



Understanding the Touchless Workplace

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Editor's note: This post is part of our ongoing exploration of [how design is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

As experience designers, we think of friction as any moment that prevents an uninterrupted flow through the built environment, and we try to come up with solutions that can create “frictionless experiences.”

In the workplace, digital solutions and platforms have eliminated some of the noise by improving guest check-in, conference room booking, company communications, wayfinding, food and beverage service, and more.

Now, the coronavirus has us evolving our perspective of the frictionless workplace because many of the solutions we’ve put in place so far have been reliant on touch technology – kiosks that require navigation via touch, conference room booking screens outside of the door, sign-in tablets, or even biometric fingerprint scans. All of these conveniences start to look like health risks in light of the recent pandemic and other viral threats.

When we return to our physical workplaces, we need to rethink how we introduce interfaces that aren’t just frictionless, but also touchless. We should start by looking strategically at the various technologies already available to us.

Shift from shared to personal devices

One idea is to reduce the dependence on shared devices and shift control of the workplace environment to each person's smart device. This may not have the "cutting-edge" appeal of other technologies, but it greatly reduces the chance that a virus can spread via touch. Plus, it eases the cognitive load for employees — they already understand the interaction patterns on their mobile devices and it's much easier to learn how to control the environment around them.

Other examples include the use of Bluetooth to grant employees access to their building, replacing less sanitary manual or kiosk check-ins for guests and biometric for some employees. Food and beverage ordering is already moving into mobile apps to speed up the ordering process, but has the added benefit of removing the exchange of cards and cash.

Widespread adoption of workplace experience apps may not seem revolutionary, but rather as simply the next evolutionary step, and that's by design. For years, smart companies have been slowly building digital infrastructures to support user technology layers that control the environment around the worker. The current landscape gives you and your company a chance to step back and assess if you're on the right track for supporting the use of employees' mobile devices in the workplace.

Replace touch with gesture

There's a lot that smartphones can do, but sometimes you need to complement those actions with interactions still rooted in the built environment — especially regarding sanitization. Automatic soap dispensers — a very simple form of gesture control — were patented back in the 1980s and touchless trashcans are common in homes today.

In the workplace, consider gesture for non-secure access control or situations where using a personal device to interact would be cumbersome or disruptive. Waving your hand to trigger an automatic door, for example, removes the need to touch handles or a physical button.

But the most radical use of gesture control in the workplace will be to replace the touch interaction of large, shared collaborative screens — whether it be an immersive lobby display, a wayfinding kiosk, or a digital whiteboard like Microsoft Surface. That said, gesture technology isn't without its own challenges. Smartphones are so ubiquitous, and the operating systems at their core are so similar, that we take for granted how standardized our touch interactions have become. We need to create an intuitive, standardized set of interactions and a common design language for them — otherwise, users will be left struggling to figure out the connection between movements and actions.

Use your voice

Siri, Google, Alexa, and Cortana have transformed the way we think about virtual assistants and their ability to handle mundane tasks for us. At the same time, they've normalized voice control and integrated with home devices, allowing people to speak directly to their light fixtures, doorbells, appliances, and more components of their physical environment.

Combine these two elements in a workplace setting and the potential is immediately appealing: "unlock my office," "order my usual lunch in 10 minutes," or even "setup a meeting for me with John tomorrow at 3 p.m. in a conference

room for two.” The ability to scale this solution over time is huge. As your company grows and invests more into other technology, the assistant can also grow in their capabilities to accomplish advanced functions like checking multiple people’s calendars for available times, complex ordering, and eventually calling for your autonomous car to pick you up.

When planning out your workplace technology roadmap, voice command should be strongly considered in the long-term. The options need to mature before becoming integral to the workplace, but when ready, they should nicely complement and enhance existing features.

Recognize your people

The most powerful enabler of truly frictionless experiences is facial recognition, since it requires no conscious action by the employee. A system that recognizes your people and automatically grants them access is the epitome of frictionless. And the opportunities don’t end there. Once the building knows who you are, a whole world of automation opens up.

Imagine videoconferencing starting when you walk into a room and it knows you are the host of the meeting, or a workstation that adapts its ergonomics, lighting, and temperature when it recognizes you, or even lit pathways to guide you to where you’re heading for your next meeting so you never get lost.

Facial recognition is already in use at many workplaces and in retail (as a crime deterrent), as well as in many US airports and even venues like Madison Square Garden. All indications are that it is a technology here to stay and worth investing in for the workplace, even amongst privacy concerns. It will become increasingly important for employers to protect their employees’ data and openly converse with them about their data management to instill trust.

Now What?

Adapting your workplace to the new needs of your employees is not a task to be taken lightly as it’ll require much planning and smart investment. However, here are a few tips to help you as you start this process:

1. **Put your people first** – When it seems like there’s too many decisions to make about what to implement, include your employees and understand what’s most important to them.
2. **Keep it simple** – it can be overwhelming to try to meet all of your employees needs at once, so you’ll need to focus on features that quickly benefit the largest number of employees. Touchless access control for everyone is better than virtual personal assistants for executives.
3. **Focus on the short term, plan for the long term** – Your technology roadmap should cover several years, not just the next six months. Plan for both by selecting solutions that will also serve your long-term needs.

COVID-19 is raising our awareness of how easily we facilitate the spread of germs through community devices. We don’t fully know how the pandemic will reshape the workplace, but we do know it is accelerating digital transformation and faster adoption of workplace technology. Just as the rapid shift to remote work prompted us think about how we interact with our virtual work environments, we should take this moment to rethink how we interact with our *physical* workplaces, once we return to them.

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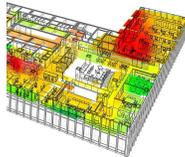
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