



The new workplace: How employers can promote wellness at work - by Gabriel Hernandez

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As we look towards returning to our offices in New York City and across the country, it may be daunting to consider just how many unforeseen hurdles employers must overcome. As architects and designers, several core values have guided our RTW (return to workplace) strategy: resilient planning, sustainable thinking and a people-first culture. From this perspective we see the future workplace as exciting, not solely a challenge. We are already seeing many positive changes on the horizon, fast tracked into mainstream work culture in the wake of COVID-19. The key is a holistic approach to workplace wellness, not only focusing on the technical safety measures but the communication and general wellness strategies behind them. This holistic process can make for resilient return of your own.

First, focus on wellness. It's not just about washing hands, it's about communication and a shared mentality. Employees need to know what is going to be new and different clearly and consistently before returning to work and in the office. Communicating new cleaning protocols, sanitizer stations, work hours, adjusted layouts to incorporate social distancing and in-office requirements minimizes viral risk exposure and will drastically reduce the stress and anxiety of employees. Promoting a holistic approach to health and wellness within this messaging establishes a positive human-centric work culture of security and safety; greater, well-communicated healthy building standards allow wellness to shape the future workplace, a growing trend even pre-pandemic.

We also need to ask ourselves what contributes to our employees' general wellness. Show your employees that you are investing in how they take care of themselves when at work. Many of the same policies people are adopting in their own homes can be embraced in the workplace to boost morale. Terraces and operable windows will continue to be high-demand amenities, as well as on-site sick rooms and indoor gardens, which encourage overall well-being.

Communication is key for a good RTW plan even at the building level. Updates by building management about upgrades and changed policies reflect care for people who use shared spaces and systems when communicated well. Useful upgrades implement technology such as check-in apps, temperature checks, automated sign-in, and other systems that provide privacy with pre-screening, sequence elevators, or paced entry/egress hours to avoid overcrowding at high traffic times of day. All those solutions can only work well when employers and employees understand their process and purpose.

We know COVID-19 is an air-borne virus, so updates to existing HVAC systems is something to think about when considering building upgrades. Engineers and architect teams should analyze existing conditions and strategize best practices for infection control. Some questions to consider are: Does my building's system meet codes? Can components be added to my existing system? While these are effective measures to fight COVID-19, a holistic outlook is required to consider the bigger picture of building energy usage, facilities operation and management.

As we understand the science of the virus, we develop proven best responses. Despite unknowns, we can manage risk and create organizational resilience. Now is the time to build cohesion and better relationships for a healthier, more sustainable, and positive post-pandemic world. Disasters have the potential to enhance social cohesion as people support one another through their shared experience. Sustainability thinking means planned responses for positive outcomes.

The future normal of work culture may never fully return to the common pre-pandemic expectation of a full occupancy in-office week. Many of us have discovered that we can be more productive and better balance our work-life when working remotely. But, we also miss the collaboration, mentorship and unplanned interactions only possible in the office. Our city is missing the vitality and economic life that work brings to neighborhoods and businesses.

We can anticipate that our future workspaces will allow for all these possibilities: remote work, in-person work and agile work schedules. Workspace design will become about solutions that thoughtfully consider why we return to the office by implementing technology and prioritizing that employees feel safe when returning to the new workplace.

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