The design of work post COVID-19

Office space planning and wellness in focus

By Mercer's Karen Shellenback and Samantha Polovina

Clients are asking,

"What do I need to know to start planning now?"

Planning for the phased return to the office is front of mind for corporate leaders that dispersed their knowledge workers into their homes six weeks ago. When the "all clear" or "mostly clear" message is given and office workers are allowed to phase back into the workplace — returning humans are likely to find the work environment substantially different from when they left.

Executives in HR, facilities, real estate, line of business leaders, and technology experts are scenario planning now as office-based work may be a reality for some locations in just a few weeks. The task to bring hundreds or even thousands of workers back into healthy workplaces is a monumental endeavor that must take into account the physical space, the trepidations of workers, new sanitation requirements, and healthy work practices — and additional costs — all at a time when the economy and resources are stretched (87% of organizations surveyed report moderate to high impact of COVID-19 on company's financial performance in 2020 — Mercer COVID-19 survey live results). COVID-19 workplace design teams will need to balance the logistics of phasing in office employees while implementing healthy workplace practices with business continuity and financial imperatives.

So, what do executives and HR leaders need to consider to move forward on a "healthy return to the office"? Based on workspace design, facilities planning, real estate, and health experts as well as our own Mercer experts and clients — here is what we believe are core leading practices for a "return to work" situation never experienced in modern workforce history.

Seven ways the work office will change post-COVID-19

1 The tipping point for remote work has arrived — expect 20% or more full-time remote workers

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommended that employers allow flexible working when appropriate or possible. When the infection rates started to increase in March of 2020, most organizations with knowledge workers had no choice but to ask their employees to work from home (WFH). Mercer research suggests that 67% of companies implemented mandatory WFH policies either company-wide or in locations or departments most affected by COVID-19 infections in March and April (Mercer COVID-19 survey, April 2020).

While many current WFH workers are very excited to come back into the office, there may be large swathes of workers who actually prefer to work at home full-time or part-time going forward. Because the paradigm has flipped organizations now have the opportunity to truly ask themselves, *with flexible work working for many — why should anyone be in the office? What required work must be executed in the office i.e., cannot be done anywhere else? Who are the minimally required staff necessary to be onsite?*

Mercer research illustrates that over 70% of companies will examine remote and/or flexible working as a workforce priority in the next three to six months (2020, Mercer COVID-19 survey live results). Only 8% of HR leaders report that their organization will require all employees to return to standard facility work environments, as soon as social distancing rules are lifted. Do your executive leaders know the percentage of workers who want to remain WFH versus how many want to work in the office full-time?

Do you know minimal number of staff and roles required? These are the essential metrics HR leaders need to know in order to plan an effective "return" experience. Research and Mercer consulting experience indicate that your organization may have 20–30% of WFH workers that have exhibited both a desire and proficiency to work from home. If this is the case, and this 25 percent of your workers continue to WFH full-time, how does this impact workspace planning and real estate space requirements? Now is the time to plan for this potential paradigm and office space requirements shift.

WFH supports ESG initiatives.

More employees working from home bolsters corporate environmental, social and governance (D&I) endeavors. Both in the areas of environmental pollution (less commuter travel) and diversity and inclusion — by employing nonlocal employees across the globe, talent who can more easily work from home with accessible accommodations, or others who need to work from home for dependent care, health or personal reasons.

Various industry research studies over the last 10 years indicate that more than 25 percent of corporate assets are invested in real estate and that total occupancy costs of corporate real estate represent five to eight percent of total (pre-tax) gross sales or 40 to 50 percent of net income.

The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 2017

2

Reduced corporate office space and footprint

Given the current environment, many organizations will re-think their corporate real estate holdings, rental agreements, corporate real estate footprint, and overall space requirements. With real estate, facilities and occupancy costs encompassing a significant chunk of the average corporate budget — coupled with fewer people in the office on any given day (due to remote, staggered, and spaced work) — many will re-consider the necessity of expansive corporate square footage.

