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## The Great Return: Making the Workplace Ready

BY KNOWLEDGE LEADER EDITOR | 22 APRIL 2020



Companies are turning their attention to how their employees will return to the workplace after abruptly being made to work from home. COVID-19 initially created challenges as the global workforce quickly pivoted to working remotely. While there will be long-term impacts to the future of workplace, our focus is now turning to the

immediate concern: How will we all return to the workplace? The date of the return is still uncertain. The [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) has said, “returning to work will be gradual, phased-in and will vary by factors such as location, sector, business type or size, and the health status of workers. It also will require continued social distancing, expanded use of personal protective equipment, and other counter-measures.” Employers are asking questions about the changes they need to make to ensure that the post-pandemic workplace is safe, functional and most importantly, builds trust with their employees. Questions like:

- How will our recent experience with working from home impact the post-COVID workplace?
- What hygiene and cleaning practices need to be put in place to maintain the health and safety of employees?
- What physical changes do we need to make to our space?
- What new behaviors do we need to encourage?
- What are the best practices others are doing to make their workplaces safe?
- How do we build trust with our employees and assure them that our workplaces are safe?

Through extensive research and discussions with our clients around the world, we have divided the actions that space occupiers will need to take to ready their workplaces for their employees’ return into five categories. The following recommendations represent the current thinking on best practices and immediate actions to be considered. Longer term actions will be explored in a later blog piece, but these actions will not jeopardize longer terms investments.

## DESIGN AND SPACE CHANGES

To help maintain the six-foot social distancing recommended by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), some alterations will need to be made to space layouts and furniture. It should be noted that for the initial return to the workplace, we see most actions as behavior and cleaning related, rather than space changes. A sampling of changes includes:

- Rotate open workstation desks/work surfaces so people do not face each other.
- In areas with six-by-six-foot workstations, occupy every other workstation. This can be rotated on a daily basis for different teams.

- Direct employees to work in alternative work areas like conference rooms, huddle rooms, open collaborative areas, etc. One company has said that since they have mastered the art of virtual meetings, they will turn their conference rooms into assigned work spaces to reduce the density in their open workstation areas.
- Install temporary clear plastic panel barriers at the reception desk to separate visitors from receptionist.
- Install tall partitions between desks that face each other. An alternative is to install temporary clear plastic panel partitions to raise lower panel heights to at least 60 inches.
- Locate the wellness room as close to the entry to the suite as possible to reduce ill people moving through the suite and to ease departure from the suite.

## NEW BEHAVIORS

- Educate receptionist to know what to do after interacting with a person who exhibits COVID-19 symptoms. Establish a plan with your partner health care provider or health department on how the person, and those exposed, will be removed from the premises and treated.
- Require employees to “qualify” to return to the workplace by completing on-line training for new workplace hygiene behavior and a signed form that declares they are free of COVID-19 symptoms.
- Provide information for employees who are not feeling well regarding what to do immediately, including numbers of local health care professionals and the designated company contact.
- Some companies like Amazon and Walmart have already begun taking employee temperatures when they enter the building.
- Stagger employee arrival and departure hours to limit densities in elevator cabs.
- To focus evening cleaning, use signage and/or tape on conference rooms doors and workstation entrances to indicate if that area was used during the day. Unused spaces do not need to be cleaned every night.
- To reduce touching of door handles, leave office and conference room doors open unless there is an absolute need for privacy.
- Encourage people to collaborate virtually, rather than in a conference room, whenever possible. Ask, “can this meeting be a virtual conference call?”
- Use paper cups and disposable utensils until it is safe to use washable utensils.

- Ask that employees clear the desk they have used of all personal items at the end of each day.
- Consider the mental health impact of the situation. Establish quiet spaces or rooms for personal restoration or meditation. Make available meditation apps, counselling and support.

