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RETURNING TO THE NEW NORMAL

As offices reopen, health and wellness strategies will become a crucial part of design and operations.

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COVER STORY

RETURNING TO THE NEW



By Greg Zimmerman, executive editor

Some new strategies may run counter to how things have always been done.

Health and wellness is the new normal; is it more expensive?

Wellness, sustainability, and resilience: A triangle of new strategies.

Will this place make me sick? That'll be the question on the minds of anxious occupants as they begin returning to offices. And it'll be up to you, the fearless facility manager, to allay those fears.

That's no small order.

The coronavirus pandemic will create a fundamental shift in how the workspace is conceived, designed, and operated. Never before has implementing strategies to benefit occupants' mental health and physical well-being been more critical than now. Indeed, health and wellness strategies will be inextricably linked to the new normal of office design and operations. "Health and wellness will move from a 'nice to have' to a 'must have,'" says Paul Scialla, founder and CEO of Delos, and founder of the International WELL Building Institute. "The pandemic is really bringing the importance of health and wellness front and center."

Yes, the new normal of the immediate future of social distancing, more-frequent cleaning, and limiting exposure to high-touch surfaces will be crucially important as occupants return to the workplace. But also, facility managers will need to confer with business leaders to develop ongoing staggered work-from-home and desk-hotelling policies, as well as create the infrastructure and implement the technology to make this possible. And finally, facility managers will need to ensure ongoing projects that actively encourage health and wellness — especially those that complement money-saving sustainability measures — remain at the top of the priority list.

The immediate future

Much of the new normal, both in the immediate future and in terms of long-term shifts in office strategy, will run counter to how things have always been done.

The coronavirus pandemic will create a fundamental shift in how the workspace is conceived, designed, and operated. Photos in this article were taken before the pandemic, but the principles behind the designs shown promise to be more important than ever.

NORMAL

As offices reopen, health and wellness strategies will become a crucial part of design and operations.

To start, not every employee will be coming into work every day anymore. The pandemic has shown that work-from-home not only can be done, but can be done just as productively (if not more) than making everyone come into the office every day. Allowing employees to stagger their days in the office gives them the flexibility to work from home and manage their lives, and thus their mental health and physical wellness (as well as anxiety and stress — many people will still be nervous about using public transportation for a long time to come) more effectively.

In the office, however, both because there will be fewer employees physically present at any given time and also to accommodate new social distancing guidelines, facility managers will need to spread out the workspaces, which may require them to rethink their floorplans.

“We’ve spent years densifying the workplace because we believed everyone wanted to be close together and collaborative, and also because it reduces real estate cost,” says Daniel Montroy, a partner with Montroy DeMarco Architecture (MDA). “We are now going pretty quickly in the opposite direction.”

Facility managers will have to consider new furniture layouts and designs — and probably not have occupants

facing each other with no barriers anymore, as one example, says Montroy.

It’ll also be important to implement strategies that make hoteling and free address easier and more prevalent. This has multiple benefits: One is the flexibility it offers employees to choose a workspace in which they’ll be more comfortable — an easy win for wellness. Another is that it’s an infection control strategy, which is the most critical piece of keeping occupants healthy. Essentially, a desk that is clear of personal knick-knacks at the end of each day is easier to clean and disinfect, says Ray Carney, vice president at consulting firm Markon Solutions. If an organization isn’t quite ready to make such a huge shift, policies to make disinfection easier at the individual workspace level may need to be implemented. Sure, employees like to personalize their workspace, but that may not be permitted in a new normal.

New types of space and more of them for receiving visitors in the office may be necessary, as well. “When tenants start coming back, they may not want to welcome visitors in their offices,” says Montroy. “So buildings should have common meeting rooms that can be assured to be clean. That way, risks can be minimized. Landlords are starting

Design so natural light, as through skylights and floor to ceiling windows, will enter the workspace to aid mental health, focus, better sleep at night for occupants, and productivity.



CORY KLEIN PHOTOGRAPHY.

to offer these amenity centers to minimize short-term COVID risks.”

Unquestionably, these short-term shifts in strategy will result in some long-term standard practices. But one question on the minds of many: Will de-densification, occupant anxiety about staying healthy while working in the office, and the need for greater flexibility in space kill the open office concept?

“It’s not a binary of, is the office open or is it closed?” says Despina Katsikakis, head of occupier business performance for Cushman and Wakefield. “The future is not binary, it’s complex.”

Many organizations won’t have the capital to start from scratch and totally redesign an open office plan anyway. The biggest changes — social distancing and staggering the workforce’s days in the office, for example — will be immediate, but wholesale changes to the office layout will have to be incremental. “Open office plans will likely look different going forward, but they will not be eliminated entirely,” says Paige Pitcher, director, office innovation for Hines.

The new workplace will be about being able to have choices and flexibility. The open office has been the “fall guy for just about everything for what’s wrong with work,” says Katsikakis. “But what’s been wrong is business policy and leadership that doesn’t trust people to work in a more flexible way, and that’s the piece that will change rapidly.”

So, no, the open office isn’t dead. But it’ll sure be a bit different and require different thinking in how organizations consider real estate costs and how facility managers think about policies and operating budgets.

“We will need to put buildings to work for us to fight against infectious diseases,” says Steven Anderson, a partner with Montroy Andersen DeMarco (MADGI). “Though there will be physical design changes, there will also be new protocols and policies regarding health and wellness.”

Regarding the costs of all these new measures, Katsikakis suggests a “redistribution of expenditures,” rather than simply assuming post-pandemic strategies will automatically be more expensive for organizations. There might be less office space, but better and more frequent cleaning, she says. As one important example, cleaning and disinfection

of high-touch surfaces, like elevator buttons, doorknobs, and more, and switching to antimicrobial surfaces where possible, will have to be implemented as soon as workers are filtering back to the office.

