Pop-Up Webinar: Key Takeaways

19 May 2020

How are companies rethinking their current space use considering COVID-19 – including potential remodeling – without overcommitting resources in spaces where leases will be expiring in the near term?

- We are currently trying to make exactly those kinds of decisions. Our back pocket is short-term lease extensions, rather than reinvestment. We do not want to reinvest without knowing what our ultimate plan will be. The environment is too uncertain now for us to know what our ultimate go-forward plan will be. Most landlords are willing to discuss short-term solutions with us while we figure things out.

When you are negotiating with landlords, how are you laying out the respective responsibilities of landlord and tenant, particularly regarding safety and protocols for getting into the buildings? Are you putting that into the lease, stating that the landlord is responsible for "x" and the tenant is responsible for "y"?

- We are aware that some landlords are asking that tenants use masks when coming into the building and into the common areas. Once they get into their own spaces, of course, it is up to them. But these issues are being handled more from a communications standpoint vs. outlining it in the lease.

Is anyone back in the office yet? Everyone seems to be moving their timeline for getting back later and later.

- I am back in my office here in Atlanta. But I am the only one here. There is virtually nobody in our building.

- Our organization is not looking at coming back until after Labor Day. We are in no hurry to return.

- Some of the larger organizations out here in Seattle have said there is no need for their employees to come back to the office until October.

- We have only opened our offices in Seoul and Beijing. We have not opened any of our U.S.-based offices.

How did those openings go in Asia?

- We had about 30 percent of our people coming back in. It was based on who needs to come in. So far, it has worked out OK. There have not been any concerns so far from the teams. We have been cleaning the workspaces as needed.

Was it optional for employees to go back to the office?

- It was based on the manager's decision. So, the managers would give a reason for why the employee needed to be in the office. We worked through our facilities team to get the space ready and make sure the employees had the appropriate PPE.

- My sister works for one of the Big Four accounting firms. She has been working from their Jordan office, which has been shut down. To get an office open, the request must go all the way to the very top. The firm is very hesitant now to open any offices.

- Beyond our openings in Asia, we do not have any dates for our other offices. We are waiting for our security team to approve further openings.

- My sister says it is the same at her company. It is the security team making the decisions about reopening offices.

- I can think of five reasons for the delay in opening offices: 1) working from home is working well; 2) concern with liability for any illnesses that would result from going back; 3) uncertainty about space needs of the work force; 4) need to prepare and clean space to ensure proper health conditions; and 5) perhaps companies are still soliciting input from employees about what they want to do. I am surprised to hear these comments about the role of security. Perhaps number six is 'who is deciding these questions?'

- It sounds like security is coming into play more in developing countries.

- Security is involved at our company as part of an overall task force along with HR, Facilities, and the business. We have a team working together to approve openings. Security communicates what is opening, and when.

Is anyone sensing angst in their team members to get back to the office and have more of a regular schedule? I know everyone says working from home is working out fine, but is it, really? Will it continue to work well for an extended period?

- We do not have an answer yet, but we put together a survey that is being deployed today. It is a survey for leaders and teammates to get feedback on their remote working experience. We are also seeking feedback from leaders as to whether their teams are productive. We are doing that survey to help get some answers to these questions.

Our company decided last week that we will not be reopening any of our offices until at least Labor Day. But some associates have decided they want equipment or supplies from their desks. Has anyone had to deal with packing up associates' materials or coordinating pickup of equipment from offices?

- We have allowed employees to get equipment, monitors or even desk chairs. We have been coordinating with our facilities teams to allow people to come in briefly. And we have coordinated with security, so they know not to stop them from coming in.

- We are a manufacturer of medical equipment. We have continued operations for essential employees. For those who are not designated essential, and are working from home, we do not have a timeline for returning to the office. I have a couple of construction projects globally that are

still going. We have allowed staff who are working from home to come into the office a couple of times in preparation for those construction projects. Person A gets a specific two-hour time slot, and person B gets a different two-hour time slot. That is how we have handled it.

For employees returning to pick up equipment, how many people are you allowing in at one time?

- It depends on the size of the facility. For smaller facilities, just one person at a time. We recently let 64 people back in, and that took a week, with two people per time slot. The question we confronted was 'Do we get a moving company, or do we let people handle their own stuff?' A mover would have been faster, but we felt employees might be distrustful of a moving company touching their things. So, we let employees do it themselves.

- The universities are doing the same thing because a lot of kids left stuff in their dorms at spring break. They are allowing students to come back in and get things if they want to do that. But the universities are also packing things up and shipping them if the students prefer that.

What kinds of technology tools are available to help with social distancing, contract tracing and so on?

- There are products in the marketplace for reserving resources, such as conference rooms, and for incorporating physical distancing in configuring seating in workspaces.

- We are working on a signage program that will be distributed globally to each of our offices. We will have dots and arrows on the floor, and signage for what social distancing looks like in conference rooms. We will implement a clean-in and clean-out process. We plan to set up sanitation stations where there are disinfecting wipes or spray. Signage is really what we are going to depend on when we do get back to the office.

- We have three different functions that we put together to help specifically with situations like this. If you are using AutoCAD® for your floor planning, we have the ability to take your floor plan and drop in what we call our 'rings of reality' that will show you social distancing circles around desks. If you place an employee in a certain area, it will show you where you can place other employees and keep social distancing in place. We also have pins for those floor mats that will show where the hand sanitation stands, sinks, cleaning supplies, PPE and anything along that line are located. Employees using the mobile app will know where to find those. A third function, if you are using hoteling desks, is that before anyone can sit down and use the desk they must check in and state that they plan to use the desk. This enables a workplace manager to be aware, and to do a cleanup on that desk if needed.

Is that cleanup before, after, or both?

- It is both. It allows you to schedule janitorial time, a buffer time, in between. A person cannot sit there unless they have checked in using the system.

- It is a low-tech solution, but you could also have a symbol, or tent card, that tells people 'this desk was cleaned on this date.'

If working at home is going so successfully, how much are companies planning to reduce their office space going forward?

- That is a great question!

- That is the 64,000-square-foot question!

- One of the large real estate service providers thinks everybody is going back, which I think is wrong.

- I think half the people will come back but will require twice as much space. You can see how close that is to where we are now.

- Then I think it would become a vicious cycle, since only half the people can be there at a time. The cost per person essentially would double, and then people will want to reduce their square footage.

- But they will be restrained by the six-foot radius until there is a vaccine. At that point, any expansion of space could stop, and even reverse.

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