

Workplaces

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Destination Unknown: Where Business Travel Might Land Now That COVID-19 Has Arrived



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As COVID-19 uniquely forces workplace and hospitality experiences to radically adapt and innovate, this is an opportune moment for the two players to learn from each other. Though they may fundamentally serve distinct purposes, the overlap between the office and hotel industries has been imminent. Brands and designers were already blurring the lines and borrowing inspiration from the other category — manifesting in social lounges in offices and coworking spaces in hotels. As both industries reinvent themselves to exceed new consumer expectations, we will only see this convergence accelerate.

We identified eight shared components that drive experiences in both industries: service, journey, atmosphere, amenities, programming, localization, flexibility and technology. We evaluated what each industry historically does well, how COVID-19 is impacting those tactics and how workplace design can leverage hospitality cues as it evolves in this unprecedented climate.

Service

From the most luxurious resort properties down to limited service brands, the spirit of hospitality is ingrained in every touchpoint of a hotel experience while office settings typically lack any overt service presence. As offices big or small welcome back employees, this is a significant opportunity for workplaces to lean on hospitality for guidance. Often overlooked roles like office managers and receptionists will be redefined and elevated into pivotal positions that set the tone for the entire environment, curate the new experience and manage employee and visitor itineraries. And as hotels find their footing and reimagine what high-touch service and a concierge mindset look like in a post-COVID-19 world, corporate interior designers can continue to use hotel brands as a benchmark for success.

Journey

Let's face it, an employee journey through the course of a work week is highly monotonous at best and non-





existent at worst. Journeys are often limited to functions, resulting in teams feeling siloed. Hotel journeys, on the other hand, are carefully crafted around individualized rituals where guests are encouraged to engage as they wish across room types, amenities and activities. In the transition back to work, COVID-19 urges corporations to design a more purposeful employee journey that accounts for new safety protocols, plus culture-building moments of connection and celebration. Both industries also will be challenged to think about nuanced journeys that accommodate users with varied comfort levels and unique preferences.

Atmosphere

Both offices and hotels could elevate their brand activations through environmental design. High-end hotel brands invest in creating ambiance throughout their properties, but there's still an overwhelming need for true brand development, differentiation and translation in the hospitality industry. Similarly, leading corpora-

tions bring their brand values or visual assets to life in their office design, but most workplace aesthetics are limited to surface-level décor. Moving forward, both will need to consider how to communicate and convey cleanliness, safety and hygiene without sacrificing their atmosphere.

Amenities

Amenities are a hot topic for offices and hotels and will continue to shape the future of both industries. Major corporate headquarters and disruptive startups lean into a campus mentality that incorporates a myriad of meaningful amenities, while small to mid-sized businesses offer minimal options, if any at all. Prior to COVID-19, hotels were trending toward a more purposeful inclusion of wellness, food and beverage, coworking and cultural experiences. We will see that proliferate as hotels fight for relevance in a period of decreased travel. Meanwhile, employees found productivity and work-life balance as they were forced to work remotely amidst

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the pandemic. Amenities will arm employers with incentives to entice employees to come back to the office. A robust suite of amenities also enables businesses to keep employees and hotel guests contained on-site, which could offer a sense of control and safety.

Programming

More aptly positioned as “benefits” in the workplace, employers often boast value-add perks, training and programs to maximize employee recruitment, retention and engagement. In the hospitality world, leading brands create robust social calendars while budget brands fall short. COVID-19 is challenging both to deliver on those promises remotely. A rise in relevant and impactful virtual programming will shape the future success of each industry — from happy hours to fitness classes. Hotels are also extending experiences into the home through household and beauty products, modeling an approach for how to expand on brand meaning.

Localization

Workplace experiences are beginning to dabble with localized design nods that differentiate office locations from others in the same corporate portfolio, while boutique hotels demonstrate how to truly embody locale through brand positioning, storytelling and on-property activations. COVID-19 has sparked a heightened appreciation and emotional connection to local communities which will amplify employee and guest expectations for even more authentic expressions. Elevated amenities, service-driven tenants and programming partnerships will continue to support community ties. Localization can also be achieved through targeted considerations for specific team or user needs, driven by location.

Flexibility

Office culture paved the way for transformable environments through experiments with activity-based workstations and hoteling. As employees continue to work from anywhere post-COVID-19, the workplace will have to innovate around flexible work schedules and spaces. On the other hand, few hotel brands have

solved for true flexibility, though some have capitalized on converting lobbies and meeting rooms for various needs. Future innovation will blur traditional functionalities of public spaces, while also introducing new uses and considering additional revenue stream opportunities. In this instance, both industries can learn a great deal from each other.

Technology

Technology is an undercurrent across all experiential components. Though highly present throughout offices, it is primarily utilized as a tool, frequently an afterthought and still not considered holistically throughout the experience. Hotels have invested in digital key and app platforms to enable seamless control for guests, but really only at token touchpoints. COVID-19 simultaneously forced an acceleration of the adoption of these technologies while also illuminating the need for further integration throughout the hotel guest journey. Similarly, COVID-19 put pressure on corporate IT teams to advance virtual collaboration tools and lean into tech as a true experiential driver in physical workspaces.

COVID-19 is challenging all industries and the designers that serve them to revolutionize and rethink established experiences. Sometimes the best inspiration comes from adjacent or aspirational categories that reframe user needs and desires into unique solutions. As office environments look to evolve to ensure relevance, it's imperative that they leverage hospitality benchmarks as a source of strategies, tactics and innovation.

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Editor's Note: As a Senior Brand Strategist at NELSON Worldwide, Tori Tasch leads brand, experience and design strategy development through actionable insights, emergent trends and purposeful processes. From conducting market and consumer research to crafting strategic frameworks, Tasch balances high-level ideation with considered execution. Tori partners with NELSON's creative teams to bring brands to life, identifying the most relevant opportunities to push our client's businesses forward. Client experience includes Luxottica, Domino's, Colliers, Hilton, P&G, WS Development, Macy's, and many more.

