Is Your Workplace Post-COVID Ready?

SpaceIQ
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The devastation caused by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is unfathomable in so many ways. The loss of human life, daily increases in new cases, and the ongoing battles to rein in this disease have fundamentally altered how we live and work.

The COVID-19 impact on businesses is profound and unsettling. A Texas-based analyst firm projects the pandemic “could cost the U.S. economy approximately $972.6 billion in real gross product and 11.4 million jobs on an annual basis.” Every day that a company is shuttered or running at minimal capacity is costly to both business owners and employees.

Americans eventually will return to work and businesses will once again need to manage the day-to-day operations of their workplaces. But what will the offices, stores, warehouses, and factories of yesterday look like when the economy reopens? And how will employers create workspaces that promote both productivity and employee safety now and in the future?

This guide will highlight tips and strategies to optimize existing workplaces across while offices are empty or sparsely occupied, accommodate returning employees, and create a post-COVID workplace management plan. Because COVID-19 measures will change over time, we’ll update this guide to meet the present needs of your workplace. Let’s start with how you can make workplace modifications and improvements while offices are vacant.

Planning for a Post-COVID Future

There's no clear guidelines on how to prepare your workplace for the eventual return of employees. One thing is certain: extreme health and hygiene measures will be the norm.

“The workplace and those who manage it will be responsible for saving lives,” said Carly Tortorelli, senior vice president of technology for Impec Group.

“Health and safety must take center stage in how companies set up their workplaces for the return of employees. Every detail must be scrutinized, from space configurations to janitorial services to ongoing hygiene education and enforcement.”

Now is a great time to make necessary changes to your workplace. A majority of are vacant or running on skeleton crews due to self-isolation and stay-at-

81% - The percentage of full-time employees who say COVID-19 has disrupted their life “a great deal” or “a fair amount.”

“The workplace and those who manage it will be responsible for saving lives.”
-- Carly Tortorelli, Impec Group

3 https://www.impecgroup.com/
home mandates. Employees may be out of sight, but their needs post-pandemic should be top-of-mind.

Empty Offices are Opportunities

A Gallup study⁴ from March 2020 showed that 61% of full-time employees are working from home due to office closures. Many companies are furloughing workers⁵ for undetermined amounts of time: Disney (43,000), JCPenney (85,000), Cirque du Soleil (4,700), and Under Armour (6,700). COVID-19 has created ghost towns of many businesses.

Despite the immense losses, there is a unique opportunity to make improvements to workplaces in anticipation of employees coming back to work in the coming weeks or months. Empty and sparsely occupied workspaces allow facilities professionals to configure new floor plans based on social distancing, improve workplace hygiene, make long-overdue employee/department moves, and improve technology.

The biggest challenge facing workplace managers is adapting to the six-foot rule of social distancing. Do they have enough room to reorganize space to ensure employee safety? What should you do if available square footage doesn't allow for new designs?

Design for Social Distancing

After months of social distancing and self-isolation, employees are likely eager to jump back into the offices they left. Question: How do you practice social distancing in close quarters?

It’s not impossible, as Cushman & Wakefield shows with its “6 Feet Office”⁶ program. The company’s entire Amsterdam office was retrofitted with signage, safety equipment, carpet and floor paths, and detailed instructions on how to practice social distancing and still get work done.

The concept is simple, yet involves tremendous planning and coordination to execute. It creates six-foot safe zones around all desks using black carpet circles. Employees walk clockwise around the office to limit face-to-face encounters. Entry and exit from meeting rooms is carefully orchestrated. Every employee is given a paper desk cover to be used under their keyboard and mouse, which they carry with them.

“The 6 Feet Office” is a program that combats workplace contamination to the nth degree, but portions of it are likely out of reach for most companies. You may not have the space for 12-foot diameter circles around every desk. But with workplace management software, you can create

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modified floor plans while employees are absent, then coordinate how workspaces are occupied when business resumes.

With employees working from home, it's a perfect time to use planning software to modify desk configurations and seating arrangements. Facility professionals can virtually evaluate and collaborate on potential layouts with business leadership using an Integrated Workplace Management System (IWMS) and initiate changes once consensus is reached.

