BACK TO WORK: INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERIOR ENVIRONMENT
A Reflection for Returning to Work Post COVID-19

"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." — Albert Einstein

During these unprecedented times in the modern workplace, creating safe and agile environments for our team and community has quickly transitioned from trend to survival. Accountability, flexibility, integration of technology and adaptation are themes that will shape our landscape like never before. We all must learn to plan for the unpredictable, and the journey into the unknown starts with the first step — a successful return to work.

In preparing our firm for coming back amidst the pandemic, we turned to our experience in project management, tapped into industry resources and leaned heavily on the fundamentals of design thinking. Focusing on our **physical spaces**, **social interactions**, **personal care and wellbeing,** we created what we believe is a holistic approach in mitigating disruption and fostering change agency.

However, if the past few months have taught us anything, our firm does not stand alone. Improving the health and vitality of our community takes a collective effort. We are sharing these insights in the hopes that they might inspire other companies through this challenging time and encourage strategic preparation in the face of these anomalous organizational shifts.

PHYSICAL SPACES
Isolation shines a bright light on all the ways our physical spaces affect our health and wellbeing. In the return to work, we believe it is important to recognize how individuals, as well as the design community, will make a direct impact on the cleanliness and vitality of these spaces.

Proactive Communication. Naturally, there will be insecurity and anxiety surrounding entering the traditional office environment and working together again. It only takes moments on social media to recognize that the entire workforce has been considering the "new normal." Tapping into these ideas can be a source for insight and inspiration in imagining the evolution of our environments. Proactive communication can both ease feelings of uncertainty and foster this collective creativity.

- **Take the pulse of your team –** Send out a [team-wide survey](#) to get a clear view of their ideas and concerns.

- **Encourage feedback at all levels –** Create a digital "suggestion box." Encourage the use of chat boards during virtual meetings. Vet any potential "action plans" with team members at varying levels in your organization.

- **Be transparent from the top down –** Have leadership in the organization provide consistent updates through daily briefs, company updates or "fireside chats."

Responsive Action. Consider the immediate steps you can take that will be most impactful to your team in the initial phases of a return. This begins with an evaluation of your existing office space. Identify "hot-spots" that are frequently touched, heavily trafficked and overly populated. Micro-adjustments in these areas can significantly help protect your people and mitigate fear.

- o **Implement office-wide cleaning protocols –** Put a CDC recommended cleaning and sanitation plan in place for workstations, conference rooms, reception desks and social/common areas at regular intervals throughout the day.

- o **Encourage individual participation –** Place "sanitization stations" with cleaning supplies in "hot spots" and provide each team member with a "welcome back kit" that might include sanitizer, a mask and gloves.

- o **Improve your air quality –** Introducing UV lights to air handlers will help purify air and contribute to a safe and healthy indoor environment.

- o **Display visual cues throughout your space –** Creating new habits takes time and repetition. Remind everyone interacting in your workplace to do their part with clear wayfinding and signage.

Resiliency Planning. The speed at which COVID-19 disrupted the traditional office environment proved even further that the only certainty with the future of our physical spaces is uncertainty. Agility, adaptability and flexibility in design will become paramount as we conceive what resiliency means in our altered landscape. As design professionals better understand the long-term implications to design and space planning, we anticipate an emphasis on a variety of elements.

- o **Restructuring floorplans –** The "six-feet" rule may be here to stay and will almost certainly inform future office configurations. Determine what is possible within your current or intended footprint and work arrangements.

- o **Rethinking air-filtration systems –** We may start to see more operable windows in buildings allowing for fresh airflow. Biophilic design, bringing more plants indoors, creates another way to improve air quality naturally.

- o **Integrating technology and AI –** Office spaces will likely let technology handle some of the heavy lifting with touchless entrances, voice control, embedded technology and modified elevator accessibility.

- o **Emphasis on materiality –** Antimicrobial materials used in hospitals and laboratories may become more prevalent in commercial offices, placing a much stronger preference towards smooth surfaces that are easy to clean versus textured or porous ones that could harbor germs.

- o **Building in more flexibility –** The way we construct and use space all together will need to be more adaptable and equipped to manage the unknown. We may see a spike in technology-driven, manufactured construction solutions that allow for more flexibility than conventional methods.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

While the circumstances have shifted, it is in our nature to crave interaction with one another. Furthermore, the socialization, in-person collaboration and knowledge sharing that office environments encourage, remain critical to engaging work. The challenge now is how to foster connection while mitigating contagion.

Proactive Communication. Trust between firm leadership and team members is more paramount than ever. It is not enough to say it is safe to return to work without some way to back up that claim--we will have to demonstrate it. Fostering an environment where everyone feels secure enough to interact with one another will require thoughtful messaging combined with visible and quantifiable measures.

- o **Lead by example -** Show your team and visitors that you are being mindful and respectful of your space and theirs. If you ask your team to wear PPE, plan to do so too. If you ask them to disinfect regularly, let them see you doing the same. Remember that actions always speak louder than words.

- o **Mind your language –** When we are speaking, the words we use to describe the distancing measures are significant. For example, pivoting to describe the 6-foot distance order to "physical" distancing versus "social distancing" can help to reinforce safe protocols without discouraging sociability.

Responsive Action. While social interactions may look different going forward, commitment to servicing clients and maintaining company culture must remain a priority. Flexibility will be key a component of success with social interactions in the return to work. Seek to strike a balance between safe space and room to reconnect.

- o **Schedule occupancy in shifts –** Review and adjust work from home (WFH) policies and consider scheduling in-office shifts, spacing people out while still allowing for access to the tools, resources, and visible social connections in the workplace.