## COMMUNICATION AND NAVIGATION

- Install signs to inform visitors of distance rules, hand washing and sanitizing, gathering, queuing at coffee stations and wearing of masks (where required) in public areas.
- Using signage, create one-way, clockwise paths through the space. Tape arrows on the floor to indicate direction.
- In conference rooms, after removing every other seat, put tape markers on floors to indicate safe six-foot clearances between seats.
- Use signs to show that whiteboards cannot be used (due to shared pens) or provide individual pens sets to certain employees.
- Put marks on the floor to indicate safe six-foot queuing distances near copiers.

## HYGIENE AND CLEANING

- Empower employees to take care of their own hygiene safety. OSHA's [Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID](#) provides recommendations for new behaviors, safe work practices, personal protective equipment, etc.
- Place dispensers of alcohol-based (60% minimum) hand sanitization prominently throughout the space.
- Discourage employees from using other employee's phones, desks, offices or other work tools and equipment.
- Provide disposable towels/wipes for employees to clean their work surfaces, task lighting, chair backs and other touchable surfaces in their work area.
- Provide access to trusted health information and provide regular briefings on hygiene.
- Throughout the day, clean door pulls/handles, handrails, elevator buttons, badge readers, appliance handles, light switches, shared common areas, counter tops, snack dispenser controls, sinks and faucets, copiers/fax machines and touchable pads in conference rooms.

- Make cleaning visible throughout the day to help reduce employees stress levels and build trust.
- Each night, clean all touchable surfaces including desktops, task lighting, light switches, chair backs and arms, drawer handles and desk height control.

## TECHNOLOGY

- Leverage technology to continue with remote work. This will reduce density to help maintain distancing requirements of the office and enable staggered occupancy of the workplace during different days of the week. Preliminary findings from Colliers' *Global Working from Home survey*, launched in March, shows that 80% of employees would like to continue working from home at least one day a week.
- Install touchless door openers at key locations. In bathrooms, install touchless, motion activated faucets, soap dispensers, flushing and paper towel dispensers (or air hand dryers). Consider voice activated elevator controls.
- Use screens to broadcast new workplace hygiene rules.

These are only a sampling of the initiatives that companies are taking to get their workplaces ready for their employees' return. Colliers is continuing to learn from this unprecedented event and will share our insights and recommendations as they develop. Our collective experiences now will shape the workplace for years to come. Many things will never be what they once were. But the first task in front of us is to get back to the workplace and back to working together.

Other Resources:

[U.S. Chamber of Commerce National Return to Work plan](#)

[WHO: Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19](#)

[Pandemic Preparedness Manual, IFMA](#)

[CDC: Keeping your workplace safe](#)

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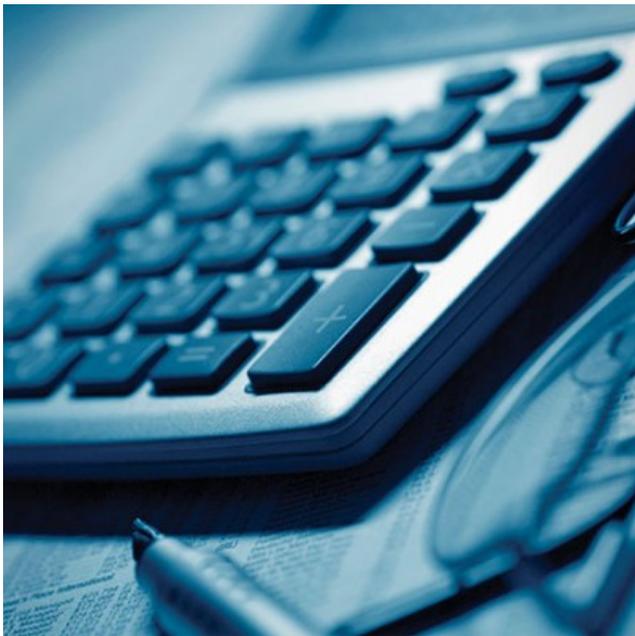
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