

Creating The 'New Normal' Workplace

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With the economy slowly opening up, the gradual return to the workplace will need to be carefully choreographed by a collaborative team of leaders across facility management, real estate, human resources, finance and IT. While HR and IT have awakened to the importance of both the physical and digital workplaces in recent years, finance is now realizing the value real estate and facility management functions bring to not only cost cutting efforts, but workforce productivity and talent retention. In the wake of COVID-19, it's even more clear that office space is not just an amortized asset, but also a strategy tool for growth.

The return to the workplace will present new challenges and opportunities. It offers us a chance to rethink space utilization, employee engagement and well-being, sustainability and how we view and manage the overall real estate portfolio.

Embarking on the path to make the most of this "new normal" and use what we learned during the pandemic to fine tune how we manage the workplace and broader real estate portfolio can leave many organizations overwhelmed. If you're unsure where to start, consider taking these five critical steps:

1. Capture Workplace Data

Successfully preparing to welcome employees back to the workplace and maximize your real estate portfolio require data on your existing portfolio of buildings, including information on the location of each rented or owned property, local conditions (including the latest data on the virus), as well as regional and country information and any current new legal or government regulations. If you haven't already, inventory buildings to gather basic data on both the condition of the exteriors and interiors. Exterior information should include the condition of exterior cladding and the roof. Interior information should include as-built floor plans and major equipment information, along with preventive maintenance schedules and history.

If buildings or floors of a building are leased, make sure you've documented critical dates and current capacity, utilization and occupancy for each floor, as well as required usage across businesses and functions.

You should start thinking about the workplace policies you'll roll out in the months to come. For example, move to all or partial reservable desks, reassign existing workstations

according to new ways of working or assign people to fixed desks/workstations and create schedules for occupancy. With the right technology in place, you should be able to create space plans based on new configurations that follow requirements for physical distancing.

2. Prepare the Workforce

Taking care of employees is more important than ever. Your human resources team should be preparing the workforce for re-entry and leading efforts to alleviate any anxieties they have around returning to the workplace. This includes establishing a detailed change management plan and task force focused on helping employees return to the workplace. You should have a list of employees and contractors returning to the workplace and information on the type of work area/workstation each person requires based on their job category, their assigned phase or shift for moving into the building and a schedule for remote work.

Social distancing strategies should be determined based on the latest scientific findings. Your FM workforce could also be augmented with people who could assume the role of a Covid-19 block captain(s), PPE training experts, quarantine marshals and supply managers.

3. Get Strategic

Through this pandemic, we've seen phenomenal proof that remote working can be effective. As Kate Lister, a leader in the IFMA Workplace Evolutionaries Community, states, "the genie is out of the bottle and can't be put back." Now that they've had success with remote working, some organizations may need less space.

This is the time to execute various 'what-if' utilization scenarios for both short- and long-term planning. James Gorman, CEO of Morgan Stanley, believes his company will more than likely come out of this crisis with a smaller real estate footprint due to a successful remote work program that involved 90 percent of the financial institution's 80,000 employees.

4. Ensure Facilities are Safe

In preparation of the next phase, evaluate and address any issues with air, thermal, water and ventilation quality to ensure employees can safely return to the workplace.

5. Embrace Technology

Both new and proven technologies are available to help you plan, design, construct, manage and operate workplaces. Collecting and analyzing the data needed to create action plans requires a computer-aided facility management system (CAFM) or integrated workplace management system (IWMS) that becomes a centralized repository of existing conditions and other baseline data, and allows for strategic planning, space planning, move management, room booking and financial analysis.

CAFM consists of basic inventory data, maintenance functionality, strategic and tactical planning applications with integration to 3D models of buildings (BIM) or 2D floor plans (CAD). IWMS is ideal for more complex portfolios of leased and owned buildings and offers CAFM functionality plus robust financial capabilities.

If you haven't experimented with or implemented these tools, the time is now. Technology is critical for the planning re-entry to the workspace and allows you to create space plans based on a variety of algorithms that consider various social distancing guidelines and plans. Move management software can also help schedule the movement of workers back into the office.

In addition to successfully operating today, technology will also help you strategically plan for future pandemics, or if the virus cases increase again in the Fall.

Coming out of any crisis, it's important to think about the lessons and opportunities that came to light. As your dream team of facility management, corporate real estate, human resources, IT and finance come together to devise your next steps and new "normal" workplace, remember that cross-team collaboration, strategic planning, technology and data-driven decisions can help create a workspace that is safe and runs more efficiently than it ever has.