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How COVID-19 may forever change use and design of office space

By Kevin Okobizje September 23, 2020

The leasing of large commercial offices may be a thing of the past as employers gauge how working remotely impacts productivity and how they can be better prepared for a future pandemic.

Instead of one central urban location for all employees, businesses may prefer smaller hubs throughout a metropolitan area, according to Shal Khazanchi, department chair and professor of management at the Saunders College of Business at RIT.

Other employers may lease co-work space themselves, giving employees the flexibility of working remotely while still providing the necessary social interaction of the traditional office, Khazanchi said.

"I would venture we have to re-envision office space that is not large real estate but is interconnected hubs of smaller spaces," she said, "which allow you to collaborate and do complex problem-solving, but even more importantly, you have an organization that is spread throughout the community so you allow community building, as well."

Khazanchi shared her views during a recent Zoom panel discussion, Redefining the Future of Workplace and Building Design, co-sponsored by Bergmann and the Urban Land Institute — Western New York.



The coronavirus pandemic has made work-from-home the new reality, with many offices still working only at partial capacity and others not re-opening at all due to fears of another wave of COVID-19 this fall and winter.

As a result, the commercial real estate industry is trying to sort out the unknown regarding future demand for office space.

"This won't be the end of office, but you could maybe call it an accelerated fresh start," said Michael Frame, executive vice president of CBRE|Rochester.

The knee-jerk reaction would be to assume that reduced office capacity and remote work are here to stay.

"I come in the office and there's only a third of the people here and it's easy to assess that we should reduce office space," said Andrew Gallina, president of Gallina Development Corp. "The reality is, that may not be the entirely new normal. There will be some adjustments, there will be changes.

"In one way, some employers may need more space for appropriate social distancing and want to open up their space instead of jamming people together. We'll have a better understanding in the next six to eight months."

That's especially true when evaluating health risks and productivity. Being allowed to work in the office and needing to work in the office could be two different things.

"Just because everything is permissible and possible doesn't mean it's beneficial," said Michelle Ossmann, director of healthcare knowledge and insights at Herman Miller Inc. "The beneficial side is something we're going to see longer term."

Indeed, there is no doubt that the new normal will alter how businesses use office space and, more importantly, how that space is designed. Resiliency of the office space will be critical, said Kelly Jahn, senior interior architect at Bergmann.

"It's about creating environments that can respond to unpredictable situations," Jahn said. "But it's also looking at how policy and design work together.

"Going forward, it's going to be about designers and business owners working together to create holistic environments that not only change the physical modifications, but also policy modifications for sick leave or remote work policies that are going to protect employee health and well-being better," Jahn added.

New office space also likely will incorporate more emphasis on air exchange and air filtration, touchless switches and faucets and hand and workspace hygiene.

"One thing that COVID has taught us is that we are fundamentally animals who are at risk to factors we can see and cannot see" Ossmann said. "The typical office desk harbors more than 10 million bacteria, which is around 400 times more than on a standard toilet seat. And why are sinks only found in bathrooms? We need to wash our hands lots of times in our everyday work. Make it easy, make it possible to do the right thing."

Some sort of shared office workspace will always be essential; maybe not five days a week, but many projects and problems require teamwork.

"While we've all gotten used to working at home," Frame said, "technology alone does not replace being in the office working with team members, team leaders and clients."

And human beings need social interaction. The concept of an office is critical for "complex problem-solving and collaboration, and for the social aspect," Khazanchi said. "Surveys show people miss most the casual interactions with their colleagues, and with time that's going to creep up even more."

She said the COVID-19 crisis has created an epidemic of loneliness. That's one reason co-work space is still thriving. Co-work is, by some standards, a happiness industry. Companies that allow remote work from co-work facilities benefit as well, she said.

"You're going there because you're lonely," Khazanchi said. "Employees of organizations who lease out co-work spaces report greater commitment to the company and are likely to stay

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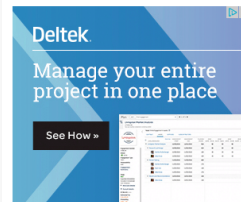
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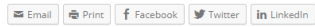
longer with the company. A lot of times companies think that if they don't have all of their employees at one place at one time, somehow they will not be able to retain them. That's not what the studies are showing. It gives them the legitimacy, it gives them the professional identity and the social interaction."

Even so, it's still too early to say office space as we have known it will no longer exist.

"We're not going to make any changes," Gallina said, "until the market talks to us."

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