

FUTURE OF WORK

7 ways the workplace will drastically change in a post-pandemic world

Ashley Jones May 6, 2020



With stay-at-home orders throughout the country slowly expiring and states testing the waters of **increased person-to-person interaction**, a return to the physical workplace is inevitable for many. Exactly how that will look though is yet to be determined.

Will everyone **return to work** just as they did before the novel coronavirus, or will our workspaces continue to evolve to meet ever-changing societal needs? Only time will tell, but expert insight into the workplace **post-pandemic** shows an array of changes on the horizon.

Physical workspace changes

If you will be heading back into the office soon, Rob Wilson, a human resources expert and President of **Employco USA** says your physical work environment will look much different. “Desks will certainly need to be placed further apart and in some cases, partitions may be implemented,” he says. “For their safety and in compliance with CDC guidelines, employees will have **masks**.”

Additionally, companies, where employees share cubicles or have close quarters, could see staggered in-times and more remote work to decrease personal interaction, as well as changes to communal spaces. “There will need to be more hand sanitizer stations in common areas such as reception desks and outside of elevators,” Wilson says.

“Workplaces will look to make changes to HVAC systems in an effort to have as much fresh air as possible. There will also be rules and guidelines placed on common area usage in places such as elevators, bathrooms, and lunch/break rooms.”

Debating a physical return

The decision not to return to a physical workspace at all might be one that some companies face, according to Nicola Smith, CEO, and Founder of **REBEL & REASON**, whose focus is on driving disruption and innovation for the brands they serve. “I anticipate a lot of small and mid-sized brands really taking a look at whether or not they need physical office space and at a minimum reducing that,” she says.

In addition to changes in a physical workspace, Smith predicts increased flexibility around when work will occur will happen due to both priority shifts and potential changes in school schedules for working parents. “Whether that’s starting earlier in the day or finishing later in the evening or only working two or three days during the workweek,” she says. “I think that we’re going to see a massive impact from that.”

Employer liability versus employee responsibility

Smith says that due to a lack of clarity on health and safety, the liability aspect for employers is “a big consideration” should they choose to bring people back into the office when it may or may not yet be safe. Because every industry will look different, this will be a unique challenge employers must grapple with individually. “I would just challenge any company considering it to really ask themselves what the value is,” she says.

“There will certainly be employees with health and safety concerns and the anxiety people are feeling now won’t go away overnight,” Wilson says.

“Employees should be comfortable with the return to work process,” Wilson advises employers to let their employees know that they can address questions and concerns right away prior to a return to the office. “Be flexible and consider individual needs as seriously as they need to keep everyone safe and well,” he says. “Make adjustments where necessary.”

If employees are uncomfortable with the new office set up or have a reason why a mask cannot be worn, Wilson recommends considering “granting a small, private workspace” to help them feel more comfortable. “Some employees simply may need time to adjust and ease into the new workplace normal,” he says. “If they are able, advise them to continue to work from home and if necessary allow them to come into the office on the weekends when there is minimal exposure to co-workers.”

If an employee doesn’t feel like their concerns are being heard or addressed by their employer, Smith says her advice is to organize with other employees to advocate for your rights. “If you’re not feeling comfortable, it’s highly likely that other employees aren’t feeling comfortable as well,” she says.

Increased telecommuting

As Lindsay Grenawalt, Chief People Officer of Cockroach Labs, discussed physical workspace changes, she mentioned that “a sole chair in the middle of a 6-foot space” just isn’t realistic for some employers moving forward. “All of those things are great and they’re plans, especially if you are a business that does need to return to a physical workspace, but those are plans that are using little data,” she says. “They’re using little certainty around how this virus really acts in the wild.”

For this reason, Grenawalt says their company has not set a specific office return date, noting that they want to “be thoughtful” about their approach to a return to shared workspaces.