According to Global Workplace Analytics, the average employer can reduce $11,000 in costs per employee per year for every person who works remotely half of the time and $10,000 per worker per year in real estate costs alone. The prospect of 30% of the workforce working remotely full-time can also offset the reduction of workstations needed for required business social distancing. With financial losses due to the pandemic and the real potential for a recession on the horizon, along with leaders who may now have fewer realized fears in managing remote workers, organizations may wholeheartedly revisit their corporate office space needs.

3 Everything will be staggered to avoid interaction — phased re-entry will be the first indicator

Organizations will likely plan on phased re-entry to the office based on government recommended phases paired with functional or role criteria and potential health risks; priority will go to essential staff. However, following local and national labor laws in this area is paramount. The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has released Interim Guidance for businesses and employers to plan and respond to COVID-19. This report covers health and US labor law considerations. (Also, review Mercer's article, Yes, You Can and Should Ask Employees about COVID-19 Exposure for more COVID-19 employment, legal, and return-to-work considerations.)

Plan for everything else to be staggered too — work hours, daily or weekly shifts, workspaces (staggered or checkerboard design), lunch times, cleaning shifts, elevator usage, new hire interviews, start dates, and onboarding, etc. Over half of employers across the globe plan to stagger return to work to allow greater social distancing by splitting employees into shifts based on specific criteria (e.g., by name A–M and P–Z work different days).

Staggered workforce strategies companies are considering in their effort to bring employees back to work

74%
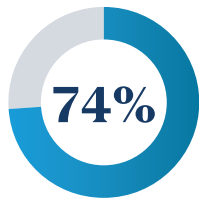
Following government guidelines, procedures and protocols

56%
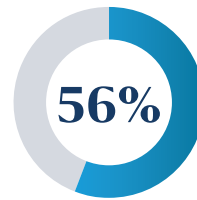
Staggering return to work to allow greater social distancing by splitting employees into shifts based on specific criteria (e.g., by name A-M and P-Z work different days)
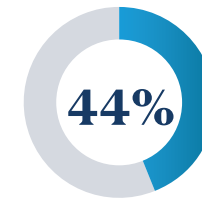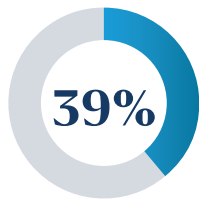
44%

Creating smaller workgroups to limit mixing of employees/ groups in the workplace

39%

Staggering return to work based on employees' own health risks related to COVID-19 (e.g., older employees or those with chronic conditions return later), if legally authorized

35%
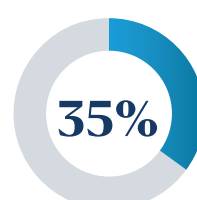
Returning to work strategies will be based on local infection rates and risk (e.g., different strategies by location

13%
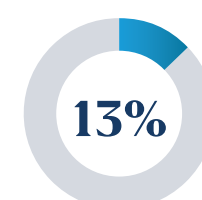
Not sure, have not yet considered a return to work strategy

