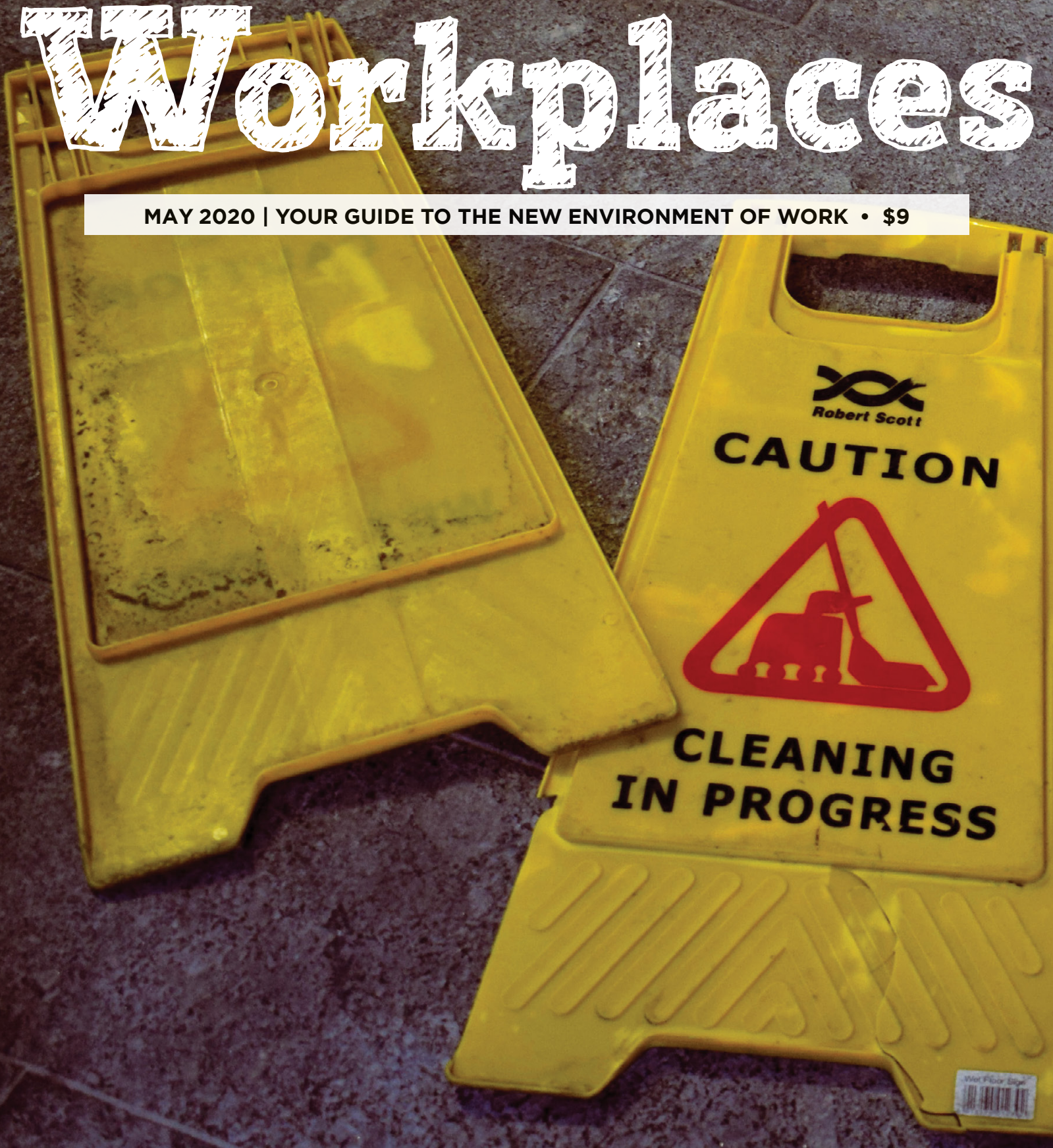


# Workplaces

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**The Returning to Work Issue**



## WORK AFTER COVID-19: KEEPING YOUR CULTURE SAFE

by Scott Hierlinger

**A**s architects and designers, we create inviting and engaging guest-centric spaces for all types of environments. We deliver both experiential and energized settings that resonate with the unique individuals who work, shop, dine, stay and serve in these spaces, while always staying true to the foundation of the brand and its culture.

