduce/eliminate shared desking and shift to more owned individual spaces.



Re-orient Furniture

Reconfigure desking to reduce face-to-face orientation; turn workstations to 90-degree angles to prevent workers from working directly across or behind one another.



Separate Desks

Pull workstations and desks apart to increase distancing.



Add Space Division

Increase barriers for existing workspaces by adding screening, storage elements, plants or partitions.



Moveable Screens

At workstations, consider increased user-movable screening and privacy devices to reduce exposure.



Height Helps

Implement the highest boundary possible above the worksurface (on all exposed sides) when a minimum 6ft/2m distance cannot be achieved.

How We Can Help

We're here to help you navigate what's next by creating a safer workplace now that can adapt to whatever the future may hold.

Get in touch.

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