“For us specifically I think from an organizational standpoint, we’ve been very fortunate that we have a workforce that is supported by a work-from-home environment and from a cultural standpoint, we did have a lot of not only cultural practices that were in place but processes that were in place that really supported us transitioning to a work-from-home environment,” she says. For Grenawalt and the Cockroach Labs employees, those processes will carry them through to the next phase of changes to current workplace environments.

While some employees will likely commit to working from home for the long haul, the decision will require input on part of the employer and employee to make the transition work. “We’ve been pushed into these situations under duress, against our will, and that’s not what a true work-from-home experience is,” she says.

The transition into a work-from-home role requires adjusting to a different environment, and Grenawalt says that “you have to reset what your expectations are for that environment,” noting the process will take time as employees go through a mental shift during the process of stay-at-home restrictions being lifted.

Re-thinking time off

“America still has such an outdated idea of what time off looks like,” Smith says, noting that she believes we will also see more flexibility in that area of work-life balance post- coronavirus.

For Grenawalt and Cockroach Labs, their company has already begun to implement a regular day off in the name of relaxation during this uncertain time. “We want to give our employees an opportunity to reset their expectations around what vacation time is,” she says. Instead of a traditional vacation scenario, this could look like going on a hike nearby, going on a “vacation from home” and “learning how to cook pasta and watching Italian movies all day,” she says.

Grenawalt says she would love for her employees to take an entire week off right now, but believes some feel guilty doing so right now. While vacation time before COVID-19 looked like taking an entire week and traveling to a destination somewhere, she says that “vacation can happen even if you’re sitting at home, and that’s ok.”

Healthcare benefit shifts

As employees begin to return to the workplace, experts believe that the way employers deal with healthcare benefits may be impacted.

“I think it is becoming harder and harder to justify healthcare solely being tied to employment,” Smith explains. “I think coming out of this, it is going to be very, very difficult regardless of which side of the political spectrum you’re on to argue that everybody having access to healthcare is not in the public good and a component of public safety.”

Smith notes that if healthcare becomes detached from employment, certain employers will begin to offer additional healthcare benefits like priority access to appointments and certain types of doctors in lieu of traditionally structured healthcare benefits.

New communication processes

Grenawalt says two things that really helped to have in place pre-pandemic for their company was establishing balance as a core value. They achieve this by understanding that everyone operates differently where productivity and responsibilities are concerned to support a flexible workforce. The company also allows for transparency about highs and lows in order to inspire employees to communicate effectively and support a distributed workforce, something the company had already even before the pandemic.

They've found that collaboration can still happen when expectations of how to communicate are in place and explained thoroughly during onboarding, which could be helpful for many companies to implement moving forward to create successful telework setups. "We talk very heavily about which platforms are used for what, and then we also talk about our practices around communication," Grenawalt says. "So, the way that we document, the way that we share information, and really the importance of it is that we all get to learn from one another. At the end of the day, we fundamentally believe that through different perspectives you can actually solve problems better."

Looking ahead

In moving into the future of work post-pandemic, changes are inevitable. That doesn't mean things can't change for the better. "It's easy to just do what's been done before. You can always go back to just what's been done before," Grenawalt says. "This is a horrible thing that's happening, but there is a huge opportunity here to just burn the ships and move forward."

Whether it's a change in processes or re-establishing company values to better serve employees, organizations must be focused on the future of work and an ever-changing landscape in order to survive.

"I think this is an opportunity to set yourself and your company up for success not just during this disruption, but coming disruptions that will be the result of everything from shifting political alliances to climate change," Smith says. "I actually think it's a huge opportunity for organizations to come up with contingency plans and other ways of operating so that they can weather not just this, but any disruption that comes in the future."

Smith says that the threat to business today is not disruption, but rather conformity and falling back onto the same rules and conventions that have worked up until this point. "Those are not going to apply or work moving forward," she says. "In order to survive not only do you need to break the rules and conventions of your industry, but you've got to break your own internal rules and conventions on an ongoing basis in order to keep up with the disruption that we're seeing."