WHAT WILL THE GREAT WORK FROM HOME EXPERIMENT TEACH US?

DISTRIBUTED WORK: WHO’S ZOOMIN’ WHO?
The corporate real estate community stepped up to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19 through CoreNet Global’s Hackathon. The virtual ideation experience drew more than 1,000 real estate-related professionals from 35 countries to participate in 122 teams to develop collective solutions that go beyond the immediate crisis response — and help ensure the long-term health and well-being of citizens, companies and communities.

This report is a summary of one of six topics addressed in the hackathon. To see the full team reports for each topic, visit: www.corenetglobal.org/hackathonresults

The Challenge

A hackathon, by definition, is a group of individuals convening to solve problems collectively and within a short, defined period of time. Teams were formed and participants convened for a period of less than three weeks during April/May to ideate and explore what comes next in the following key areas:

2. Distributed Work

With government-issued orders to shelter in place across the globe — and corporations shutting offices — employees have been sent home. We are now conducting a worldwide experiment in remote working. What will this experiment reveal? Will it transform workplace strategy? Will companies that were reluctant to embrace remote work before now see it as a viable option? Or will employees be eager to return to their workplaces and be in the physical space with their colleagues again? Will the employer see greater value in one over the other and what may prevail? And will it result in corporations using less traditional real estate?

Challenge: Develop key forecasts and recommendations for corporate real estate professionals as they address how the pandemic will impact where we work going forward.

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Introduction:

Singer Aretha Franklin could never have known how prophetic her words would become when she asked in her mid-1980s hit song, “Who’s Zoomin Who?”

A screen shot with tiled images of 5, 10, 20 or more co-workers (not to mention family members, students and virtual happy hour partakers) will be one of the lasting images of the pandemic. And it’s not just Zoom, of course; video conferencing platforms including GoToMeeting, WebEx, Google Hangout and others have all become a vital part of everyday life.

To frame it more broadly, these systems have enabled distributed work, and, as it has been named, the great work from home (WFH) experiment. What are the lessons from this experiment?

Will it transform workplace strategy? Will companies that were reluctant to embrace remote work before now see it as a viable option? Or will employees be eager to return to their workplaces and be in the physical space with their colleagues again? Will the employer see greater value in one over the other and what may prevail? And will it result in corporations using less traditional real estate?

The Hackathon teams provided great insight and a path forward as they explored these topics.

And as we have seen in other team reports, the future picture they draw is one that may very well be more efficient in terms of space, time and expenses than prior to the crisis.

The Short Term

Distributed work is not new. We can define it as the use of physically separated workplaces to meet the requirement of business continuity for enterprises that enable a balance of productivity and innovation, employee engagement and experience, and psychological wellness and physical safety.

Through CoreNet Global’s surveys during the pandemic, we know that the increased reliance on distributed work will last beyond the current crisis.

- Ninety-four percent of end users think that expanded use of remote working will last beyond the current crisis (up from 89 percent in the previous survey)
- Ninety-four percent of end users surveyed think that expanded use of virtual meetings (e.g., vs. face-to-face meetings) will last beyond the current crisis (unchanged from the previous survey)
- Sixty-nine percent of end users surveyed say that their company’s real estate footprint will shrink as a result of increased work from home (up from 51 percent in the previous survey)

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When we return to the office, we will not return to pre-COVID real estate density. And that will have immediate short-term ramifications:

- More fluid workplaces will take shape as businesses understand how to incorporate work from home into business as usual.
- Technology will have to be upgraded to aid flexible workplaces, and provide operational tools that enable teams to work together more collaboratively, flexibly, and securely.
- Data on desk occupancy will be collected for maximum efficiency, resulting in an audit and re-plan of business unit space allocation, depending on the desires and requirements of business moving forward when they start to return to the office.
- Employers and employees will jointly develop work from home ratios. This could mean having fewer people requiring fixed office space, where it would be mandated for staff to work from home more than once a week.

The Long Term

The creation of a multi-location hybrid workplace will not eliminate the use of traditional offices as a component of an overall workplace strategy.

Offices will remain a place to convene, integrate, develop culture, collaborate face-to-face and efficiently advance operational and strategic objectives.

Corporate real estate leaders may draw inspiration from the hospitality industry in creating spaces that bring people together.

