

WHITE PAPER / MODERN WORKPLACE DESIGN

THE POWER OF PLACE: LEVERAGE DESIGN TO REINVENT THE WORKPLACE

BY David Weinberg, AIA, NCARB

From managing safety concerns to incorporating creative, collaborative areas, office environments will likely transform in the coming months and years to meet evolving needs and improve employee well-being and satisfaction.



Despite the escalation of COVID-19 variants and accompanying hospitalizations, vaccinations continue to roll out internationally. As municipalities grapple daily with how to safeguard communities, businesses are experiencing a steady revival of gatherings, in-person sales and cautious vitality. How will the workplace we return to differ from the space we left behind in March 2020? Perhaps the more important question is — should it?

As the threat of COVID-19 progresses, corporate leaders are assessing the new reality and purpose behind the workplace. The pandemic surreptitiously demonstrated that, for most office dwellers, work could occur anywhere with negligible impact on productivity. For most, this scenario was unimaginable before March 2020. However, the ability to connect and produce virtually has embedded itself as a new normal and an acceptable aspect of some workday activities. The key question looking forward is assessing how the pandemic has altered our perception and appreciation of the workplace. Many companies are closely examining whether remote work could or should become a part of their culture. While remote work offers benefits for some staff, it must be evaluated in the context of how companies define their internal culture, professional development and staff engagement.

As economies rebound and business markets expand, workers may no longer be bound by the threat of layoffs and employment uncertainties. Many are already seeking opportunities that espouse work-life flexibility as well as happier and healthier work environments. Pandemic burnout is real and an increasingly recognized condition to be acknowledged and addressed. According to The Achiever’s Employee and Engagement Report, 46% of workers feel less connected to their companies than before the pandemic. Even more alarming, 52% of workers intend to seek new opportunities in 2021. Addressing and correcting diminished engagement is crucial for a successful rebound as companies devise and evolve their Return to Office (RTO) policies.

Critical to a positive recovery is rethinking the workplace. Its purpose and value to productivity have been shaken and queried. The pandemic demonstrated that

the workplace could transcend from a fixed physical destination to a virtual hub of communication and connectivity. Corporate leaders need to shift their priorities and redefine the purpose and benefits of the workplace.

By embracing the adage Power of Place, the influence that the environment has on someone’s behavior, business leaders can now benefit by endorsing a purposeful and more engaging workplace. Through recalibrating the physical, virtual and experiential aspects, an enhanced workplace environment can shift corporate culture and better align with the values that workers came to prefer during the pandemic. Reimagining the post-pandemic workplace as a destination for collaboration, ideation and communication — a place of engagement — can articulate and advance the corporate mission.

WORKPLACE SCENARIOS

Current headlines focusing on RTO offer a panoply of approaches and action plans. Three scenarios dominate the discussion — the return to office, the hybrid/agile model and remote work. Recent surveys reveal that more than half of all workers will be returning to the office by the end of 2021. The plan to return varies considerably from one company to another. For example, Goldman Sachs stated that WFH (work from home) is an “aberration” and “not ideal and not a new normal.” Other companies, such as Slack, have assessed lessons learned and are defining “a more asynchronous work cadence.”

Work hours may no longer be relegated to 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Instead, the workweek is morphing into a more holistic time frame, and workers can participate and contribute during the hours that best align with their individual, personal lifestyles. Other companies, including Amazon, DropBox and Facebook, are embracing long-term remote work as their new norm. Many companies have already devised positions solely for remote work situations and see it as a competitive trend. The fundamental takeaway is assessing each scenario and determining which offers an appropriate approach and time frame. As companies refine their RTO strategy, it’s necessary to approach each scenario without bias or prejudice.



LESSONS LEARNED

Over the course of the pandemic, WFH revealed universal challenges. Workers, predominantly working parents with school-aged children, witnessed an abject eradication of work-life balance. According to the latest Women in the Workplace report, one in four women has considered either downshifting or terminating their careers. The pandemic also revealed the unintentional disparity of home workspaces. As of late 2020, many millennials returned to live with their parents for improved interpersonal connection and financial stability.

