



Employers work to ‘earn the commute’ of hybrid workers - Akram Khalis

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Akram Khalis

After cocooning into highly personalized workspaces during the pandemic, remote workers are reluctant to part with them. As we've learned, however, the domino effects of removing hundreds of thousands of employees from any city center can be seriously impactful. To reverse the negative impacts of a remote workforce, highly-motivated corporations and property owners are collaborating to entice employees back into the office.

Making workspaces more appealing to employees typically takes one of two tracks. While some employers focus on making the office environment more like the home environment, others focus on making the office better than home.

Smart desks among
'resimercial' design elements rising in popularity

Those attempting to mimic the home office have embraced the concept of "resimercial" design. A mashup of residential and commercial design elements, resimercial design seeks to replicate the creature comforts — not to mention the choice and autonomy — of a home office.

Giving employees more control over their environment — a key characteristic of home offices — is one way resimercial architects are achieving their aims. Take Cisco Systems' integration of intelligent furniture, for example. The Fortune 100 technology company installed hundreds of smart desks during the past year inside its offices at 1 Pennsylvania Plaza.

"The smart desks have been something of a savior in our office transition," said Cisco's Jeff Meek, customer solutions marketing manager. "They are part of the larger story about our company's intention to remain flexible as the world of work changes. Most companies that employ people on-site are wrestling with a lot of unknowns around space planning and utilization, not to mention employee satisfaction."

Luxury amenities draw remote workers back to the office

Among owners and tenants looking to not only match, but exceed, the comforts of home, many are building out luxury community spaces for their employees. High-end amenities like connected gyms with personalized equipment, elegant lounges fitted with premium design and lighting fixtures and gourmet café, coffee and cocktail bars with high-quality or hard-to-procure options are popping up in more offices nationwide.

With commercial property values on shaky ground, owners are rightly applying extra pressure to the ROI of all return-to-office initiatives, especially when it comes to something as potentially capital-intensive as the addition of communal amenity spaces. Take the Black Rock building at 51 W 52nd, for instance. According to William Vazquez, senior general manager of Harbor Group Management Company, Black Rock's facilities management firm, the value of a 'before' space can be a major contributor to the complete ROI picture.

Vazquez led the renovation of a 14,000 s/f cellar-level space designed to entice more of the tenants' employees back to work in the iconic skyscraper. Prior to its makeover — which today includes a centralized meeting area, lounge, coffee bar, cardio theater, barre fitness gym and modern locker room facilities — the space was 8,000 s/f of copying machines and another 6,000 s/f of messenger center.

“The space had zero long-term value,” said Vazquez. “The normal course of action for an owner weighing options for such a space is to chop it up into rental storage units. That may deliver some value, but it doesn't move the needle on building capitalization, and certainly not on occupant experience.

“We took a space that had limited value and turned it into an amazing amenity offering for every tenant,” continued Vazquez. “At the end of the project, we had a very high end, very welcoming and very beautiful space to draw more employees back into the building. And we did it all without affecting our office stack in the slightest.”

Whether replicating or exceeding the personal comforts of home, the built environment offers property owners a wealth of opportunity for earning the commute of pandemic-era employees. It will be exciting to monitor the data to learn how successful different resimercial and renovation projects ultimately are at luring people out of their beloved cocoons.

Akram Khalis is CEO of MHT Technologies and the co-founder of Inspextor, Manhattan, N.Y.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540