N = 1203

Source: Mercer COVID-19 survey live results, 2020

4 Increase in executive and/or HR employee communications

Executing a clear strategy that outlines the expectations for the 'new normal' to reduce employee anxieties is crucial. Easing fear is paramount. Is your workforce ready to return to the office physically, emotionally, and psychologically? Employees are fearful of becoming sick, having loved ones become sick, losing their job and are generally concerned about the future of their organization and even the trajectory of their industry. Frequent and consistent communications that focus on connections and care, while sharing detailed updates on plans to move forward can help employees feel more confident to return to the office when called upon.
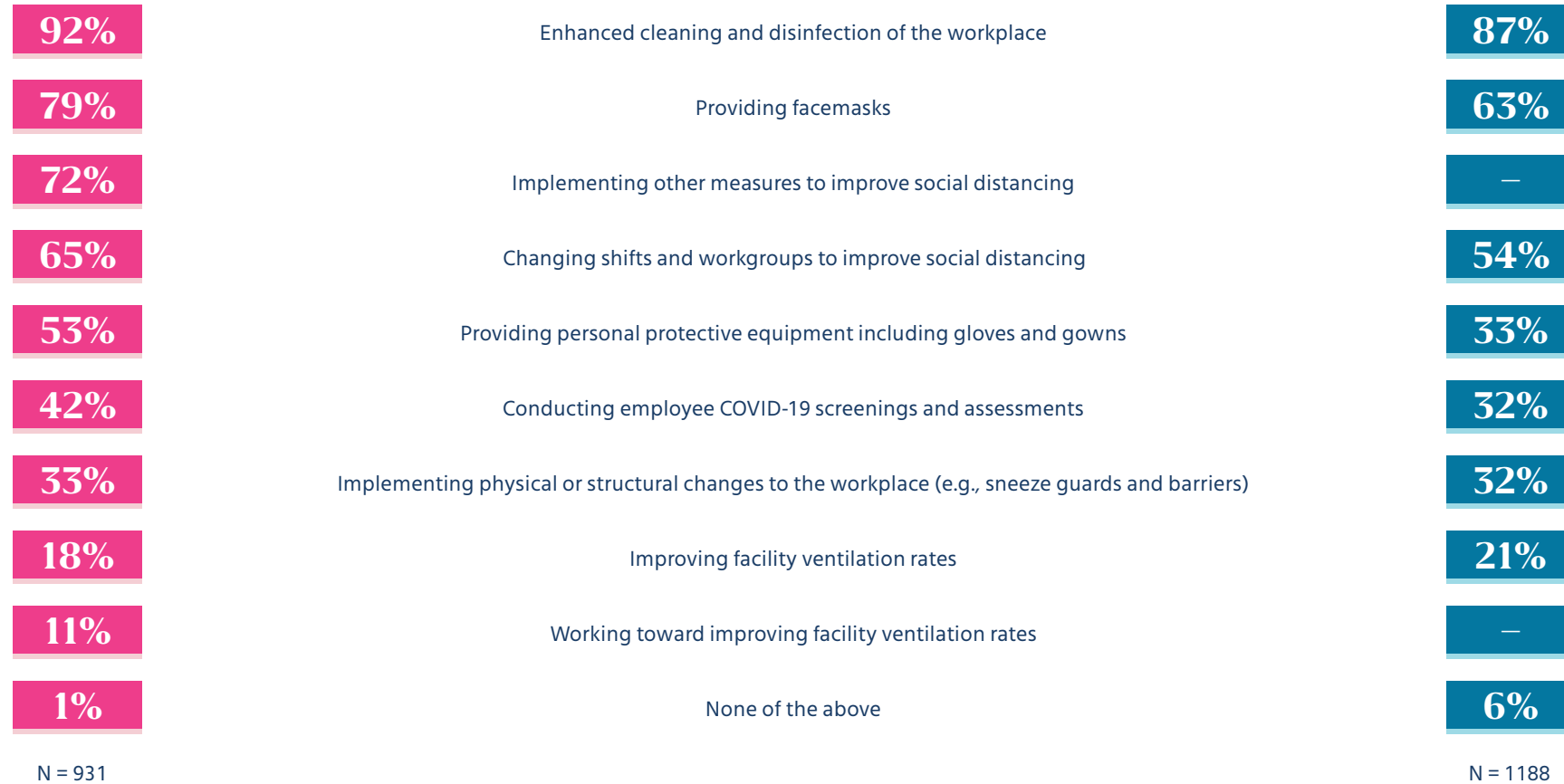
Organizations will need to communicate clear plans of who, what, when, where, and how of phased return-to-work strategies and workspace practices expected to help people navigate new layouts, new rules, and a new way of being at work. Help managers conduct check-ins with productive WFH employees on their preferences to continue to work from home or come into the office. Communicate measures taken to comply with government regulations and safety requirements including health screenings and reporting protocols. Communications need to be two-way, transparent, accessible, iterative, phased, and targeted to various audiences using a variety of mediums and channels — all with a simple and personal touch.

Share communications as plans form up, before day one, and on the first day of return to the office. Training and reminders on expectations for new mores and social norms, obligations and responsibilities, and new protocols and practices in the office for the near term is a necessity and should be provided as virtual demonstrations prior to arrival. These educational sessions should showcase modifications to arrival protocols, sanitation requirements, expectations for pre-packaged food (and utensils), private or shared workstation requirements, physical building access, mail, traffic, and security protocols as well as internal and external meeting protocols — including visitor access. In addition to reminder emails in the first few weeks, and when new phased cohorts arrive at work — interior signage should educate and remind staff of new traffic flows, spatial distancing norms, and infection mitigation practices.