More corporate real estate portfolios need to address how remote work has altered the workplace's needs, operations and perceptions. Despite speculations and innuendos, the pandemic did not kill the workplace. In contrary, the pandemic showed that a physical workplace empowers business synergies and interpersonal benefits that remote work cannot offer. Nurturing an engaging and motivating corporate community provides an essential outlet for social interaction, relational connection and mentorship. For some companies, rethinking the workplace offers the opportunity to reshape the ways we work. It can dismantle hierarchy and promote egalitarianism. It can also provide a forum for engagement.

Recent surveys illustrate two crucial facts — first, more than half of workers feel highly engaged when their companies take real action to improve diversity and inclusion. Second, for too many, remote work is an accelerant that fuels doubt and misconception about productivity. Most workers surveyed fear that their managers and supervisors question productivity when done remotely. According to a 2021 Q1 JLL report, “only 37% of the workforce feel more productive at home than in the office, as opposed to 48% in 2020.” Most importantly, the workplace provides balanced working patterns — the ability to focus, connect, communicate and ideate when and where needed.

Looking for a silver lining, the pandemic's impact on our understanding of the workplace has evolved. WFH was not a game changer but an accelerant for change. Leadership and employees shared a collective demand for immediate mobility and flexibility. Technology and enhanced connectivity provided a successful transition to these demands. As an unanticipated experiment, WFH advocated the rising importance of safety, health and wellness in the workplace. For the disabled, WFH offered a respite from the daily challenges of confronting inaccessible environments. This criterion pertains to both

mental and physical aspects. Advanced technologies facilitated broader communication and equality — there is no hierarchy of talking heads on a Teams or Zoom call.

Other learning moments that emerged at the beginning of 2020 include an increased appreciation of collective assessment, parameters for engagement, and rethinking metrics of productivity. It demonstrates a clear need to align social connection with safety, health and well-being. In short, it has taught us to rethink why people will return to the office. The office should no longer be a facilitator of productivity but an experiential destination. The ongoing pandemic brought the future of the workplace to our doorstep.

Additionally, changing our perception of work allows for a realignment of corporate values, culture and community, resulting in a democratic mix of “individual space” and “collective space.” Finally, working from home has taught us that the home could become the office, but the office needs to learn from the home.

LOOKING FORWARD

With each new announcement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, companies continue to calibrate and adjust their RTO transition plans. As of late August 2021, approximately 62.5% of U.S. adults are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, leaving a significant portion of the country’s population potentially at risk in the event of an exposure. As RTO becomes a reality and a confluence of vaccinated and non-vaccinated workers comes together, health, safety and wellness considerations require action. Rethinking the workplace requires addressing the RTO transition as well as a reimagined perception of placemaking.

As companies transition back to the physical office, we recommend integrating three aspects to facilitate a successful transition: outreach, communication and engagement.

OUTREACH

Outreach offers a proactive means of communication between leadership and staff. Enable outreach via polls, surveys, focus groups and sharing feedback. Outreach should be consistent and purposeful, and findings

should be seriously assessed by leadership. When worker input is disparate and unaligned with leadership’s interests, it should be acknowledged and communicated empathetically. Leverage data gathering and technology tools such as with Scoop or Teams to track attendance for hybrid meetings to streamline and engage the outreach process. For maximum benefit, the outreach process should become engrained within the culture.

COMMUNICATION

Communication should be timely, transparent and authentic. It should also be honest and sincere. Communicate choice and enable flexibility. Build consensus and identify individuals who can serve as change champions within an organization. Ideally, these change champions offer a grassroots approach to improved and coherent messaging. By incorporating consensus builders, the dissemination of information can identify topics of concern and benefit a change management process.

ENGAGEMENT

Listen to and respect staff input with genuine concern. Maximize engagement by crafting the message and coaching the plan. Emphasize that behavioral change can optimize health, wellness and psychological safety for the entire community. Also, identify building owners and operators as solution partners, not adversaries. Landlords and property managers are integrating new strategies to better understand and service their building occupiers. Realigning the corporate real estate portfolio can provide improved flexibility, elasticity and choice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As companies transition back to the workplace, leadership must provide policies, procedures and protocols for RTO. These new house rules offer a means of supporting cultural transformation, encouraging behavioral changes and committing to health, wellness and psychological safety for all. Today’s workforce seeks timely and relevant information. How and when information is shared offers an ideal way to refresh the employer brand.

