Key Takeaways

14 April 2020

Where are you in terms of preparing for when people return to work?

- Most of what we're doing now – other than fire drills – is planning for when people go back into our buildings. I am curious as to what other people are doing with that, and especially timelines. How soon are you planning to bring people back, and what percentage of the population are you thinking?

- We have a number of clients who are asking exactly the same question. It's really encouraging to see this come up, because about three weeks ago we were in a place where nobody knew how to start thinking about it. We have turned a corner now, perhaps last week, where people are realizing that at some point we will be going back. That is coming up more now, last week and this week. There are a number of things we are proposing for organizations to do right now, and a number of buckets we are proposing for organizations to think about as sort of a way back to normalcy. We don't think we will ever be normal again, but you can start ramping up the physical workspace. That includes deep cleaning to help persuade people that as far as duty of care goes, the organization has taken steps to disinfect the workplace, especially in common areas and reception areas. You can make elevators and other spaces touch-free; technology is beginning to kick in there. Regarding getting back to a degree of normalcy, we think that will be phased. The critical workers, maybe 15 to 20 percent of the total, will come back first. Some of the elements for success are behavioral, and it will be important to ensure that people are trained to follow various protocols. If there is a meeting of five or six people, everyone does not have to be in the same room, even if they are in the same building. It's all about changing mindsets and behaviors. The key message is to start that planning now to prepare workers for coming back.

- We are doing something very similar. We are starting with a 20 percent return, and then increasing it every three weeks. If there is a reinfection from one of those returning groups, we will return to working from home. We have 95 percent of our staff working at home effectively, so we are not going to jump in with both feet when the states where we operate allow people to return to work.

- I am beginning to see in social media, as perhaps the rest of you are as well, a number of hypothetical concepts emerging from all this. I have a strong view around thinking about it in a human-centric fashion, and from a holistic point of view. Consider the employee journey to work. How are they leaving home? What is their mode of transportation? The journey to work doesn't start at the front door of the place of employment, but at the front door of their house. There is a huge risk for the 10 to 20 percent of employees who might come back first if many of them use public transport. For instance, if they do not own a car, a taxi would be safer than public transport.

Who is responsible for making people follow the rules for masks and gloves in a multi-tenant building? Is it the landlord, or the corporate tenant?

- Shouldn't it be everyone?

- It's whoever sets the rules – building rules or tenant rules.

- If it's a building rule, and the building managers see a tenant's employee violating the rule, they would go to the tenant and say, 'you must make this person leave the building.'

- I can see situations in which different tenant groups might have a different or higher set of rules than the building requires. Either way, the tenant must police their own people.

- I think as an industry we will be significantly challenged, particularly in the mid-term, because we tend to like standards and guidelines, and we tend to deploy policies than can be deployed in a consistent fashion. But it seems we are entering a phase in which rules may not be generally or widely applied across geographies or even across buildings. Just a word of caution that while we often try to establish guidelines that are broadly applied to a great variety of situations, in this current situation we just don't understand everything.

- This entire issue could play out like the green building movement. Landlords did not necessarily pay attention until tenants started demanding green features. Landlords that are out in front of this probably will be able to attract tenants that want the best for their employees and that don't want to have to 'play cop.'

For those who are doing scenario planning, are you assuming masks will be required?

- We are assuming masks will be required, and we are trying to procure them for an early May start.

- We are seriously considering requiring masks for the first few waves. The variable for masks is the availability to others and making sure the medical community has ample inventory first.

What level of testing will be required before people return to buildings? Do we wait until everyone can be tested, or do we go back before that?

- We will be doing screening of employees returning to work. We will be asking: Have you experienced any new cough, sneezing, or shortness of breath in the past 24 hours? We will also do temperature checks. And anyone who has traveled outside of the state cannot return until they have taken the 14-day stay-at-home requirement.

Is the general opinion that working from home will become part of the strategy going forward for companies that have not done it before? What is the percentage of employees who might work remotely?

- It is my belief that it will be a prevalent part of the go-forward plan for everyone. It is now proven, and people will adapt to this. As to the percentage, nobody knows. It will be driven by the business and the type of business that people do – perhaps they need to be adjacent, perhaps they can do it remotely.

- I agree, but just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. We need to make intelligent decisions on this, not knee-jerk reactions. Are you the right personality to work remotely? Is your job a good one for remote work? Does your organization have trust? There's a whole plethora of questions that need to be asked. This shouldn't be just an economically driven decision. We need to think more holistically about it.

- Until there is a vaccination and mass immunization, along with more people recovering from COVID-19, the odds are good that we will continue to have social distancing rules. You will only be able to put so many people in your buildings. We will be limited as to how many people we can fit in the building at one time. Thus, we will be forced to have more people working remotely compared to what we were doing back in February.

- We are seeing a bit of change around adoption of remote work as a workplace strategy. The previous perception was, 'if I can't see them, they're not working.' This is the biggest one that must change. Before, remote working was perceived as a way to save money but going forward we will see it as more of an intentional strategy intended to give something back to the employees. We are also seeing the value of socializing and collaboration, which is very different in the workplace when compared to home. I think people will come to value the workplace more in terms of its social aspect. All these will push workplace strategy to a different level when we do get back.

- It will be very important to coordinate with our building owners in multi-tenant buildings. Our building has converted to touchless and is enforcing that six feet of separation. When one of our turnstiles goes down, there is a huge backup in the lobby. Landlords will control the common areas, and they have the right to do as they see fit and set limits on the number of people. We can make as many rules and regulations as we want for our premises, but you have to go through the lobby to get in.

What are you thinking about indoor air quality? Will employees be willing to go back into a workplace with recirculated air?

- Our team in China is saying there is a lot of concern when going back to buildings with interconnectivity of floors and mechanical systems. In some regions, they opted to turn off the mechanical systems altogether and only occupy facilities where you can open the windows to get fresh air. Think how paranoid you must be to be willing to open the windows to get fresh air in parts of the world with huge air pollution challenges!

- On the facilities management side of things with our buildings, we are concerned that employees are definitely going to be concerned about whether or not the air quality is good and safe. We are increasing outside air volumes through our systems and changing air filters often to reassure employees that they will have good air quality in our spaces.

- Our response to this virus challenge will be part art, part science. How all this works out will be a little different in each facility, in each location. Some people will not be able to come back into the office because they're parents with children at home. Some buildings will be better equipped than others to meet the new requirements. Some people are willing to wear masks, which helps, but how do you reduce the touching of surfaces? And there's risk in coming back too soon: in South Korea, 10 people got the virus all over again when people went back to work.

- We are living in the middle of an experiment, and we're not necessarily sure what the back end of all this will be. Certain things we can predict, but there a lot of 'unknown unknowns' around this. Having conversations like this is really important, even if we do not have all the answers.

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