Make the Right Moves

Keeping employees healthy may require moving individuals or entire departments to meet social distancing requirements. Workplace moves are disruptive, so a vacated office is an opportunity to evaluate moves without creating chaos. Again, proper planning and powerful technology are keys to success.

An IWMS supports creation of multiple scenarios for the same floor plan, and makes them accessible online to department heads and decision makers. With their input, you can spot potential gaps, identify what new equipment is needed, and see the final outcome—all before packing the first box.

MOVE WITH A PLAN

Step 1: Create a detailed move plan based on new/modified workplace designs

Step 2: Share objectives/goals with department heads who will be impacted

Step 3: Gather input from department heads, leadership on proposed move plans

Step 4: Communicate move plans to employees; collect feedback and address concerns

Step 5: Execute the move and share results with employees

Once your move plan is done, it's time to communicate changes to employees. Just because they aren't in the office, workers want to know how the move impacts them. Plus, some people may not want their belongings handled by someone else. With social distancing in mind, you may allow individual employees to set a time and day to collect their belongings and move to their new workspace.

Welcoming Employees Back to Work

The long wait is over and employees are coming back to the office. But experts predict the workplace of the past is...well...in the past. The post-COVID workplace will look and operate in vastly different ways as companies strive to shift business back into high gear without compromising employee safety.

The specter of social distancing will continue to hover over your workplace. The option to have your entire team in the office at the same time may no longer exist. Desks pushed together to maximize space must be separated unless you embrace alternative work structures.
Embrace Agile Work Tactics

Well before COVID-19 rocked the business world, we saw significant change in how and where people work. The days of 9-to-5 shifts in front of a desk were quickly fading as remote work, telecommuting, and flexible schedules became the norm.

In fact, Gartner found that 74% of CFOs surveyed in late March said they’re looking to move at least 5% of previously on-site employees to remote status; nearly a quarter of them said they’ll make 20% of employees remote. Technology has made remote work more cost-effective and interactive—benefits brought to the forefront by the pandemic.

But a fully remote workforce may not be an option. To accommodate employees who commute to a physical office, workplace managers can leverage several agile strategies that keep productivity up while addressing health policies.

Agile workplaces require a system of governance, which is where your IWMS or Computer-Aided Facilities Management (CAFM) program comes in. Each can help track scheduling and utilization over time.

By denoting agile spaces in dynamic floor maps, workplace managers can see when hotel desks are reserved and by who. That same map also shows where hotel and hot desks are located and what employees are assigned to those spaces. Workplace managers can then restrict access to other open spaces within the six-foot safety zone and facilities management can disinfect spaces by seeing when they’re unoccupied.

Agile work tactics are an option to traditional workplace models. Regardless if you opt for a mix of work types, it’s critical to let employees know how, when, and where they’ll be giving their best efforts to your business.

Workplaces won’t reopen with a flick of the light switch. As we’ve discussed, careful planning and reorganization must occur before employees return. And one strategy that should take precedence is communication—both before and after you unlock the doors.


AGILE WORKPLACE STRATEGIES

> FLEX SCHEDULING
  Allow employees to work varying hours based on personal need; coordinate schedules for on-site health safety

> ROTATING SCHEDULES
  Create rotating shifts for employees who sit next to each other; one works in office three days a week and two from home, then switch

> HOTEL DESKS
  Offer reservable desks/workspaces with set days and times

> HOT DESKS
  Give access to non-reservable desks/spaces for employees on flexible schedules or remote workers visiting the office
Communication and Maintaining Culture

Employees are looking to leaders and workplace managers to navigate their return and how they’ll work going forward. You may have done a great job communicating company business pre-pandemic, but how you keep employees informed and educated is paramount now.

Connecting with employees is more than reminding them to wash their hands and cough into their elbows. Cleanliness mandates can seem Draconian to workers, especially when your workplace culture is built on more-informal tenets. Employers don’t need to communicate with an iron hand, but employees will expect you to have their best interests in mind when making—and enforcing—change.

Several business leaders told CMSWire⁸ that the secret to communicating with employees and maintaining culture isn’t spouting directives and requesting conformity. It’s empathy. That means setting time aside for more one-on-one meetings, phone calls to remote workers to ask who they’re doing, and practicing what they preach.

Understanding and patience will go far in helping employees adjust to new work structures. But that doesn’t mean should forego regular outreach about workplace cleanliness and safety requirements. This is when over-communication rules.