Some ongoing contextual re-imagination of real estate, technology, work and management is going to be necessary across all industries. We know from surveys that CoreNet Global has conducted during the pandemic that 69 percent of corporate real estate executives are predicting a smaller corporate footprint as a result of remote work. This will be underpinned by the realization that physical workspaces currently house the collaborative communities that foster talent, enable productivity and drive innovation via cross-disciplinary encounters, and that some form of investment into physical or digital spaces or practices that engender the above will be fundamental to the success of any DW model.

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Companies exist as both economic entities and as part of a social ecosystem or the fabric of a complex society. We want to spend time with each other, and casual office interactions are highly valued for creating a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Serendipitous connections are likely facilitated by proximity, but as workforce trends advance, so too will technology that enables communication and collaboration.

Over time, the utilization of seats in the office will remain diminished as WFH is accepted. As cost pressure continues, CRE will be unable to accommodate both choice and dedicated seats in the office. Desk sharing will emerge as a sensible workplace strategy, especially in the post-vaccine world. In anticipation of future pandemics, improvements in cleaning protocols and smart building technology advances will support this new corporate-provisioned workplace full of various settings available for the use of all.

Management Changes Forced By Distributed Work

As employees spend less time in traditional workplaces, we anticipate noticeable changes to management training and styles. If work is distributed, so too will management be distributed. Expect restructured org charts (more freelance/gig workers) and the meaning of “going to,” “being at,” “leaving work” and “overtime” will shift.

Leadership behaviors were changing long before the pandemic. Command and control management had given way to coaching and support, with increasing emphasis on creating an environment where employees could do their best work.

Those skill sets will be needed now more than ever, and leaders will need to develop new skills to become exceptional communicators leveraging a diverse style that can adapt to the personal needs and situations of their team. Establishing trust and transparency amongst the leader and team will be paramount to ensuring a high functioning team. Employers will need to arm leaders with the tools and resources necessary to manage a distributed workforce. This includes access to more readily available and on-demand surveys and tools to allow for continuous feedback loops. Leaders will be asked to navigate through the blurred lines of their team’s personal and professional lives, seeking out new ways to create social connections. Leaders will leverage new productivity metrics and performance evaluation criteria.

There will be clear delineation between focused work and collaborative work. Human resources, procurement, health and safety, risk management, and technology will adjust to support distributed work practices.

Every company will evolve in response to changes in workforce supply/demand, labor demographics, products and services markets, brand, culture, local labor norms and regulations, community relations, and technological maturity.

The skills required to work in the office as part of a team are different than the skills required to work in a mix of settings with less face-to-face interaction.

To get the most out of distributed working, CRE will need to work closely with HR to help increase and advance the skills of employees. HR will need to support training the companies’ workforce toward improved emotional intelligence, resilience and agility. This will ensure that the individuals within the business have the right personal toolkit to allow them to work away from the office and thrive.

Distributed strategies offer the following advantages

For employees:
- Increased satisfaction due to the choice of workplace
- Accommodation of different lifestyle choices
- Support health, safety and wellbeing

For real estate:
- Reduction in cost of real estate
- Reduction in long-term real estate obligations
- Improved financial reporting results (accounting changes)

For human resources:
- Enables access to a larger and more geographically dispersed labor pool
- A tool for recruiting and retention

For business:
- Reduced concentration of risk: improved disaster recovery and business continuity

For the environment:
- Reduced pollution resulting from less traffic and transit congestion
- Potential reductions in business travel

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Culture will need to be measured in a different way and leaders will need to be more visible and seen to be responding to the changing demand of their workforce. Performance measures linked to employee experience and culture will be used to build agile companies with wellbeing at the heart. Leaders will need to respond to employee activism and be seen to cultivate a ‘listening culture’.

Some businesses will already be moving in this direction but for others this will require a large pivot to support the ‘new normal.’ Having a strong relationship between CRE and HR has never been more important.

Keeping The Connection

Key takeaways from COVID-19 that will be incorporated into how we work moving forward include maintaining employee connection (mental and broadband) and engagement.

In the crisis stage of COVID-19, many employees reported increased levels of focus, flexibility and freedom, resulting in a surge of engagement and productivity. However, as enterprises begin to formally manage distributed work, worrying signals are emerging, with employees feeling increasingly socially isolated, demotivated, overwhelmed and lacking in purpose. Loneliness is the single greatest predictor of mental illness.

Employee Experience and Engagement (EEE) typically measures the strength of the mental and emotional connection employees feel toward their places of work. It predicts how hard people will work and how long they’ll stay with the company. It often correlates with improved productivity and profitability.