Rethinking the workplace requires planning, evaluation and execution. Staff will return to the workplace if it is deemed safe, hospitable and equitable. The workplace should provide easy access to collaboration and technology,

and most importantly, offer a positive transformation. These house rules address guidance to successfully repurpose the reinvented workplace.



THE NEW WORKPLACE

Initiating a new work environment focuses on accomplishing cultural shifts via strategic operations and physical

changes. It begins by identifying the different space types and adjacencies required for engagement and productivity. Additionally, pre-pandemic density factors and office occupancy metrics are assessed. The viability and advantages of a lower headcount are assessed. Surveys reveal that a majority of workers in an RTO scenario are comfortable at a 60-70% density. The good news is that this percentage of occupancy aligns closely with pre-pandemic averages. The delta is shifting from assigned seating to unassigned seating or activity-based workspace and offering a mix of focus and collaborative settings. These settings are frequently referred to as DropBox Studio spaces.

Unassigned or activity-based seating may promote better maintenance policies. One consideration: Building maintenance staff routinely avoid cleaning assigned workspaces due to private property situated on the desktop. By converting workspace to unassigned seating, workforce members are responsible for clearing their respective desktops at the end of each day; this allows maintenance to clean and disinfect desktops each evening. In addition, personal items can be stored in numerous ways — lockers, caddies, cubbies, etc.

As the workforce returns to the office, many will be looking for an enhanced variety of purposeful work settings. As an alternative to their assigned or prescheduled desk, workforce members routinely seek alternative locations for quiet, focused heads-down work. These space typologies include study carrels, libraries and quiet cars. When activities involve active engagement, phone rooms and huddle rooms offer acoustically isolated locations that reduce disrupting colleagues and neighbors.

Informal collaboration with and without technology can be provided via collaboration booths, shared work counters, lounges and stadium seating. Mobile monitors, portable chargers, whiteboards and pinup easels allow

for spontaneity, connectivity and flexibility. When more formal settings are required, video-enabled training rooms and conference rooms provide adaptable and acoustically sensitive configurations and multimedia presentations. Offering a variety of work environments comprised of different settings and space types enables improved engagement and optimization.

Other aspects increase physical and emotional wellness. When staff members are feeling well, engagement and productivity are demonstratively higher and sick leave is lower. Biophilic design interventions, which incorporate plants and living walls, are proven to offer a healthy mental balance and increased oxygen levels. Materiality, texture and natural scent can support the foundation of sensory architecture — the ability of spatial stimuli in built environments to lift the quality of experience for the occupants.

Integration of low VOCs and natural materials reduce chemical sensitivities. Critical materials to assess include paint, varnishes, caulks and photocopiers. An egalitarian approach to daylight access and daylight harvesting reduces energy consumption and demonstrates a commitment to sustainability. Studies prove that even minimal access to daylight can cause eyestrain, exhaustion and weakened mental health, which are all detrimental to daily health. For internal spaces with no or minimal access to daylight, circadian lighting can replicate natural rhythms. Research shows that individuals report a 12% improvement in task performance when working under such conditions. Circadian lighting improves cognitive processing and also can promote greater functionality.



ARRIVAL AND SEATING

Arrival and check-in set the stage for the employee and guest RTO experience. The process should provide a comfortable, safe and considerate welcome for all. Ideally, arrivals for guests and visitors are prescheduled ahead of time. Monitor workforce traffic regularly to identify patterns; various software and technology tools exist for reserving seats and meeting spaces via desktop, kiosks and mobile apps. If an unassigned seating program is implemented, integrating an online reservation system is relevant. Managing space inventory and space utilization is necessary for accurate data collection and analysis.

Provision of personal protective equipment including masks, alcohol-based wipes, hand gels and disposable gloves should be easily accessible.



