

The Post-COVID-19 Office: What Will It Look Like?

BY NATALIE ROONEY

As companies work to ensure their teams can return to the office safely, everything from hygiene to cubes to the communal kitchen is being reworked and reconfigured.

ONE SIZE WON'T FIT ALL

When we think about returning to office life after working remotely, we know two things: Offices won't look like they used to, and one-size-fits-all solutions won't apply, says Lisa Christner, principal of the Corporate Interior Design Company. Christner has been working with companies and organizations of all sizes as they contemplate how to prepare their spaces for employees.

"Companies are communicating their expectations and explaining what employees will see when they return to the office," Christner says.

There are as many different solutions as there are companies seeking them. "More than ever before, companies are looking at their individual situations," Christner explains. "There are a lot of guidelines out there, but every company needs to decide for itself if and why to bring people back."

Christner says most clients are making decisions based on the short term. "Most people realize this situation isn't going to last forever, and they're not making extreme changes at this point."

Many of the changes happening in work spaces are basic – providing hand sanitizing stations and masks, creating space for physical distancing, adding signage for directional flow, lowering the maximum occupancy for conference rooms and common spaces (if they're available at all), removing furniture to keep numbers low, and adding Plexiglas to the tops of cubes.

There also has been an uptick in the number of companies improving their air filtration systems, something Christner says may be a costlier change, but will be money well spent for the future. "People have always been concerned about air quality and even more so now. Taking steps to improve air quality gives people a mental picture of well-being in their space."

Christner suggests another air quality idea: indoor plants. "Bringing the outdoors in can help make people feel better about being in the space, and plants do help with air quality," she says. "It's something easy to do." She encourages thinking through the use of plants in advance. "It can be touchy with some people so make sure it's a thoughtful, planned approach."

FLEXIBLE SPACE

Office furniture industry experts say companies are likely to have a mix of workers in the office and at home on any given day, creating a need for flexible office spaces. There likely will be more spacing and more barriers, meaning there could be a move away from open layouts that gained popularity in recent years. Cubicles with short walls can be retrofitted with glass or acrylic toppers.



Example of a wall-mounted air filtration in a meeting space pictured in the unit above the presenter



Planters can be a way to bring the outdoors in as well as define space and create directional flow

Christner emphasizes that people still want and need to collaborate, so she doesn't envision those collaborative spaces going away completely, but the spaces will be reimaged.

Christner describes new, flexible cubicle spaces that allow cubes to be transformed into micro offices. "Companies are actually building clear, demountable floor to ceiling walls for total space privacy that

allow workers to maintain a sight line and keep a sense of openness while feeling protected. They still feel they're part of what's happening, but they have their own 'office' for safety," she says.

Christner says office reconfigurations with these demountable, movable walls are better than standard drywall construction because they're flexible. When it is time to reconfigure, they don't generate the dust and dirt from a standard remodel. "It's a good temporary solution," she says. In addition, because the walls can be reconfigured



Micro offices using demountable walls



People oriented away from each other with added plexiglass or glass toppers on cubicles

many times, they are also a good long-term investment with potential tax advantages.

There are other ways to protect employees without spending a lot of money, Christner says. "You can reorient how people are sitting within their cubes by having them face away from each other instead of toward each other. It's a simple trick that just about anyone can do with existing cubes."

And in a time when antibacterial/antimicrobial are key marketing points, Christner says don't be fooled. "You should look for materials that are bleach cleanable instead or can withstand the cleaning from a CDC-approved cleaner," she advises.

According to furniture designer Knoll, "A fabric or material that is antimicrobial can kill or inhibit the growth of microorganisms like

bacteria and fungus. This feature protects the fabric or material from the growth of certain microorganisms that would deteriorate its appearance or performance. It is not intended to protect humans from the spread of infectious diseases."

Companies also are incorporating technology to reduce touch points and improve hygiene:

- Motion lights and motion sensors when entering a room or turning on a faucet
- Doors that open automatically with motion sensors or facial recognition
- Elevators and AV systems that can be ordered and controlled from a smartphone
- Room or cubicle reservations that can be made online with a smartphone

Employees likely will see reduced sharing in common spaces like kitchens, if they're available at all, and less sharing of printers and other tech equipment. Cubes are becoming more self-contained so workers can complete their tasks without leaving their spaces.

Christner says whatever steps you take, your office space should be well thought out and planned in advance. "Think it through," she advises. "Don't just do something because you read or heard about it. If you don't have a good reason, don't do it." ▲

MEANWHILE, BACK AT HOME...

The office may be taking shape for your return, but while you're still working at home, here are some do's and don'ts.

DO MAKE SURE YOU'VE GOT THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT.

At first it might have seemed fine to sit at the kitchen counter and work for a few hours. But now that working from home has stretched into a much longer timeline, consider the ergonomics of your chair, its height, and your desk configuration.

DON'T FORGET TO TAKE BREAKS. It's easy to get into a groove and then realize you haven't moved for three hours. Get up every hour. Stretch. Blink your eyes, and focus on something far away. Take a walk outside. If you're a smart watch wearer, take your requisite 250 steps when it reminds you.

DO CREATE AND STICK TO A ROUTINE as much as possible. Set a schedule with all of the tasks you need to get done for the day, and set time limits on each so you're on track to finish the day on time.

DON'T LET SOCIAL MEDIA SIDETRACK YOU.

It's tempting to have tabs open from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, however, social media can prolong your workday if you let it.

DO GIVE YOURSELF SOME GRACE. We're all still in pandemic mode. Kids still are virtual learning – possibly right next to you. And the world is still an uncertain place. Some days are going to be better than others. And that's OK.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO REACH OUT AND ASK FOR HELP.