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Returning to work: Disease-prevention trends - by Elizabeth Holmes

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With the expectation of employees returning to work, whether May 18th or a later date, companies need to be prepared to not only provide a safe environment now, but fundamentally alter their office spaces to accommodate employees' newest priority: staying healthy and minimizing the spread of germs.

Future Alterations and Disease-Prevention Trends in Office Space

1. The Internet of Things and Hands-Free: Looking to China's implemented technology and procedures to minimize spread of viruses, we see the value in the Internet of Things and tracking technology. Their measures of tracking each individual's location and having them scan a QR code to gain access to public places may be too extreme for the U.S., but something to take inspiration from. The U.S. proptech industry was already experiencing exponential growth prior to the coronavirus. We can now expect further implementation of these technologies that can scan an employee in at security, order the elevator to the correct floor, and monitor the activity/hot spots in your office space – all through an app and hands-free. Infrared Fever Screening Systems (IFSS), currently implemented in airports to screen travelers and was used in the SARS 2003 outbreak, may be implemented in building lobbies to scan employees and visitors. Expect use of this IoT technology to expand to further monitor employee/visitor interaction within the office and provide more hands-free opportunities around your office. Additionally, expect owners to increase IoT and hands-free technology in common areas, such as lobbies.

2. Air Flow and Quality: One of the reasons China was able to allow their office workers back to work so quickly was their HVAC systems provide a much higher level of fresh air circulation compared to the more common U.S. systems that recirculate air. Look for higher expectations from tenants to have HVAC systems that circulate fresh air, which is currently only about 25% of the air we breathe. For those buildings where that is not a possibility, expect an increase in biophilia – living green walls. Plants have been shown to increase air quality in office space and provide a cost-effective way of increasing air quality. WELL Certification, similar to LEED Certification but focused on employee health and wellness, already has guidelines in place for higher air quality and systems to implement. They are currently looking into strengthening these requirements to focus further on disease prevention.

3. Furniture & Fixtures: Furniture vendors are already working to redesign workstations to accommodate the six foot radius for social distancing, higher dividers between cubicles, and even changing the materials for furniture and equipment. Anti-microbial materials are being utilized in high-touch furniture/equipment such as light switches, doorknobs, desks, and faucets. Some of these materials are already in use at healthcare/medical buildings while others are still being tested – such as a material that mimics shark skin, shown to minimize the time and amount of bacteria on its surface. Expect companies and owners to alter the furniture used in high-volume areas and future expectations on building/furniture materials to focus on anti-bacteria and easy to clean surfaces.

4. Office Layouts: It's no surprise that the trend of benching and maximizing office density is out. Tenants will need to focus on creatively redesigning their offices to provide each employee with the six foot radius for social distancing at their workstation, conference rooms, and amenity spaces. We expect more companies to move towards small, private offices rather than reverting to large, high bay cubicles in order to keep employee morale up and germ spreading down. Small phone booths or "just in time" rooms for private calls will be minimized as they encourage high use, thus proving private offices a better option.

5. Suburban Push: As companies decrease the density of employees, two options are available: Decrease the number of employees working in the office or increase square footage. For many companies, neither of those options are the ultimate solution. Instead, companies have realized the ability for employees to work from several locations can be efficient, but as most humans are social, they still want the in-person office experience. Therefore, adding satellite offices is one potential solution. Particularly, the suburbs provide several opportunities: cheaper rent, lower densities, and abundance of free parking. Employees will be extremely hesitant to commute on public transportation and downtown parking is not economical. Therefore, suburban satellite offices allow certain departments to relocate and collaborate together in a cost efficient way.

6. Coworking: Coworking companies like Workbar and WeWork are already drastically redesigning the way space will be offered to their members. The focus will shift on more private spaces rather than "hot desks" to minimize the spreading of germs. However, these models will not be remotely as lucrative as their previous layouts. Though more companies with upcoming lease expirations or growth needs will be eager for short term office options in the near term, they will most likely look to their landlords instead of coworking for a solution. We expect many landlords to be amenable to short term renewals or expansions as overall leasing demand decreases in the near term. Additionally, as coworking models become less lucrative for operators, expect landlords who have their own coworking/short term options to be more successful.

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