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# Today's Business: The new-look office: Where do we go from here?

George Perham

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America is getting back to work, and, as it does, we are realizing that in the past year — The Year of the Pandemic — we grew older and wiser, especially with regard to interpersonal relationships.

What that means, in returning-to-work, is that the post-pandemic office may have less than 100 percent occupancy at one time, increased sanitation practices, flexible meeting places, telephone-type booths for private conversations and video conferences with coworkers sitting either 20 feet away or at home.

Let's face it, post-COVID corporate America is going to experience a season of change in work environment, and will emerge considerably different than it did

in 2019. Offices will have to accommodate new health and safety needs of full-time workers, and, specifically, the needs of those who divide their work between home office and corporate office.

Which leads to the primary issue facing America as it returns to work: Space.

To some extent we have come full circle in regard to the open office spaces with cubicle-like workstations. There was an unwritten standard. If it is a workstation, its 8 feet by 8 feet.

These workstations generally were made up of work surfaces, movable partitions usually 54 inches to 60 inches tall, and storage components. The intent was to reduce the number of separate personal offices and to stimulate collaboration, which, in turn, saved square footage — and money.

Over time there still was a desire to save on rent and increase collaboration, so the workstations got smaller, 6 feet by 6 feet, and the partition height dropped to 36 inches to 42 inches. This created a wide-open environment allowing employees to see from one side of the room to the other without leaving the seat.

So here we are in a new world, coming full circle where greater distance reduces the spread of the virus. So, if we were still building the old 8-foot, high-partitioned workstations it would be back to work as usual. But it is not as usual anymore.

The office layout must change. Hand sanitizers spread throughout the office is a simple way to reduce the spread of germs.

There also are myriad other special options that can improve the office environment: acoustics, color schemes that support healthy work attitudes, proper lighting — particularly types that are adjustable throughout the day to mimic natural lighting — and greenery.

Here are questions to ask if we want to be responsible in solving the post-pandemic return-to-the-office quandary.

1. Is your staff coming back at full capacity?

2. If they are, how far do you want to go regarding guidelines for distancing and separation?

3. Do you want to reduce real estate for fewer seats or increase it to provide the same amount of seating in a larger space?

Answers to those three questions will provide the information needed to design new post-pandemic office space.

Pandemic aside, consider ways to incorporate the brand's logo and colors in the design of a space. This can be accomplished with pops of the brand colors throughout, in furnishings, for example, or flooring or other components perhaps more subliminal.

More natural lighting is a continuing trend. The goal is to get as much natural light into the space as possible, often accomplished by putting the workstations along the window wall and by using as much glass as possible in the office wall fronts.

Lighting controls can play a big part, too. Properly zoning lighting with the right controls, lights can go on and off depending on the time of day or month of the year. For example, the first row of lights along the window wall might be off, the second row might be at 50 percent power capacity and after that at 100 percent power. This provides a much more pleasant environment while saving money on electricity.

Open concept office designs, increasingly popular recently, now are resulting in a new flexible workspace — particularly where stations are co-occupied by different staff members on different days. This design also is resulting in a need for private space for times when privacy otherwise would be achieved at the workstation.

Smaller private areas, dubbed pods by designers, provide just enough workspace for small conferences, phone calls and participation in video meetings. These spaces can be perfect for those who work in an open office but need occasional one-on-one meetings.

Trends are just that. Design solutions should not be trendy. They should be timeless. Offices should be just as exciting in 10 years as when was first designed.

This will require imagination, and knowledge of a broad spectrum of construction and scientific issues. But one thing is certain. It will not be your grandmother's feng shui. It will be the feng shui of the present and as far into the future as we can see.

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