Health and Hygiene is Everyone’s Responsibility

If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it’s the importance of proper sanitation and hygiene—especially in the workplace. Research by WebMD⁹ revealed an office’s top germiest places:

- Coffee Mug: 90% have significant germs, including fecal matter
- Desk/Keyboard: 400x more bacteria than a toilet seat
- Kitchen Sponge: 400x more bacteria than a toilet seat
- Telephone: 25K bacteria per square inch

Workplace managers should create cleanliness protocols to help mitigate the spread of germs. The World Health Organization¹⁰ recommends several

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⁹ https://www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/ss/slideshow-germs-office
employee health practices:

- Regularly wipe surfaces (e.g. desks and tables) and objects (e.g. telephones, keyboards) with disinfectant
- Wash your hands after using the restroom, using kitchen appliances, and returning from outside the office
- Practice good respiratory hygiene. Use masks and paper tissues and dispose of them in sealed containers
- Stay home if you're sick, and see a doctor if your condition worsens

In the office, modern workplace technology makes access to hygiene supplies and stations a snap. Using a dynamic floor map editor, you can “pin” icons on your workplace map to show employees where to find:

- Hand Sanitizers
- Sinks
- Cleaning supplies
- First-aid kits
- Shower

Want to go the extra mile? Employers can also supply employees with disinfecting wipes to regularly clean keyboards, phones, mice, and their desk tops. For $30 and more each, businesses can provide ultraviolet phone and laptop sanitation units that kill 99.9% of bacteria.

**MAINTAIN A HEALTHY WORKPLACE**

- CLEAN/REPLACE CARPETS
- SCRUB GRIME FROM AIR VENTS
- WIPE DOWN WALLS
- SANITIZE KITCHEN APPLIANCES
- SCOUR DESK TOPS, CHAIRS, MEETING TABLES
- WASH INSIDES OF WINDOWS

And don't forget regular workplace cleanings. Employees should wipe down desks, keyboards, phones, and chairs once a day. On a grander scale, consistently scheduled office cleanings by licensed, professional services will show employees that you care about their ongoing personal health and safety.

**Our Post-COVID Workplace Reality**

Business owners and employees anxiously await the re-opening of the global economy. When it happens, the way we work will need to change and workplaces along with it. Emphasis on worker health and well-being will be greater than ever. Interactions with co-workers may never return to what they once were.

But your workplace doesn't need to feel sterile and unwelcoming. Advanced planning, floor plan modifications, agile scheduling, and ongoing attention to health can create environments that allow employees to feel safe, reconnect with co-workers, and above all—get back to doing their best work.
Checklist: Preparing a Post-COVID Workplace

☐ Optimize your workplace
  ○ Create new/modified floor plans
  ○ Configure spaces with social distancing in mind
  ○ Conduct individual/departmental moves while employees are out
  ○ Install hygiene stations, motivational posters, sanitation guides
  ○ Communicate changes with employees before they happen

☐ Consider agile work structures
  ○ Flex scheduling
  ○ Rotating schedules
  ○ Hot/Hotel desks
  ○ Telecommuting/Remote

☐ Regularly communicate with employees
  ○ Email updates
  ○ One-on-one meetings (in person or virtual)
  ○ Informational/Educational posters
  ○ Intranet/Employee newsletter articles
  ○ Wellness check phone calls

☐ Denote hygiene resources on floor maps
  ○ Hand sanitizers
  ○ Sinks
  ○ Cleaning supplies
  ○ First-aid kits
  ○ Showers

☐ Regularly sanitize often-used office equipment
  ○ Desks/Conference tables
  ○ Keyboards/Mice
  ○ Telephones/Headsets
  ○ Kitchen items (appliances, plates, cups, silverware, etc.)
  ○ Cleaning supplies (sponges, rags, mops, etc.)
  ○ Door handles/knobs

☐ Clean the workplace while employees are gone
  ○ Shampoo/Replace carpets
  ○ Steam-clean tile, wood, linoleum floors
  ○ Remove grime and dust from air vents
  ○ Wipe down walls
  ○ Sanitize/Replace kitchen appliances
  ○ Scour desk tops, chairs, conference room tables
  ○ Wash insides of windows