SHARED AREAS AND AMENITIES

One of the motivators of engaging pro-social workspaces are amenity spaces. Intended to be accessed and shared by all, these spaces are now recognized as high-touch point centers. There should be an improved alignment of facility management objectives, policies and specifications. This can be achieved by increasing the connection between hygiene/health and wellness standards. Also, improve the alignment between short-term health concerns and long-term sustainability objectives. Raise the awareness of materiality and cleanability of surfaces and materials being specified and installed. Food and beverage offerings should be examined with a greater reliance on prepackaged, prewrapped offerings. Also, initiate a digital experience to improve flexibility and ease of food and beverage services, such as with DoorDash or Grubhub.



LAVATORIES

Another silver lining of the pandemic has been an overdue focus on and the benefits of improved hygiene. Rethinking planning and configuration, access, density, visibility and materiality of lavatories is a cornerstone of improved physical and psychological wellness. Altering lavatories goes beyond hygiene by also addressing equality and inclusion. Reimagine lavatories as nongendered, fully equitable destinations for wellness for all.

There are several considerations to achieve this objective. Provide effective occupancy signaling to raise awareness of personal proximity. Introduce shared nongendered hand-washing stations to encourage good modeling and regular cleaning by all. Since cell phones harbor a wealth of infectious bacteria and some antibiotic-resistant pathogens, it makes sense to provide dedicated storage locations for personal devices. Introduce antimicrobial copper and nonporous surfaces. Provide hand dryers equipped with photocatalytic disinfection and add waste receptacles at exits. Assess compartment panel dimensions — lower bottoms/higher tops — for greater privacy.



HEATING, VENTILATION AND AIR CONDITIONING (HVAC)

In the early days of the pandemic, scientists disclosed that COVID-19 spread via airborne transmission and respiratory droplets. Indoor locations with poor or outdated ventilation systems proved to be the harbingers of transmission. Below are straightforward guidelines to improving workplace mechanical systems. While these modifications will not stop the spread of the virus, these adjustments can lower the potential of transmission.

1. Follow American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineer's Guidance for Building Operations regarding HVAC systems.
2. Increase outdoor air ventilation with a lower building population to increase the effective dilution ventilation per person.
3. Disable demand-controlled ventilation.



4. Open minimum outdoor air dampers to eliminate recirculation.
5. Improve central air filtration to the MERV-13 or the highest compatible.
6. Seal edges of the filter to limit bypass.
7. Keep systems running longer hours.
8. Consider portable room air cleaners with high-efficiency particulate-absorbing filters.
9. Introduce UVGI (ultraviolet germicidal irradiation).
10. Insert electrostatic filtration inside air handler units.
11. Conduct ionization treatment inside air handler units.
12. Incorporate temporary installation of ultraviolet light fixtures in areas such as bathrooms.

CONCLUSION

We have endured a collective journey of loss, change and uncertainty. As many of us actively seek personal reconnections and professional reengagement, two aspects of the RTO transition should be celebrated: gratitude and resilience. Gratitude should collectively be conveyed for a return to normalcy. With gratitude, which should be collectively conveyed for a return to normalcy, comes the realization that our resilience affords the opportunity for boundless improvements in our personal and professional lives. Rethinking the workplace gives us the chance to optimize lessons learned for ourselves and

the next-generation workforce. By taking time to reassess and reimagine, elegant solutions can be crafted that provide appropriate, functional and pleasing approaches to where we spend most of our waking lives.

BIOGRAPHY

DAVID WEINBERG, AIA, NCARB, is director of interior architecture for Burns & McDonnell in New York. Having worked in Houston, San Francisco, London and New York, David brings 30 years of professional and project experience in all areas of design and delivery, including master planning, strategy development, architecture, interior design and branding. He has particular passion working with foundations and nonprofit organizations and is a former board member of CaringKind, formerly Alzheimer's Association of New York.

ABOUT BURNS & McDONNELL



Burns & McDonnell is a family of companies bringing together an unmatched team of engineers, construction professionals, architects, planners, technologists and scientists to design and build our critical infrastructure. With an integrated construction and design mindset, we offer full-service capabilities with more than 60 offices globally. Founded in 1898, Burns & McDonnell is 100% employee-owned. For more information, visit burnsmcd.com.