Practices already implemented and planned to protect the health and safety of onsite staff

Already implementing for essential onsite staff

Planning to provide to protect the health of the workforce once shelter-in-place rules are lifted

Already implementing	Practice	Planning to provide
92%	Enhanced cleaning and disinfection of the workplace	87%
79%	Providing facemasks	63%
72%	Implementing other measures to improve social distancing	–
65%	Changing shifts and workgroups to improve social distancing	54%
53%	Providing personal protective equipment including gloves and gowns	33%
42%	Conducting employee COVID-19 screenings and assessments	32%
33%	Implementing physical or structural changes to the workplace (e.g., sneeze guards and barriers)	32%
18%	Improving facility ventilation rates	21%
11%	Working toward improving facility ventilation rates	–
1%	None of the above	6%

N = 931

N = 1188

Source: Mercer COVID-19 survey live results, 2020

Re-designing workstations, zones, and areas with six-foot or even 10-foot personal perimeters will be the new gold standard for office design.

5 Demise of the open collaborative office. Space planning based on proximity ratings and new density requirements

Up until the coronavirus pandemic workspace designers and executives often worked to create high-touch, collaborative, open space work environments that encouraged opportunities for impromptu social interactions. Like a flipped switch, today organizations will opt for the virtual interaction rather than the face-to-face work environment.

While maintaining the existing layout of desks and office furniture, seating will change to accommodate the latest recommendations for safe physical distancing. Governmental recommendations state that until there is a vaccine, workers need to maintain at least a six-foot (two meter) distance. This applies to workspaces, unassigned seating, assigned seating, conference rooms, café tables, elevator capacity, etc.

To accommodate safe distance, most organizations will phase in new seating arrangements based on every other workstation or diagonally facing stations with partitions. The return of the cubicle or workstation pod is likely — but with hard, cleanable surfaces instead of foam and fabric. Plexiglas barriers may also be installed in certain areas.

Cushman and Wakefield recently released guidelines on the "6 Feet Office Project", The Safe Six Checklist, and the Recovery Readiness Guide for Re-Opening Your Workplace. In addition, Mercer's Job Library (MJL) is currently linking O*Net's proximity ratings to hundreds of office (and other work environment) jobs listed in the MJL. The MJL can help workforce planners understand distance ratings required of different jobs given the expected job tasks and requirements. This tool combined with Mercer's Job Architecture and our real time intuitive pilot can help HR leaders and space planners map their job architecture and individual jobs to HCM and HRIS systems

Mercer Job Library — example of corporate job proximity ratings

This table rates the extent to which each job requires the worker to perform job tasks in close physical proximity to other people.

O*Net proximity rating	O*Net code	O*Net job title	MJL code	MJL job title
58	17-2141.00	Mechanical engineers	ENS.03.013	Mechanical engineering
58	43-4051.00	Customer service representatives	CSV.02.001	General customer service
47	13-2051.00	Financial analysts	FIN.03.024	General corporate finance management
55	15-1152.00	Computer network support specialists	ITC.02.001	General information technology
48	15-1121.00	Computer systems analysts	ITC.02.001	General information technology
52	41-4012.00	Sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing, except technical and scientific products	SMP.07.001	General field sales & account management
39	13-2011.01	Accountants	FIN.06.001	Accounting
43	43-6014.00	Secretaries and administrative assistants, except legal, medical, and executive	AFS.01.020	Secretary/administrative assistant
41	13-1071.00	Human resources specialists	HRM.02.001	General human resources
36	13-1161.00	Market research analysts and marketing specialists	SMP.03.001	General marketing

Source: Mercer Job Library (MJL)

Notes:
MJL job code ITC.02.001 correlates with two O*Net codes/jobs.
Scale: 0 - 100 where 0 = "I do not work near other people (beyond 100 ft.)" and 100 = "Very close (near touching).

We see significant potential in connecting the new Mercer Job Library with O*Net data to help our People Analytics teams build new insights.