The data indicates employees are missing social interactions with their colleagues. Collaborative interaction is vital to innovative solutions, and effective and efficient task execution. In identifying appropriate DW models, enterprises need to ensure their spaces and technologies enable collaboration across the DW mix.

Additional Thoughts:

- People are now interested in flexible working arrangements, the ability to choose how best to work productively, blend work/life priorities, supported by right tech tools and leaders/teams/people trained in the management of distributed working. Many people have taken a huge, and sudden, leap of faith to remote working; greater organizational transparency will cement stronger trust levels with people.
- Remote working has implications on employee productivity, data security, employee loyalty and company culture. It is essential to design and implement a plan/policy to action new virtual teaming routines and protocols.
- Populations of employees have now experienced less or no commuter time that has translated into productive work time and family time. Teleconferences have been organized across states and time zones, reducing the previous regarded need of traveling for face-to-face meetings. Savings will occur from reduced travel for businesses and employees.
- The main office can now become a brand and culture hub to train, hold large meetings/events and place to bring clients while individual focus work can be completed remotely -- at home or in smaller suburban satellite locations.
- Many corporate real estate executives will adopt a combined real estate strategy of fixed and flexible real estate.
- Short-term leases in managed workspaces in the suburbs might see a boom which has many ancillary benefits like reduced commute time and ease of accessibility to employees, while providing interaction for ideas sharing and socializing.
- Long-term lease agreements will see an inclusion of ‘pandemic’ force majeure and rent abatement clauses.
- The social and economic shifts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic will change how work is accomplished. This change will pressure much of our built infrastructure that was designed and constructed for a different time and different practices. And, real estate, which has long lagged behind the accelerating speed of businesses, will evolve too.
Data Points

The teams offered various estimates and statistics:

• 25-30% of the workforce will work at home on a multiple-days-a-week basis by the end of the 2021.

• According to SHRM, Society of Human Resource Management, 67% of employers were considering a work at home policy (March 2020).

• In 2018, IWG, International Workplace Group found that 70 percent of professionals work remotely at least one day a week, while 53 percent work remotely for at least half of the week.

• On April 13, 2020 Gartner published a survey that involved 317 CFOs. About 25 percent of those surveyed expect 10 percent of their employees will remain remote, 17 percent expect 20 percent will remain remote, 4 percent expect 50 percent will remain remote, and 2 percent expect over 50 percent of employees now working from home to permanently work from home even after the pandemic subsides.

• It is estimated that 25-30% of the workforce will work at home on a multiple-days-a-week basis by the end of the 2021, according to a report from Microsoft.

Concluding Thoughts:

The “old world” and the “new world” will exist in common. These parallel universes combined provide a place for work to be accomplished and for companies to produce services, products and revenue.

Each type of space will have its purpose. Mentorship, social and learning goals may best be met in an office where people come together. Work/life balance, business continuity, health and environmental concerns may be better served by other, alternative workplaces. Maybe the term “alternative” workplace will fall out of use. The alternative of the past will become the new typical workplace and a traditional office will become the “alternative.”

Work from home is currently playing a significant role in the conversation even though it is only one element of distributed work. Additional elements include flex space and co-working and other places, such as cafes.

This global pandemic revealed that not everyone’s WFH experience is the same and individual circumstances need to be taken into consideration. Dependent care, technology infrastructure and space all play a role in the WFH experience. The effectiveness of CRE organizations in driving a safety-first agenda will be a key driver in bringing back employee confidence to “return to work.” Until that confidence is reestablished, digital water cooler interactions and WFH will likely persist.

COVID-19 has provided the “burning platform” from which to launch a full-scale change program related to distributed work. There was little to no time to thoughtfully implement time tested change methods. Employers and employees simply reacted to the best of their abilities to cope with the circumstances and knowledge at their disposal.

The adaptive reuse of retail and hotel buildings will diminish the role enjoyed by traditional office real estate. Fewer people will “go to work” like they used to. We will flex over the work week (perhaps a shorter or longer work week) from home to office to co-working.

Work anywhere anytime has arrived, and results-oriented management will prevail. Technology has enabled it. The health of the planet, employee preferences, cost structures, productivity, resilience and the speed of business demand it.