- o **Provide clear visibility –** Create a check-in/check-out procedure with your team so you can track the number of people occupying your space. Consider posting that list in a visible location so people know where they can find one another at any given time.

- o **Rethink your communal spaces –** Determine the appropriate density in these spaces. Limit the number of seats in a conference room to half the occupancy and encourage virtual meetings as much as possible. Stagger meal shifts in breakrooms or cafes.

- o **Continue tapping into virtual tools –** Utilize digital platforms to host virtual meetings and collaborations. Consider diversifying large team meetings with partial in-person and remote attendance. Regardless, be sure to share digital meeting collateral and agendas in advance to keep everyone on track.

- o **Expand your team's network –** Encourage connecting with thought leadership groups, professional organizations and industry networks. Many organizations have been curating virtual content and expanding learning opportunities to foster this valuable type of engagement.

Resilient Planning. In the long-term we will be faced with considering the ways in which we fortify company culture and maintain connection in the event of a future crisis. Planning, infrastructure and a cohesive strategy will help prepare the collective group for any potential disruption.

- o **Manage the crisis before it happens –** Re-evaluate the ways that you address crisis management in training, coaching, and onboarding as a result of the pandemic. Roles and responsibilities for team administrators may begin to morph as we learn new ways to support interaction outside of the physical workplace.

- o **Build a technology infrastructure –** A strategic technology plan goes beyond the ability to meet digitally. View your IT resources, software, and hardware, as a cohesive platform that can assist in improving business functions, streamlining workflow and fostering meaningful interactions wherever your team is located.

PERSONAL CARE + WELLBEING

COVID-19 is not a crisis confined to the workplace. The pandemic has disrupted almost every aspect of our lives. Routines have changed rapidly. Access to everyday needs is still limited. Many are facing challenges concerning dependents, household income, and shifting obligations. All of these stressors can be detrimental to performance and job satisfaction—directly impacting the bottom line. Now more than ever, investing in the care and wellbeing of the individual will significantly affect profitability and the overall vitality of the firm.

Proactive Communication. Empathy, trust and an understanding will help leaders navigate the individual needs of their people. Keep in mind that not only are personal situations complex, everyone has varying and nuanced communication styles.

- o **Acknowledge the sensitivities of the situation –** There is a great deal of vulnerability involved in the personal care and wellbeing and remaining sensitive to the individual and their experiences outside of the workplace is key. Work to eliminate feelings of shame or fear with the current mental, physical, and emotional effects of this experience.

- o **Foster a cycle of understanding and feedback –** Consider the ways you are relaying information to your team and ensure there is an element of inclusivity to messages with a high priority. Allow for one-on-one check ins intended to share personalized feedback and ensue each team member has an outlet to connect and communicate within the overall team structure.

Responsive Action. As we return to work it is crucial to remain aware that personal actions create longstanding results. Empowering team members to "own" their individual impact can go a long way in collective improvement. The whole is greater than the sum of our parts.

- o **Employee awareness and support –** Ensure team members are aware of all current company benefits and can access key documentation virtually. If team members begin to feel stressed or overwhelmed, make them aware if there is a policy in place and/or assigned teammate for them to seek help.

- o **Focus on cleanliness –** Promote individual hygiene efforts such as handwashing and respiratory awareness. Avoid touchpoints where possible and discourage the sharing of phones, desks, and equipment. Remind them that this is a team effort and every safe action counts.

- o **Healthy habits –** Encourage team members to participate in physical activity for a minimum of 20 minutes a day, allow time for fresh air, limit screen time and take to metal breaks to refresh the mind.

Resilient Planning. Changing our behavior is ultimately up to each of us as individuals. However, firms have a tremendous opportunity to help their employees see the value of adopting heathier habits so that they can lead healthier and ultimately, more resilient lives. Smart design choices, wellness programming, financial planning are all ways companies can prepare their teams to weather future crisis.

- o **Increased investment in outdoor spaces –** Dynamic community spaces in offices has been trending upward with the addition of terraces, roof-top decks and patios. There is now even more incentive to encourage fresh-air and physical activity.

- o **More robust wellness programming –** We imagine we will see more companies providing preventative health and wellness programming. Not only is physical exercise is proven to increase immune system strength, but studies unanimously show that wellness programming boosts the bottom line.

o **Designing healthier buildings -** Smart design can not only decrease the rate of sickness and alleviate symptoms of illness, it can also improve mental functions, outlook, and mood. Vet your building's healthy status through an agreed-upon industry standard like the WELL Building Standard®. Consider adapting these proven healthy practices into your space.

o **Stronger benefit offerings –** We see healthcare offerings becoming even more competitive with telehealth becoming a standard. Smart companies will consider the overall benefit program including time off structures, financial wellness plans, and personal planning as key strategies in building up a resilient workforce.

A successful return, regardless of firm size, will require a blend of business problem solving and individual accountability. While it may be some time before we calibrate to a new sense of normalcy, we believe addressing proactive communication and responsive action will help us get back to work as quickly as possible. However, we cannot stop there. Status quo was not enough to protect our employees, our firms and our community during the first wave of the pandemic and we must use the lessons of today to help us design a healthier, more resilient tomorrow.

ABOUT AOS INTERIOR ENVIRONMENTS

As the largest design-assist FF&E (furniture, fixtures and equipment) contractor in Louisiana and Mississippi, we have been successfully partnering with our clients and the architectural community to create sustainable spaces for over 43 years. In that time, we have weathered countless storms and navigated a variety of disruptions to the economy in our region. Each time a new crisis arises, we are reminded cooperation, collaboration and the strength of our community is how we prevail.

If you wish to discuss further or determine any solutions that may help achieve some of these changes, please do not hesitate to reach out to the AOS team.

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