Global Head of People Analytics, Consumer Goods Industry

In addition, Gensler, a leading workplace design firm, has released an algorithm-based occupancy and space planning tool called Re-Run and a space management software called Wisp. "Using the existing layout of a workplace, Re-Run can quickly generate many scenarios and identify the most optimized plan for a variety of physical distancing conditions, whether an organization has hundreds or thousands of seats" (Gensler, 2020). Re-designing workstations, zones, and areas with six-foot or 10-foot personal perimeters will be the new gold standard for office design.

Calculate the maximum capacity of each space by dividing the net usable area by the square of the locally acceptable social distance factor.

For example:

Six-foot social distance:

- **a 200 SF room** divided by 36 SF would have a recalculated maximum **capacity of five people**
- **a 800 SF room** divided by 36 SF would have a recalculated maximum **capacity of 22 people**

10-foot social distance:

- **a 200 SF room** divided by 100 SF would have a recalculated maximum **capacity of two people**
- **a 800 SF room** divided by 100 SF would have a recalculated maximum **capacity of eight people**

Communicate capacity via elimination of seats, signage, and if applicable, room reservation tools.

Source: Recovery Readiness Guide for Re-Opening Your Workplace

6 Increased focus on screenings, health, and wellness

Across the board, we are likely to see more social pressure and enforcement of "stay at home when sick" policies. Organizational leaders should also examine their sick policies and some of the unintended consequences of illness policies designed prior to COVID-19. Best practice during the COVID-19 recovery period ensures sick policies are flexible, do not require a health care provider written confirmation, permit employees to stay home to care for dependents, and provide other nonpunitive emergency sick leave provisions. Organizations can also provide training and support to supervisors to check-in with employees on emotional and physical well-being.

Policies regarding health screenings in terms of type, frequency, use of results, implications of positive test results, and refusal to participate, need to be shared prior to implementation. Screening procedures and training on protocols should be established prior to implementation. Successful organizations with onsite essential workers will implement screening process trainings, toolkits or playbooks, screening aids, talking points, procedural steps, and audits to collect metrics to ensure consistency and learn what is working and what is not. For one-third of companies, health screening will become an imbedded business process for the foreseeable future. Personal protective equipment (PPE) is necessary for screeners using infrared guns or temperature strips. Screeners can also be cross-trained in contact tracing techniques if needed.

If health screening or testing occurs at US workplaces, employers must comply with HHS Office for Civil Rights guidelines, HIPPA, ADA, CDC, OSHA, EEOC, and other government and regulatory requirements regarding confidential treatment of medical information and medical testing. Discrimination laws regarding disability also must be followed in determining selection of employees able to return to office or facility work. Review Mercer's article, Yes, You Can and Should Ask Employees about COVID-19 Exposure for more COVID-19 employment, legal, and return-to-work considerations.

Employers outside the US must follow their applicable government and regulatory requirements.

COVID-19 screening and assessment actions currently implemented and planned for onsite employees

Among the 42% already implementing for essential onsite staff

Among the third of companies planning to provide to protect the health of the workforce once shelter-in-place rules are lifted

81%	Administering temperature screening onsite	79%
53%	Administering symptom questionnaire onsite	56%
49%	Requiring employee self-assessment and verification	53%
32%	Purchasing handheld scanners	26%
29%	Requiring employee self-temperature checks and verification	32%
20%	Purchasing thermal temperature scanning cameras	19%
15%	Purchasing other medical eaquipment	12%
13%	Contracting outside services to conduct the health screenings	16%
10%	Hiring onsite clinical staff (e.g., medical assistants, technicians, and nurses)	8%
8%	Performing screening for presence of virus (PCR testing)	10%
5%	Performing screening for immunity (serology screening for antibodies)	10%
1%	None of the above	1%

N = 388

N = 375

Source: Mercer COVID-19 survey live results, 2020

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Increase in the technology for risk mitigation, disaster preparedness, smart, green, and healthy offices

While reduced corporate footprints may be the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be pressure on remaining offices to become more technology enabled as the central brain or hub of the distributed business. More applications to support remote and distributed work will become necessary to sustain workers working in collaborative teams across the globe. Organizational network analysis and social recognition technologies that track performance, networks, and engagement may see substantial usage upticks. Smart technologies for increased cyber-risk within distributed networks will also see burgeoning use. Applications and physical scanners for monitoring health, sanitization, social distancing, and contact tracing may also be implemented in ways not visualized before the pandemic.