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<tr>
<td>Hub + WFH</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single Hub office. All other employees WFH.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suits sales and consulting firms.</td>
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| Hub + Flex        |
| Single Hub office. All other employees work from Flex sites. |
| Suits mid-large firms with geographically spread workforces. |

| Hub + Multiple Conventional Solutions |
| Single Hub office for ~ 40% employees. Additional capacity split across multiple conventional offices |
| Suits mid-large firms wanting activity-based working and client interface. |

| Only WFH |
| 100% WFH. |
| Suits mid-size (under 50 people) and start-ups. |

| Only Flex |
| 100% Flexible Solutions (Co-working). |
| Suits mid-size (under 50 people) and start-ups. |

| De-Densified Office |
| Retrofitted work space accommodating ‘Social Distancing Norms’ |
| Suits corporates and back-end work with confidentiality and proprietary needs. |

Source: TEAM 2
Teams & Participants

Distributed Work – 1
Team Lead: Joshua Beer, Avison Young, IL, USA
Team Members:
Leandro Caramel, IWG, Brazil
Renato Fusaro, Cargill, Brazil
Felipe Senisterra, Colliers International, Canada
Suzanne Puccino, WSP Global, Inc, Canada
Jose Sanchez- Concha, Gensler, Costa Rica
Angie Earlywine, LIC, MO, USA
Carolyn Thompson, Training Systems Inc., MO, USA

Distributed Work – 2
Team Lead: Amanda Chuback, MovePlan Group, Hong Kong
Team Members:
Jennifer Henderson, Standard Chartered Bank, Hong Kong
Laura Peterson, MovePlan, Hong Kong
Richard Claydon, roundPegz, Hong Kong
Ameeth Raja, CBRE SOUTH ASIA PVT LTD, India
Ashish Batra, Paytm, India
Mitesh Kaul, Jones Lang LaSalle, India
Mark Moore, MTM Solutions Pte Ltd, Singapore
Sean Lynch, The Instant Group, Singapore
Sharon Barbosa Januario, Cognizant, Philippines

Distributed Work – 3
Team Lead: Glenn Turnham, ANZ, Australia
Team Members:
Pranaypratap Singh Mala, RICS School of Built Environment, India
Wendy Jones, Wendy Jones Ltd, New Zealand
Jade Lim, Colliers, Singapore
Elly Dalziel, Mirvac, Australia
Jeral Tinnin, Hassell, Australia
Joey Sun, Philips, China
Nicki Bilbrough, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, New Zealand

Distributed Work – 4
Team Co-Leads:
Heidi Blicharski, Discovery Inc, United Kingdom
Cristiano Testi, TP Bennett LLP, United Kingdom
Team Members:
Francesca Jack, AECOM, United Kingdom
Gillian Burgess Smith, United Kingdom
Justin Conceicao, Unispace Global, United Kingdom
Katherine Cooke, Unilever, United Kingdom
Martin Silvester, Arcadis, United Kingdom
Agnieszka Fleszinska, AECOM, United Kingdom
Gayatri Kunhiraman, Avison Young, United Kingdom

Distributed Work – 5
Team Lead: Peggie Rathe, Leesman, Finland
Team Members:
Johan van der Walt, Uniliver, South Africa
Adriana Montes, United Kingdom
Alex Harvey, Sorcester, United Kingdom
Alex Rowley, BGI, United Kingdom
Anup Patel, Seven, United Kingdom
Caroline Waldron, HPE, United Kingdom
Chris Bunker, Royal Bank of Canada, United Kingdom
Lilian Hubbes, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Netherlands

Distributed Work – 6
Sponsor: Colliers
Team Lead: JanJaap Boogaard, Colliers, United Kingdom
Team Members:
Francisco Vazquez, 3G Smart Group, España
Artem Poliakov, Biometric Technologies OÜ, Estonia
Ed Payongayong, Shell, Netherlands
Valentina Tanjala, ING, Netherlands
Regina Johnson, Open Society Foundations, United Kingdom
Ronen Journo, WeWork, United Kingdom
Richard Boyle, The Gap Partnership - Negotiation Consultancy, United Kingdom

Distributed Work – 7
Team Lead: Chris LaPata, MCR, BHDP Architecture & Planning, NC, USA
Team Members:
Barbara Greenberg, changeship, OR, USA
Bill Hansen, Flexport, CA, USA
Bob Varga, SmithGroup, MI, USA
Brian Columbus, Netrix, LLC, TX, USA
Burcin Kaplanoglu, Oracle, IL, USA
Carlinn Cunningham, Uber Technologies, OR, USA
Candace Todd, HOK, PA, USA
Ashley Sineath, Duke Energy, NC, USA
Ashu Kaushal, Colliers International, OH, USA

