Returning to a New Era in Workspace

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For most of our lives the workspace has been designed, built, and occupied with a focus on how to *exit* people safely and quickly in case of an emergency. That has now irrevocably flipped to thinking about how to get people safely back *into* buildings.

Once that fundamental shift in how we think about the workspace sinks in, it reveals a list of challenges that lie ahead of us as we reimagine how we might return to our traditional office environment.

The first item on that list is people.

We must deal first with the anxiety people feel about returning to the office. Many people are eager to return to the routine that once separated our work and personal environments by way of physical distance. We miss the intangible aspects of collaborating with peers and having our surroundings designed explicitly for us to be productive and successful in our work. But now, most people are concerned about their personal health and safety in the workspace. How will I get from my home to my building and then up to my space safely? What measures has my employer instituted to ensure a safe physical environment? Will the ventilation be adequate?

These questions must be addressed by building owners, landlords and business leaders. For these people, it is about risk management. Regulations do not currently exist for "pandemic compliance," nor do codes such as those outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Standard design practices must be put in place if we are to adequately address people's anxiety.

The management of that risk must start with a hierarchy of priorities:

1. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
2. Environmental controls
3. Administrative controls

The top priority is relatively straight forward: ensuring an adequate supply of appropriate personal protective equipment such as masks, hand sanitizers, and infrared thermometers. While the CDC provides some guidance on this, until OSHA or other municipal guidelines are updated to include specific mandated guidance on this need, individual workspace managers and building owners will make those rules.

The second priority is trickier to address. The recent trend of building to LEED-certified standards means the energy efficient HVAC systems found in many newer office buildings do not have the fan horsepower to adequately increase the rate of exchange of air. Going forward, building owners will have to reconcile new indoor air quality needs and the costs associated with the capital investments required to upgrade infrastructure.

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The last one — administrative controls — may be the most challenging priority of all. In this case, the focus is on changing the behavior of the users of space. Organizations must consider not only work patterns and habits, but also personal schedule constraints to determine the most effective, efficient, and safe occupancy strategy. The question of what the role of the office should be will need to be addressed. Most likely, workspace will transform from a center of productivity to one of intermittent attendance and collaboration.

THE NEED FOR DATA

What is lacking behind all of this is any regulatory leadership. Businesses that are serious about moving forward into the new future and providing a path for their employees to safely and confidently return to work are starting to look towards technology solutions that can help them make some of these difficult decisions.

As commercial real estate program management experts, Pacific Program Management (PPM) has adopted some of these tools to help our clients navigate these challenges. We have recently partnered with losci.ai, a spatial artificial intelligence platform designed specifically for commercial real estate which can analyze how people and objects move through space. Losci.ai offers this analysis in real time, giving business owners and landlords actionable data that they can use to start developing plans to address environmental and administrative controls.

Instead of placing sensors in environments where office occupancy is very low or non-existent, losci.ai uses a propensity model to predict how people will move through space. We can take a floor plan and ask a few questions of the occupant to run a simulation that will predict the percentage of unsafe contact. From there, we can make recommendations to bring that percentage down.

The technology is important, but it is only a part of the equation.

THE NEW WORKSPACE PARADIGM

The new reality of doing business in the face of a pandemic presents nuanced and previously unforeseen liability risks for businesses and employers.[1] If we are to be successful at designing our future workspace, we must take a holistic view and recognize that the future will require more than good data. It will require program management, systems integration, and change management, all mapping to a process for making financially and environmentally viable smart decisions.

These decisions will have to be made against a backdrop of the global reality that has seen mental health issues spike and families strained. The data bears this out:

- Microsoft analyzed the frequency of use of the Teams product, finding a massive spike before 8 a.m. and after 7 p.m.
- PwC's research revealed that more than half of employers think employee productivity has improved, but only 34% of employees think they are more productive.[2]
- Monster's State of the Candidate Survey revealed that in the third quarter of 2020, 69% of remote workers reported feeling burned out, compared to 20% in the second quarter.

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[1] Colaizzi, Brooke et al. "Legal Issues with Returning to Work," Sherman & Howard L.L.C., 29 April 2020
[2] "It's time to reimagine where and how work will get done," PwC US Remote Work Survey, 12 Jan. 2021

In other words, as we map out strategies to return to the office, the people returning are not the same ones who left. We have learned that different demographics have different needs. Those just starting out in their careers are eager to get back to the office as they lack a business network to pursue advancement opportunities. Those with more experience may be more comfortable working remotely and can continue to be successful without the everyday interaction afforded by working in an office. Regardless, we have all been changed by this pandemic and the real impact of those changes has yet to be realized.

As we look toward a new era in workspace, many challenges will require addressing. However, along with those challenges also come a myriad of opportunities to rethink not just how we work, but how we value our work and each other.

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About James

James T. Cisneros leads Pacific Program Management's Washington, D.C. business unit, as well as the East Coast Region, where he fosters and manages both client initiatives and relationships, driving new business development across all three service lines of Workspace Consulting, Capital Project Management, and Transition & Relocation Management. He also focuses on return-to-office strategies, including the opportunities available through PPM's partner losci.ai's workplace modeling. Jim has more than 30 years of experience leading operations, strategy, design, construction, and transactions, and has managed large corporate service teams across North America, Europe, and India. Contact Jim at Jim.Cisneros@pacificpmg.com.