More organizations may join the healthy building movement. Interest in WELL, FitWel, and LEED certification may increase dramatically in the near term. For more information on the totality of built environment factors that create healthy and sustainable (green) buildings — review For Health — a research site from Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Organizations may also ramp up disaster preparedness and contingency planning. With potential pressure from shareholders, investors, employees, and customers, organizations must enable unified data-driven decision making when response to changing situations requires rapid pivoting. Scenario and business contingency planning that projects future trajectories is crucial to mitigate the impact of potential resurgence of infection in the workplace. Furthermore, investment in:

- technologies that enable remote control and visibility of building systems (automatic sanitation, HVAC, emergency systems, entry access, physical security, etc.) during a crisis (COVID-19 next wave, other epidemics or pandemics, terrorist threats, natural disasters, utility shortages, war, etc.) will become a leading practice if these technologies can substantially reduce the need for onsite human intervention and surveillance

- remote technologies for all staff that can work from home or other remote locations is now a minimum disaster preparedness and risk-mitigation requirement

- best in class cyber warfare technologies is essential to protecting sensitive and personally identifiable information (PII) especially with more workers conducting business in distributed networks (Read Mercer tips for mitigation.)

Different companies in various locations will approach the return to the office post-pandemic in different ways. Here are some ideas of what companies may implement for increased physical distance, wellness, and psychological safety.

Multi-disciplinary COVID-19 "return to the office" response team

A team representing operations, sales, facilities, HR, legal, workforce planning, office design health and safety, and risk compliance, etc. is essential to establish common sense, visible, and transparent leadership that provides clear policy, communications, and expectations setting. This team is responsible for following local government guidelines and laws, leading practices, audit, and assurance initiatives. This team should be creative and intentional in communications with both employees and their families — providing assurance to the larger community. Preparation and planning for a successful return to work means running through all daily workflows and conducting physical environment audits to understand people flows, congregation spaces and potential bottlenecks. This group should visibly model safe behaviors, implement policies that reward behaviors while making it easy for all employees, visitors, and customers to comply.

Touchless environment

Facilities will permanently prop open internal doors, remove doors, or provide handle-less access. Self-service may be eliminated. This may apply to use of copiers, printers, cafeteria buffets, shared serving utensils, communal food and beverages in kitchenettes (pre-packaged food only), remotes, mice, keyboards, headsets, desk pens and white-board markers. Potential elimination of desk and conference room phones — opting for employer-assigned cell phones. Organizations may also increase the installation of touchless switches on lights, doors, drawers, and elevators — coupled with increased use of voice activated commands. Employees are likely to experience increased touchless payment options (e.g., Apple Pay) in cafés and smart phone entry and elevator systems. Elevators are a specific conundrum not only because of high traffic but also because of the confined space — organizations may hire elevator operators to control traffic and operate the buttons, or ask employees to use their personal pens or smartphones to manage access.

Physical spacing signage

Varying carpet colors to indicate six-foot perimeter around desks, footprints, Xs or lines on floors, corridor traffic signage (one-way or clockwise rotations through office space even if it takes someone the long way to the restroom), standing circles in elevators, and numerous personal, sanitation and safe spacing reminders.

Increased sanitation

Sanitation workers will be visible during the average workday cleaning public spaces in comparison to evenings and weekends. Corporate leaders will likely implement alcohol gel or sanitizing wipes dispensing stations at every shared space (printer stations, elevators, copiers, and kitchenettes). Access to nanoSeptic disposable keyboard covers, door handles, mousepads or disposable paper placemats for workstations, may be abundant in addition to disposable masks. Anticipate needing office space sanitization policies that require workers to disinfect their workstation prior to and after use — this includes conference rooms, and other shared spaces. In addition, UV-C and electro-static cleaning options may see increased office use. Office and work facilities will begin to embrace many healthcare industry protocols, cleaning methods, and easy to disinfect or microbe resistant office materials.