Distributed Work – 8
Team Lead: Rajeev Thakur, Newmark Knight Frank, WA, USA
Team Members:
Chris Grinsted, Menlo Security, CA, USA
Christina Cooper, Knotel, NY, USA
Danijel Pocanic, NELSON, NY, USA
David Bergeron, T3 ADVISORS, CA, USA
Laura Lee Ross, Teknion, Canada
Deirdre Fenlon, Karndean, NY, USA
Dina DiTommaso, Creative Office Pavilion, MA, USA
Steve Fontaine, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, MA, USA
Dan Leonardi, Genpact, CT, USA

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Distributed Work – 9
Team Lead: Jeremy Done, Vestian, NC, USA
Team Members:
John Friel, RefineRE Benchcore, CT, USA
Doug Sitzes, AECOM, CA, USA
Kenneth Gries, Firmenich, NJ, USA
Elizabeth Baudler, Hendrick, GA, USA
Eric Johnson, Allsteel, AZ, USA
Eric Linebarger, HOK, MO, USA
Géraud Biebuyck, Self-employed, USA
Andy Bade, Oracle, CO, USA
David M Harris, Cushman & Wakefield, CA, USA

Distributed Work – 10
Team Lead: Jack Weber, Gresham Smith, TN, USA
Team Members:
Gordon Pfeil, Corporate Interiors, PA, USA
Greg Schementi, Cushman & Wakefield, IL, USA
Heather Turner Loth, Epstein Uhen Architects, WI, USA
Sherri King Parente, HOK, USA
Elisa Konik, Cushman & Wakefield, CA, USA
Tony Fedel, Clarox, GA, USA

Distributed Work – 11
Sponsor: RefineRE Benchcore
Team Lead: Peter Holland, RefineRE Benchcore, CT, USA
Team Members:
Kirsten Hall, City of Peoria, IL, USA
Kristin Reed, Herman Miller, CA, USA
Lenette Pasada Howard, Niantic, Inc, CA, USA
Lindsey Walker, Little Diversified Architectural Consulting, FL, USA
Michael Marks, Open Society Foundations, NY, USA
Nasim Yalpani, Dropbox, CA, USA
Mark Nisbett, People Places and Spaces, CT, USA
Matt Weiner, LiquidSpace, FL, USA
Antonia Cardone, Cushman & Wakefield, CA, USA
Lisa Pool, Perkins+Will, MN, USA

Distributed Work – 12
Team Lead: Melissa E. Marsh, Savills and PLASTARC, USA
Team Members:
Melanie Lowe, Salesforce, CA, USA
Melodee Wagen, Workspace Strategies Inc., KY, USA
Robert Teed, ServiceNow, CA, USA
Sharon Aucoin, HPE, USA
Michelle Cleverdon, Colliers, CA, USA
Greg Lindsay, New Cities Foundation, Canada
Sara Escobar, Netflix, CA, USA
Amy Rosen, PLASTARC, USA

Distributed Work – 13
Team Lead: Jan Johnson, MCR.w, Allsteel, IL, USA
Team Members:
Nour Abi Samra, Salesforce, CA, USA
Preet Kaur, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, CA, USA
Quentin Smith, USA, TX, USA
Rachelle Vopal, First National Bank of Pennsylvania, PA, USA
Rik Ekstrom, HUL, NY, USA
Sarah Oppenhuizen, HOK, IL, USA
Stephen Swicogood, Genesler, GA, USA
Karen Heinitz, CBRE, CA, USA
Mike Tragseiler, Hixson Inc, OH, USA
Charles Meyers, Wells Fargo, CA, USA
Nick Mancini, Milpitas, CA, USA

Distributed Work – 14
Team Co-Leads:
Ryan Turner, RefineRE Benchcore, CT, USA
Tammy Lindberg, Workplace Solutions, CO, USA
Team Members:
Jenna Anglin, Chapman Construction/Design, MA, USA
Suki Reilly, MovePlan, MA, USA
Shannon Nagel, LiquidSpace, GA, USA
Tricia Wackerly, Workplace Solutions, CO, USA
Tracy Riggan, Oracle, IL, USA
Dennis Murphy, Tektron, NY, USA