“There will also be better wellness provisions,” says Katsikakis. “Over time, we’ll see a very different pattern of work — organizations will embrace more flexible work. The workplace will be a network of locations and this will shift how we manage resources.”

Shift to health and wellness

Pre-pandemic, occupants wouldn’t think twice about piling into an elevator to take them up just a few floors to their destination. That probably won’t be the case anymore, and so depending on the size of a building, facility managers need to figure out how — with wayfinding, signage, and designating certain stairwells entrance and others egress (if possible) — to make it easier for occupants to take the stairs, while being able to maintain social distancing, as well. That’ll both help prevent infection spread in a crowded, cramped elevator, and also simply give employees a quick burst of exercise.

Indeed, many strategies facilities managers should consider will have benefits both for active and preventive health. One thing we learned pretty quickly during the pandemic was that while healthy people were just as likely to contract COVID-19, they often handled the illness much better and recovered quicker than people who had underlying health conditions. For that reason, many people have made getting healthy a priority, and they’ll be looking to the workplace to help them further that goal.

This also means workplaces that prioritize health and wellness strategies in the post-pandemic world will be more attractive to top talent than in the past. “The creation of a safe environment for employees leads to higher retention,

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higher retention leads to better workflow efficiency, and efficiency leads to profit,” says Katie McHugh, design director for NELSON Worldwide. “We have also learned that people who feel healthy and safe are more productive and balanced in their work.”

But in the post-pandemic world, conversations will move well beyond what it means to keep occupants safe and include these conversations about active health and wellness, as well. “Safety has often dominated the conversation, as people need to feel secure in buildings to want to spend time in them,” says Garrett Ferguson, sustainable building advisor for Perkins and Will. “Health is just as critical, and we’ve seen growing studies and conversations regarding ‘healthy buildings’ ever since the rise of ‘sick build-

ing syndrome.' I think that recent events will elevate those conversations, and also bring health and wellness to the forefront of company priorities."

LEED certified buildings have been shown to command a premium for rent and a better ability to recruit and retain top talent, and many experts see that being the case for health and wellness-focused rating systems like WELL and Fitwel, as well. These rating systems add a bit of initial cost and a lot of complexity to any project, but even before the pandemic, experts touted the financial payback of using these rating systems in terms of improved productivity. With a premium of \$4 to \$5 per square foot, which might be on the high end, "you can get a 20 percent productivity gain for people who (have certified) space," says Carney. "That's a pretty minor investment, for a pretty major gain."

Like LEED certified buildings, WELL and Fitwel certified buildings also will be more valuable. "There is clear evidence that buildings that make health and wellness a centerpiece are simply worth more," says Scialla. "Health and wellness is not just an investment in people. By definition, it's an investment in the asset itself."

In many cases, it'll be up to the facility manager to keep occupants and top management apprised of these initiatives to ensure buy-in and to relate their effectiveness — financial and otherwise. "The communication of these new health and wellness guidelines and protocols is crucial," says Brigitte Preston, principal and interior design director for the Dallas office of Perkins and Will. "Change management is key to create new habits and to support employees in this new normal."

Green and well

Not everything in the post-pandemic world will be completely new. Many long-term changes to how facilities are designed and operated will simply require a higher level of focus on strategies that had started to become important pre-pandemic: daylighting, access to outdoor space, advanced air filtration, enhanced indoor environmental quality, better disinfection and specialized cleaning, and many more.

If many of these strategies sound familiar, it's because they've been part of many designers' and facility managers' green building plans for a long time now. But there will be a renewed focus on these areas of health and wellness that complement sustainability. "Improved air quality strategies may increase and regain priority — especially in light of COVID-19 being specifically linked to respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) symptoms," says Amy Leigh Hufford, interior designer for NELSON Worldwide. "These could include increased access to outdoor air, increased and improved air filtration, responsible material sourcing of non-VOC goods, and biophilic features such as moss that removes both toxins and particulates from the air."

Renewed focus on increased daylighting, views of nature, and higher prevalence of biophilic elements in design are prominent strategies both in health and wellness and green building rating systems. The benefits of these strategies for health and wellness — better concentration, higher productivity, improved mental health, and many more — are well documented. As well, improved energy efficiency and better indoor environmental quality are just two of the green building benefits that pay off.

"LEED and WELL go hand in hand, they're complementary," says Scialla. "They don't play off each other, they play with each other. Using WELL is not a tradeoff, it's really completing the sustainability equation." That's why, says Scialla, a large majority of the first crop of WELL-certified buildings are also LEED-certified.

The U.S. Green Building Council also announced it will add LEED Pilot credits on an ongoing basis as needed for strategies like social distancing, nontoxic surface cleaning, and air quality and infection monitoring, deepening the connections between LEED and health and wellness strategies post-pandemic.

Facility resilience as it relates to health and wellness strategies in buildings will also move to center stage. "Building wellness into an environment builds resilience," says Carney. "You'll need to work on rewriting disaster plans and building resilience into your company. Facilities managers will need to brainstorm ideas for these 100-year events."

Health and wellness, then, is at the center of the Venn diagram of sustainability and resilience. And if health and wellness wasn't important before, it certainly will be now in the post-pandemic future. Even after we've managed to get through this one, the threat of another, possibly even more disastrous, global pandemic still remains. And so, be prepared. Facility managers well know that their entire mission is suiting the building to its organization's goals and culture. At its base level now and into the future, that'll mean situating the building to keep its occupants healthy, to prevent infection, and to provide methods for active wellness. ■

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Open and inviting stairways have been used to encourage people to increase step counts and skip the elevator.

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