At the onset of COVID-19 — and as the required work-from-home and social distancing guidelines went into effect — dialogue as to how companies were planning their successful return to the office escalated. The majority of the discussion focused on stripping out amenities, elements and services that would mitigate the risk of germs and keep employees safe, but there has been very little dialogue surrounding how to keep company culture alive and thriving without a home base or office which previously serviced as the cultural heart of a company. So, while all the unknowns continue to circle overhead, how can corporations, enterprises, and large and small businesses ensure they are keeping their cultures safe?

While reconfiguring floor plans and other critical

changes to the physical office environment must continue to be a priority, protecting a company's culture during this historical time can have a long-term impact long beyond a vaccine. We recommend a combination of approachable tactics and thoughtful design enhancements for building a stronger, culture-centric workplace post-COVID-19.

### **Establish a Teammate Task Force**

Create a task force to nurture and energize your existing culture within this new environment. Assess communications and encourage positive messaging outside of revenue and heavy discussions. Empower employees to be part of new initiatives going forward and identify key stakeholders, beyond the executive team, that can lead new initiatives; collect honest feedback; and encourage firmwide participation. Remember to focus on the personal experience of the employee in all communications. Consistent, thoughtful and cohesive brand messaging is key.

### **Strategize Seamless Transitions**

Giving employees the tools, transparency and sense of control to transition back into the office when the time is right is paramount. The key to success lies in providing constant communication to minimize anxiety. Consider assembling a welcome back kit consisting of sanitizers, masks, quick visual guides pertaining to office layout changes, lists of new protocols for quick refer-

ence and more. Infuse your brand, mission and values into the kit to tie back to your unique culture.

## Replace Rituals

Due to new workplace protocols and behavioral changes that will need to be initiated, keep in mind all legacy cultural traditions that may need to be revised or temporarily cancelled. In their place, identify new rituals that can comply with social distancing, ones that the company can rally around. Survey your staff for recommendations and communicate that in the pursuit of safety, you will need to alter some traditions. Perhaps the weekly Friday happy hour can be replaced with a virtually curated cocktail-making class.

## Differentiate Amenities

Where existing amenities might be temporarily halted, provide employees with differentiated opportunities to keep them engaged, while also promoting a healthy lifestyle and safe protocols. Should the company or building fitness center be off limits, employers could give workers credit for streaming fitness apps or online classes. Make it a team building exercise by including friendly competitions with goal setting and rewards. Encourage fitness clubs that don't require the gym. Motivate employees to go outside and partake in daily walking excursions, running clubs after work hours and meditation sessions. Inspiring team members to stay active will minimize the disappointment and frustrations surrounding closed amenities.

## Embrace WELL Building Standards

Employers should look for quick wins that benefit psychological and physical well-being of their employees. Look for inspiration from WELL Building Standards by creating work environments that prioritize mental and physical health, as well as happiness. Incorporate more biophilic elements such as living plants that can serve as barriers between workstations and provide critical air filtration and oxygen. When possible, consider holding meetings in an outdoor venue for a change in scenery.

This will not only decrease anxiety, but also promote better health.

## Lead with Brand

During this time of uncertainty, it is more important than ever to leverage your brand assets to encourage teammate creativity and collaboration in a new way. Consider providing custom, branded Zoom backgrounds for all to use when communicating with each other and clients. There are endless ways to leverage branded environmental graphics throughout a space. Look to add new graphic wraps that reflect your brand and mission at key areas of the office. These can promote safety and show employees are valued and critical to success.

Get creative with wayfinding to highlight new traffic flows and give team members a visual of what a safe distance looks like. A life-size map of the reconfigured floor plan can be displayed to easily locate colleagues and new sanitizing stations. Finally, in a time when so many things are being stripped away from company culture to keep employees safe, brighten up the office by adding a brag wall featuring accomplishments, recognition and more.

All in all, while it's necessary to protect the physical environment, your culture is the backbone of your company, and it's equally as important to keep it safe. In the midst of the chaos, the one consistent thing you can do for your employees is give them a culture to come back to. Bigger investments in the office will take time, concentrating on culture is a short-term solution that will lead to long-term benefits. **WPM**

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*Editor's note: Scott Hierlinger is vice president - interior design, managing principal at NELSON Worldwide. With more than 25 years of experience in interior design and leading numerous workplace and building repositioning projects, Hierlinger is an expert in corporate interiors and amenity design. His comprehensive background allows him to provide creative and integrated services to clients in various industries including finance, law, nonprofits and more. At NELSON Worldwide, Hierlinger oversees regional and national longstanding partnerships and offers strategic insight to his cross-functional teams.*