Distributed Work – 15
Team Lead: Renee Ovrut, MUFG Union Bank, MA, USA
Team Members:
Zachary Flora, Center for Active Design, NY, USA
Elo Olodile, VergeSense, CA, USA
Stuart Thompson, TD Ameritrade, TX, USA
Jack Hall, Chapman Construction/Design, MA, USA
Johanna Rodriguez, Savills, WA, USA
John H. Vivadelli, AgilQuest Corporation, VA, USA
Keith Peske, Colliers, NJ, USA
Holly Ellis, Capital One, USA

Distributed Work – Australia Chapter
Team Lead: Bryan Froud, JLL, Australia
Team Members:
Maria Russo-Fama, BGIS, Australia
Julie Huynh, Queensland, Department of Employment, Australia
Helen Baker, Allianz, Australia
Catherine Sullivan, Telstra, Australia
Tom Pullinen, Pullinen Property Group, Australia

Distributed Work – Carolinas Chapter
Team Lead: Jenna Geigerman, Citrix, NC, USA
Team Members:
LaMonte Johnson, Atrium Health, NC, USA

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Abdul Khan, Cisco, NC, USA  
Caitlin Chandler, Cushman & Wakefield, NC, USA  
Carrie Reneger, Gensler, NC, USA  
Josh Vallimont, DPR, NC, USA  
Matt Shelton, Bandwidth, NC, USA  
Ana Marshall, Red Hat, NC, USA  
Irene Vogelsong, Perkins & Will, NC, USA  
Courtney Fain, Little, NC, USA  
Jessika Douglas, Heapy, NC, USA

Distributed Work — Midwest Chapter  
Team Lead: Jennifer Sommers, Haworth, MN, USA  
Team Members:  
Don Williamson, HDR, MN, USA  
Dan Herman, Fluid Interiors, MN, USA  
Danielle Hermann, OPN Architects, IA, USA  
Phil Kluesner, Avison Young, MN, USA  
Tim Vennie, All State Insurance, MN, USA  
Melissa Jancourt, TAC design, MN, USA

Distributed Work — New England Chapter  
Team Lead: Stephen Elias, Citizens Bank, MA, USA  
Team Members:  
Aurora Cammarata, NELSON, MA, USA  
Frank Cantwell, William B Meyer, MA, USA  
Steven Dohen, National Grid, MA, USA  
George Hadjiannis, Converse, MA, USA  
Tara Martin, Dyer Brown, MA, USA  
Sara Ross, Dyer Brown, MA, USA  
Matt Scimone, AIS, MA, USA  
Melodee Wagen, Workplace Strategies, MA, USA  
Adrienne Fitzgerald, Dyer Brown, MA, USA  
Stephen Mancuso, Philips, MA, USA

Distributed Work — New York City Chapter  
Team Lead: Thomas Baade-Mathiesen, Altanova, NY, USA  
Team Members:  
Dale Schlather, Cushman & Wakefield, NY, USA  
Deidre Buzzetto, Lenovo, NY, USA  
Gina Rizzo, Herman Miller, NY, USA  
James Camille, Blackrock, NY, USA  
Kate Wieczorek, Ted Moudis Associates, NY, USA  
Kimberly Smith, Knoll, PA, USA  
Kristin Liu, Syska Hennessy Group, NY, USA  
Lou D’Avanzo, Cushman & Wakefield, NY, USA  
Marcus Rayner, Colliers International, NY, USA  
Paul Darrah, Google, NY, USA  
Pay Wu, Cushman & Wakefield, NY, USA  
Sarah Brown, Capitol One, NY, USA  
Vito Bacarella, Cushman & Wakefield / UBS

Distributed Work — Southeast Florida Chapter  
Team Lead: Mario Anicama, Oracle, FL, USA  
Team Members:  
John Lobus, Cisco, FL, USA  
Juan Gallardo, Colliers, FL, USA  
Miles Glascock, JLL, FL, USA  
Genevieve Janelle, Steelcase, FL, USA  
Wilson Martini, Diageo, FL, USA

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For more information, contact:

Hackathon Project Manager: Sonali Tare, Senior Director, Content Experience, CoreNet Global
Email: stare@corenetglobal.org
Phone: +1 404 589 3206

Hackathon Editor: Tim Venable, Senior VP, Research and Content Development, CoreNet Global
Email: tvenable@corenetglobal.org
Phone: +1 404-589-3221

Media Relations: David Harrison
Email: david@harrisoncommunications.net
Phone: +1 410-804-1728

Georgia Pacific Center
133 Peachtree Street
Suite 3000
Atlanta, GA 30303 U.S.
+1 (404) 589-3200
www.corenetglobal.org

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