CORENET GLOBAL
VIRTUAL POP UP
A pop in community for corporate real estate professionals

Pop-Up Webinar: Key Takeaways

22 April 2020

What is your latest thinking about returning to the office?

- We are discussing the timing of re-entry and what that looks like. Irrespective of what local governments say, there will not be any action moving forward to reoccupy our sites until as an organization and employer we feel that we have ticked all the boxes for cleaning and physical distancing. Our density and utilization now must be reworked.

- I am based in Singapore, where we just had an extra four weeks of lockdown thrust upon us. A lot of the contextual paradigms have changed. A lot of my banker friends who thought they were 'essential services' when all this started are working from home. The proportion of the work force designated as essential has been reduced to 15 percent from 20 percent. If they were in the 20 percent before, they are not now. The definition of what is essential has changed. Our fundamental definitions have changed, both from a corporate real estate perspective and a holistic organizational perspective, and we have a new normal.

Are you addressing the 'fear factor' at all? With commutes, you have so many touch points.

- Indeed, the fear factor does not start when you get to the office. It starts when you leave home. What is wrong with allowing people to work from home? To make that decision, we will look at several factors. We will look at their role, their direct reports, and so on. Where is the team based? Is it local, or overseas? It will not be a one-size-fits-all solution. We will give more empowerment to the leaders of the organization to manage their own organizations as they see fit. We see that productivity is not impacted by our not being under one roof. Of course, this is not just a real estate conversation – it involves HR, Legal and other groups. For those who will be working from home permanently, what does that environment look like? Is it the dining room table? Is it a dedicated space? What benefits or recompense would such an employee have? All these are open topics.
- The fear factor varies for different organizations in different locations. For those who have been locked down harder and longer, there seems to be more panic and concern, and there the fear factor could last a long time. In other places, they could get back to normal faster. We need to have a structure around working out who can work from home. It has been easier for some

people than others. In the future, if that is more normal, and if children have gone back to school and partners have gone back to work, how do we move from remote working as an emergency crisis response to something that is a solid platform to help manage future occupancy? We do not necessarily want to reduce our real estate footprint. We could use remote working together with office occupancy to give our people a sense that we have control over the number of people in the office.

Have you been surveying your employees about returning to work?
- Good question. We have one client who unfortunately has shut down all conversation with their employees on anything. They are worried about people panicking. But it is important to ask people how this is going, what they are feeling and to confirm whether our thinking is correct. Are people more fearful? Less? Are they finding it easy to work from home? I wonder if other organizations are being more open than this one is.

- I wonder if there is a way that organizations can use existing data from demographic surveys to identify personality types and in that way bring some insight as to where that fear may be coming from. When I speak to my organization, almost all of them are eager to get back and return to the office. But of course, there must be some who are concerned about coming back. Is there a way to use data to start mapping that?

- For organizations who have good workstyle and employee-engagement surveys, there should be some data that could be worthwhile. Engaging with people has a lot of benefits.

Will the economy affect how much companies are going to be able to spend on all the things that would make for a perfect work environment?
- It will be interesting to see how people redirect finance. A lot of projects have stopped, and they are redirecting money into COVID-19. How much money are they going to spend on the re-entry? Will that re-entry be just the office itself? Or will there be some other scenarios put into place, so people do not have to use public transport? That will be huge for some people. For me, it is a major factor. Companies could create hubs in different suburbs. It will be interesting to see how this plays out.

- Some of this starts to connect with urban infrastructure and how landlords and city planners work together. Individual companies do not necessarily have the ability to deal with all of this. Most of the companies we are talking to do not have funding to make big physical changes.

- One of our clients is a tech company and they are happy with people working from home. Now, instead of having everybody come back when governments say it is OK, they are going to use this as an opportunity to reimagine their workplace and have people continue working from home while they transform their workplace. They do not want employees to come back and feel like we do when we are in the grocery store, worried and wearing masks. They do not want employees to come back and be afraid. They want to give themselves the time to do it right and achieve the right experience. A lot of things will need to be touch-free.

- I know another very large tech company that is looking to dispose of some of their real estate. They are seeing that people can work from home. They are looking at leases coming up and they will just divest of that space. And they will use the cash freed up to help keep people employed.

- It is that whole experience of a day in the life of an employee. Will the government start to regulate reduced numbers of people who can be on a bus or train? And building access – who's coming in, how many people are coming in, and are they well enough to come in? This all starts the moment we walk out our door at home.

- Some countries have bicycle lanes, and that kind of spreads people out. Now, where they park their bikes – often large numbers of them in the same place – is another story.

- I think landlords need to take more responsibility for entry points and for ensuring safety coming into the building.

- We just sent a note to most of our landlords to ask them what they are doing post-COVID-19 to manage entry and exit. I am sure a lot of them will try to push back a lot of responsibility to the tenant.

- We had a call the other day in terms of utilization and space planning. Now, it's the business coming to me to say 'we can contract, we can work from home more, we need something smaller' as opposed to me chasing the business to test their reasoning in terms of utilization. Now, they are coming to me and saying they can work effectively at home! It is quite interesting. The paradigm has certainly changed. The conversation with landlords is becoming less adversarial. I am finding them to be much more flexible as to our requests.

- Our landlords are pushing back and basically saying 'if you want thermal imaging, you should go ahead with it.' They have restricted elevator usage to 1-3 people. That is going to be a challenge, because normally at 0900 we might have 50 to 100 people trying to get on those elevators. We are going to be doing some staggered entry to address this. We will be doing temperature checks, voluntary for employees and mandatory for guests.

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