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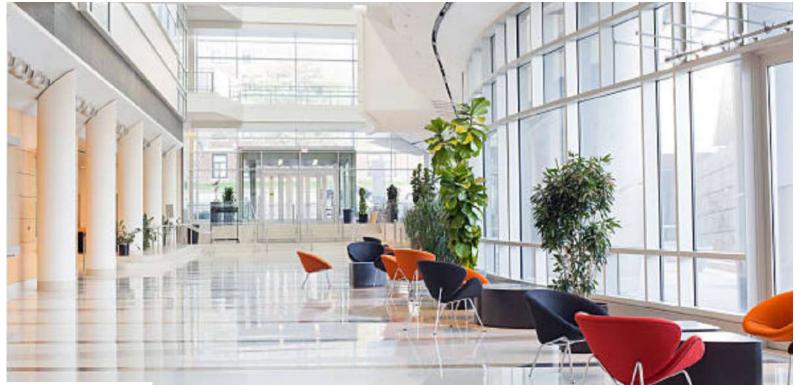
REIMAGINING THE WORKPLACE

BY AMIT PATEL

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Photo courtesy: Getty Images

POST-COVID-19, REIMAGINING THE WORKPLACE

By Amit Patel

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global humanitarian and economic crisis. Organizations are faced with an unprecedented disruption to their businesses, and as they plan to gradually reopen, they first need to imagine a "new workplace normal," post COVID-19.

This paper provides pragmatic and actionable insights on what lies ahead With diligent planning and significant change management, organizations have the opportunity to create a "new workplace normal" that emphasizes employee wellbeing and maintains their corporate culture, while increasing workplace flexibility.

"To fear change is to fear to be challenged. To fear being challenged is to fear growth and new opportunities."

Ty Howard

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INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented massive economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the world's workforce of 3.2 billion people.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) report published in April 2020, "the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated in terms of intensity and expanded its global reach. Full or partial lockdown measures are now affecting almost 2.7 billion workers, representing around 81 percent of the world's workforce."[1] This translates to more than four out of every five employees affected by the lockdowns and stay at home orders. [2]

Countries across the world are making their way towards relaxing COVID-19 lockdowns and a conscientious effort to return to some form of normalcy – and the creation of a new normal. To adapt to the new normal across industries, organizations will have to reimagine how work gets done, and the role of the office.

There is a lot of speculation and conjecture on what the new normal will look like, but, there is little doubt that a new normal will emerge, rather than a return to how things were. This presents organizations with an opportunity to proactively reimagine their workspace – to make it even better than what it was before the COVID-19 crisis. How seamlessly organizations handle this transition will define their success and brand for years to come.
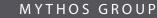
> *"Workers and businesses are facing catastrophe, in both developed and developing economies … We have to move fast, decisively, and together. The right urgency, measures, could make the difference between survival and collapse."*
>
> *Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General*

Reimagining, redesigning, and reconfiguring the existing workplace to create a vibrant, safe, and productive work environment will require diligent planning and significant change management.

As organizations begin to develop strategies to reopen their workplace, we recommend they consider the following four key elements.
1. Redesign the workplace for safety
2. Reimagine and reconstruct how work is done
3. Who do we bring back onsite and when?
4. Rethink and refine operations

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[1] "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Second edition", International Labor Organization, April 07, 2020
[2] "COVID-19 causes devastating losses in working hours and employment", International Labor Organization, April 07, 2020

1. REDESIGN THE WORKPLACE FOR SAFETY

Organizations reopening their businesses are faced with complex challenges. Offices, factories, and distribution centers that are accustomed to bringing hundreds, if not thousands, of people on-site will need to reimagine their existing workplace design, with safety a top priority.

Here are a few important things companies should be thinking about as they redesign their workplace:

Photo courtesy: Getty Images

The health and safety of the workforce should be top priority

Distributed Offices
Organizations should consider moving from a concentrated "centralized" office model to a distributed "hub and spoke" office model. Moving the offices closer to where employees live will reduce their potential usage of crowded public transport and exposure to infectious viruses. Having small groups of people working collaboratively would address the need for connections and improved mental health while minimizing the risks of widespread exposure.

Office Design Layout
Organizations must redesign their workspace to support organizational priorities, promote interactions that cannot happen remotely using digital technologies, and ensure social distancing. The new workplace should incorporate design changes such as moving cubicles further apart, installing plexiglass barriers, creating small private offices and huddle rooms, reconfiguring conference rooms, and repurposing open workspaces.

Organizations should also emphasize hygiene in their redesign efforts. Some organizations may have to retrofit their office buildings' main entrance with automatic doors, bathrooms with touchless soap, and paper dispensers, and potentially upgrade their air filtration system to use ultraviolet light and HEPA filters.

Incorporate New Emerging Technologies
The workplace of the future should incorporate new and emerging technologies as part of its office design layout. A few examples include:
- Temperature sensors installed under employees' desks and in open public spaces to continuously monitor employee temperatures. When an employee's temperature is out of range, it sends an alert to the designated HR representative.
- Employee tracking software to reduce floor space crowding
- Conference rooms equipped with always-on video conferencing for seamless collaboration