

WORKSPACE

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businesses can implement to address employee comfort and relieve stress. They can be as simple as letting people have personal fans or artwork or improved lighting.

Overall, the survey would reflect the company’s — and employees’ — concerns and values, with health and safety the top priority. Workers will have fewer distractions as a result.

“And don’t just think about this on an individual level,” Louer said. “You need to think of how work teams come together.”

Among more immediate measures, companies can address traffic flow by delineating one-way arrows or 6-foot spacing on the floor. Printers can be moved closer to workers to prevent long travel through congested areas. Partitions can be installed or made taller.

Initial changes don’t have to be expensive, Louer said.

“The ‘now’ changes are going to be getting people six feet apart. That’s a very low-cost option. The next thing is ordering screens, which are not terribly expensive.”

Every workplace is unique and not all rules apply.

“Don’t waste money or space on something we’re telling you, or that you’re reading. Do the things that make your employees feel important and comfortable,” Louer said.

Once employers know the number of returning workers, they can develop a floor plan that reflects safety measures. That likely will mean addressing shared space, continuous desk surfaces and a high density of work stations. Planning is done both short-term and long-term.

Short term would include removing seating to maintains 6-foot distances. Long term would be reconfiguration of overall space including addition of dividers.

“Make them feel like this is a better environment than home — and in many cases it is because of the camaraderie and comfort of their own workspace,” Louer said.

The workpoint, or work station/ cubicle, needs to stress comfort, offer the tools, and improve the level of focus.

Screens, reorienting work stations so employees don’t face one another, and proper spacing are the start of a multipoint strategy plan that also accounts for the number of people who will remote work; cleanliness; density; interaction and collaboration; user control; and technology.

The number of work stations are determined both by surveys and management teams.

Sometimes, professional advice will be needed to addressing maximum occupancy and increased capacity.

Some businesses might find solutions in work rotation, sequenced start times, or rotating work days.

There are both physical and virtual solutions for collaborative workers, but a key is going to be in communicating any new protocols. Individual workspace needs to be sizeable enough for mobility, flexibility, personalization and cleanliness.

“You want to spend time on what the culture is today, and which way you want to push it. Then, create the interior environment that supports that culture and helps you change it in positive

ways,” Louer said.

Not all changes need to be made immediately, “but you should be listening to your workers, your management teams and using this opportunity to create a better workplace than you had before.”

Paris noted some real-life workplace solutions she’s addressed in recent weeks.

“It’s been an interesting exercise to study all these guidelines and to implement them,” Paris said.

One situation she studied had seven workers sharing a relatively tight space as a team. Paris overlaid a 6-foot radius over the workstations to see what the layout might look like.

“Turns out we could fit four people in there while maintaining social distancing space,” she said.

The longer-term configuration would be to reconfigure the space by adding some panel divisions.

Such situations are handled case by case, she said.

The same example client had a training room which seated 41 people. The space has largely been unused for quite some time.

“One of the suggestions I had was a rearranging of the tables to create areas for overflow space for staff that couldn’t be accommodated in other office spaces,” she said.

Some businesses are finding out they must address change on an as-needed basis. She noted the example of a bank with an open reception area that needs to consider a desktop shield or divider.

“It’s important to be able to see throughout the space but still have

separation,” she said.

The general rule on partitions is to extend a minimum of 18 to 24 inches above the work surface.

“In some cases, I’ve had clients who were more comfortable going up to six feet high, which is definitely higher than we’re all use to.” The average panel height is about 50 inches.

Laminate, acrylic and glass materials are all acceptable for partitions as long as they can be easily disinfected.

Manufacturers have responded very quickly to the needs of businesses, designing dividers for both looks and acoustics. “Whimsical acoustical panels in a variety of shapes” are readily available.

“The most common thing I’ve seen recently is the use of ‘panel toppers,’ which fasten on existing panels to provide height of up to 24 inches higher than the existing panel.”


Paris said she’s had to “filter through lots and lots of different manufacturers’ products to assimilate the information and make sense of it.”

She added: “That’s our job, if you’re scratching your head over what to do with your space.”

The solution can be simple or complicated, depending on the size of the business location, Louer said.

“Open your mind to make positive change and make your new workplace healthy, functional and better than before,” Louer said.

Both Louer and Paris are licensed interior designers registered in the state of Illinois and certified LEED AP professionals.



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