Revised client access and visitor policies

Visitors may not be allowed entry in certain circumstances especially during the initial phases of return. Other policies, such as health and fever screenings and other access privileges may be enacted within legal guidelines. It is likely that virtual client meetings will be encouraged and nonessential business travel will remain restricted.

Focus/training on the healthy workplace

Education and policies that reinforce social distancing rules and that require workers to disinfect their workstation prior to use and after use — this includes conference rooms, and other shared spaces will be expected. Prepared organizations will increase sick time allocations to encourage people to stay home when ill. Installation of additional handwashing stations outside of restrooms, multiple tissue dispensers, multiple hand sanitizer stations, and non-touch trash containers dispersed throughout the work environment. Finally, organizations may educate their workers on healthy commuting practices.

Illness screening and sensors

Potential for increased use of screening questionnaires prior to daily entry, thermal or infrared scanners to check temperatures of employees and/or antibody testing kits. Consider tagging screened employees with colored wristbands, or other visual identifiers, that change every day.

Sensors — proximity and space utilization

Look for an increased government and organizational interest in contact tracing apps to detect interactions and proximity among co-workers but issues of individual privacy and compliance will bring challenges. PwC is developing a geo-location app using Wi-Fi or Bluetooth for clients to trace employee interactions and contacts in the case of new onsite infections. Expect more motion sensors on ceilings or desks to monitor space utilization. Automatic light and water sensors can also be installed to send visual signals to users for the recommended 20-second hand wash.

Staggered environment

Implementation phases, work hours, daily or weekly shifts, workspaces (staggered/checkerboard design), lunch times, elevator usage, new hire start dates, etc.

Laptop only environment

Will increase to promote mobility, disaster preparedness, desk sharing, and remote working while eliminating infection vectors. Desktops may become obsolete.

Creation of isolation plans and/ or room, risk or crisis coordinators, as well as isolated transportation protocols

If someone begins to show infection symptoms at work.

Increased need for employee cocooning and facility sound proofing

Employees who have worked from home in the last few months will be accustomed to quiet work environments and privacy. Coming back into the office even with one-third of the people will seem busy, noisy, and potentially chaotic. To increase productivity, organizations may need to make adjustments.

Single use only

Small-shared offices, huddle rooms, and meeting rooms will revert to single use. Again, from the employee perspective, there will be a premium on personal and quiet space.

Assigned desk environment

If someone does become sick, it may be helpful to understand who else may be exposed nearby for contact tracing and infection tracking.

Closed onsite amenities

Corporate child care centers, fitness centers, and even private lactation rooms (if lactation rooms cannot be sanitized thoroughly).

Reduced coziness and personalization

Workplace designs will move toward a more aseptic esthetic similar to health care environments. Workspace designers will craft environments with surfaces that can be cleaned easily and frequently — opting for hard metal or plastic surfaces as opposed to fabric, wood, and leather. Companies may eliminate assigned private offices or at least restrict or ban personal belongings, decorations, and tchotchkes to maintain easy to clean uncluttered workspaces.

More natural light and improved HEPA air filtration systems

Organizations will look to collaborate with companies that can provide UV light sanitation, improved air filtration rates, air purification, sanitation and/or fresh air systems, and sensors to monitor air quality.

Conclusion

In early 2020, no one predicted that the work environment paradigm would fundamentally flip with most knowledge workers working from home offices. COVID-19 may well end up in the history books as the one cataclysmic event that pushed organizations to embrace global distributed work. How corporate leaders envision their long-term total use/need of corporate office space and their resulting real estate footprint and capacity will undoubtedly change. Other fundamental adaptations are in scope for individual workspace design, essential onsite operations, how organizational networks and team structures operate, and the vital technology needed to manage new ways of working.

While this report discusses the office environment specifically — all organizations will need to make substantive design changes going forward to protect the health, wellness, and ultimately the productivity of workers. Many of the recommendations in this article are applicable in varied work environments. One thing is for certain, no matter the type of work environment, going back to work post COVID-19 means not going back to the same desk, structure, and social norms one left.