Pop-Up Webinar: Key Takeaways

4 June 2020

When do you plan to start repopulating your buildings? Some companies are saying September, and some are even saying January.

- In Colorado, we just started opening things. Some companies are starting to go back to work. Each county has a different approach. Here in Denver, our mayor has said companies can start to send employees back to the office if they provide social distancing, and if no more than 50 percent of the work force is back in.
- That makes sense. The success of working from home for most companies has been a big surprise from what I have been hearing. They are not necessarily in a rush to return. There is also the reluctance to be the first company that has a major outbreak or setback. Nobody wants that kind of publicity. So, there is a disincentive to take risks.
- We have employees coming back in three waves based on the criticality of their function and their need to be in the office. The first major wave is scheduled to be no sooner than September 15 but depending on what the social distancing requirements are at that point, we might postpone. When we fully return to the office, we will not have the capacity to fit everyone in at 100 percent occupancy and still follow social distancing guidelines.
- Many of the large tech companies seem to be saying this fall or early next year. They have been working at home in large numbers for a long time, so it is not as big a challenge for them as it is for some other industries.

Is anyone planning to make accommodations for remote employees who are not comfortable returning to the office?

- Our offices are open in most of our locations, but it is a personal choice about coming back in. We tell our employees 'do what works for you and what is comfortable for you.'

What is everyone doing to make their employees feel safe upon return to the office? What are you hearing from employees about safety concerns?

- We are a critical business, a financial services company, with 16,000 employees. We have about 10,000 office workers plus our branch employees. We did an employee survey, and we had an 80 percent response rate. The No. 1 factor for our employees was cleaning and sanitation. We had a much more positive response from the 5 percent of employees who are classified as critical. These staff are already in the office and they have seen the expanded cleaning that we have in place, whereas those who are still working from home are thinking about the old ways of doing things and the kind of landlord cleaning where there might be crumbs still on the floor after two weeks.
- I heard the same thing from another survey discussed in another webinar I attended yesterday: the top concern for employees returning to the office is cleaning.

- Town halls can also be beneficial in communicating to employees. One company I am aware of was doing these twice a week, and the CEO decided that once people were generally comfortable and felt that they were being informed adequately, twice a week is probably too much. This company decided to tell employees everything they knew, and everything they did not know. They wanted the employees to know that they were being over-communicated with honestly and listened to. Communications is probably the main key in getting people to feel comfortable and secure.
- We are changing our cleaning standards wherever we own the facility or control the facility. In a lot of our larger facilities that are leased, it is more landlord driven, but we do get to agree to what the standards are. When someone is suspected or known to be infected, we clean that floor and do a full disinfecting at night. With a large portfolio and a lot of different office spaces, it is very difficult to manage because it is landlord by landlord across the portfolio. Fortunately, we control the cleaning in our largest facilities, and we control the scope.

What physical changes have you made to your office space from a health and safety standpoint or a social distancing standpoint?

- We have changed the procedure for coming into our office. We no longer come in through the front door. We enter through a warehouse. There is a temperature screen that takes your temperature and records the time you arrived. There is a three-question survey. You put on a mask. Around the office there are sanitation stations and various signage. We have signs about how many people can be in the cafeteria at the same time, distancing markings on the floor, and just general postings about office procedures and practices that everyone needs to follow.
- I wonder how people in facilities groups and HR will enforce compliance with personal distancing. We are talking about an eight-hour day. Yesterday I heard one company say they will have community managers who will be responsible for making sure a department, wing or floor is following the guidelines. I think people will tend to get relaxed and forget the need for distancing.
- Our company has been back in the office since May 4. We started with 25 percent of our staff and we are ramping up from there. Childcare is opening this week at 25 percent capacity. Employees must take their temperature upon entry and throughout the day. They are provided with thermometers, hand sanitizer and two washable masks.

Before the coronavirus crisis, our calls were often voice only, and did not always include video. Now, we are using video more often. Is anyone reporting burnout from so many video calls? And will video calls become the wave of the future as people continue to work from home?

- We are design engineers for audio visual, and we deal with conference spaces in offices. From what I am hearing from clients, for most companies it will be a mix of working in an office and working remotely at home. People will not be required to be in the office every day. There are lots of different setups for people working from home, some better than others. We have developed a standardized work-from-home kit: all employees will have the same camera, the same microphone, etc. There have always been office standards, and now there will be work-from-home standards too.

I have read that by improving building [ventilation](#), you can achieve the same level of protection as if 60 percent or more of the building occupants had been vaccinated. Has anyone else heard about this?

- I am aware that building managers and professionals specializing in HVAC are working on [bipolar ionization](#), which basically breaks virus particles apart so they cannot live. Ultraviolet (UV) light is another tool.

What are you doing to assist employees with wellness? There is a lot of stress and uncertainty in the world right now.

- We are keeping in touch with all our staff and trying to keep it as fun as possible. We get on weekly Zoom meetings, and every Thursday we have office-wide calls between our offices in Chicago and New York. They are much like what we are doing now – just talking about what we are doing at home and keeping people excited that things seem to be getting back to normal. We emphasize that once we are all back together again, we will have fun.
- Our HR department has been notifying and alerting people and just keeping them up to date on what our overall health and benefits packages allow them to access. That includes mental health counseling virtually. I think some people are finding that helpful.

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