Northwest (HHS Region 10)

PTTC Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network
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The Post-COVID-19 Workplace

Health and safety concerns have risen to the top of everyone's awareness as the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded. Many of us have made the forced transition to working at home, and as we think about and plan our transition back to the office, a healthy work environment is utmost in the minds of both employers and employees. The workplace we return to won't be the same workplace we left.

In addition, many of us have experienced a new level of work-life integration, which at first seemed overwhelming and eventually settled into balance as we reassessed our priorities. We may wish to incorporate some of these changes into our new post-COVID-19 perspective on work.
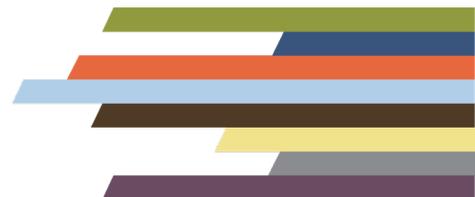
Many of us have found that some work tasks are well accomplished at home, where others really do require in-person interaction. We may have a new appreciation of our need for interpersonal connection through work. We also may need to maintain some out-of-office work activity, since social distancing guidelines will result in reduced capacity of the workplace for some time. During this coffee break, we'll explore some exciting ways organizations are re-conceptualizing the Post-COVID-19 workplace.

Prior to Transition Back to Office

Wise organizations will assess their employees working from home *before* they return to the office, to hear their concerns and ideas about how to make the transition smooth and the new workplace safe. This is important so workplace policies can reflect employee needs.

Communication

Effective communication between employers and employees will be even more essential than it was prior to this pandemic. A program of multi-media communications will help establish the "new normal" in the workplace. This means written protocols, signs, tours of the new look and orientation to new protocols of office interaction, training on how to follow new office protocols of movement and use of space, and the placement of disinfectant products around the office. New workplace policies and protocols, actively and openly advertised, FAQ resources, and social distancing posters and reminders will help workers trust that employers are prioritizing their health and safety, and will help them feel more confident to return to work.

Safety

We don't yet know what the Post-COVID-19 workplace will look like. We do know that social distancing will be the new norm, at least for a while, and that housekeeping will be more frequent and more visible. Many other questions remain. Will we use Infrared Fever Scan Systems or health assessment tools at the office? Will we have new no-touch doors, garbage and recycling containers, and bathroom fixtures? Will be e using more hands-free devices? Will we wear PPEs (personal protection equipment), and under what circumstances? Will we stagger work times, days, or breaks to reduce the number of people in the office at the same time? Will we limit the number of people who can attend in-person meetings? How much remote technology will we continue using, and for what? Horror of horrors, will we be required to keep our desks super tidy and clean, and take our bobble head collection home with us every night so our desks can be properly sanitized? All of these considerations will need to be discussed by employers and employees prior to and as workers return to the office setting.

Workplace Guidelines

Creativity will be the name of the game here. We will need to configure our offices to maintain a constant 6-foot distance between all employees and between employees and clients. Placing desks 6 feet apart and installing Plexiglas screens between employees and clients is only the beginning. Will we move around the office along one-way lanes so as to maximize passing distance? What other creative ideas will emerge to keep us all safe and healthy as we move about the office together?

Protocols will need to be considered to control public access to offices, such as requiring buzz-in entry. Hand sanitizing stations will need to be installed everywhere. Seating in public areas and space around employees' desks will need to be arranged so as to comply with social distancing guidelines.

We will need to ask ourselves other questions that may never have occurred to us previously. How will we greet colleagues and clients now that shaking hands is out? How will we deal with the reality of shared office supplies, such as pens, papers, telephones, keyboards, remote controls, even doorknobs and handrails? How many people will be allowed to congregate in break rooms, meeting and conference spaces? How will social distancing be maintained during all workplace interactions? Food services may need to be reduced or limited to single-use servings and supplies. Oh, no, does this mean the office coffeemaker is a temporary thing of the past? How about the water cooler; is this out now, too? Yikes! It's time to bring our best collective creativity to our exploration of every aspect of the office environment and use it to develop guidelines for each situation we can anticipate, and new situations as they arise.

Organizational engineers and technology experts can assist employers in addressing environmental concerns and developing plans for managing them. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

have additional health promotion resources, including posters that encourage hand hygiene and coughing and sneezing etiquette and clean hands webpage.

We have brought the best of our compassion, energy and ingenuity to living with the new reality which the COVID-19 pandemic has presented. We have come together in new and bigger ways. We can bring these same qualities to the conditions that will be different in the months and perhaps years to come if we approach this together as a unique opportunity to rethink how we have approached work, home life and relationships to imagine and create the new normal together.

Additional Resources

CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html

Work Design Magazine online: https://www.workdesign.com/2020/04/a-common-sense-guide-for-the-return-to-the-office/

Post-COVID Office Design Resources to Explore

The Fast Company online: https://www.fastcompany.com/90488060/our-offices-will-never-be-the-same-after-covid-19-heres-what-they-could-look-like

Collier's International, The Knowledge Center online: https://knowledge-leader.colliers.com/colin-scarlett/post-covid-19-office-design-and-market/

ZDNet (online news source): https://www.zdnet.com/article/could-covid-19-change-the-look-of-the-office-as-we-know-it/

Vox (explanatory journalism online): https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/4/14/21211789/coronavirus-office-space-work-from-home-design-architecture-real-estate