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Strategic Planning for a Post-COVID Workplace

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In a span of months, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has profoundly changed business as we know it. And the trajectory of the pandemic is still unfolding, with some parts of the world over their first wave while others have yet to peak. This has left companies with an intensely challenging situation—planning for a future that is riddled with question marks. Real estate planners typically forecast 2-5 years into the future, but that long-term outlook can feel daunting when every week brings fresh ripples of change.

Your organization should be commended for weathering the initial round of major disruptions caused by COVID-19. But now that you've begun adapting to known impacts (remote work, layoffs, decreased revenue etc.) it's time to navigate the unknowns. In this guide, you'll learn ways to adjust strategic planning using advanced technologies to design for reduced workforces and ongoing safety measures like social distancing. As with most strategic initiatives, this requires leadership teams to shift out of crisis management and into continuity planning.
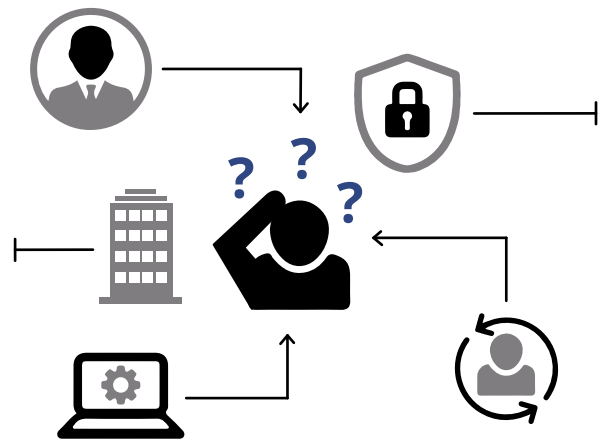
Assemble a Cross-Functional Team

Change management starts with a different type of leadership—a cross-functional team of stakeholders from across your organization. By combining their areas of expertise, this interdisciplinary cohort taps into a powerhouse of insights.

Developing strategic workplace plans can't be done in a vacuum. There's no organizational consensus to make sure the goals, objectives, and outcomes are aligned with other departments or the company's vision. Independent plans also fail to account for how a change will affect other areas of the organization or require collaboration with another department.

Imagine if HR decides that 50% of the workforce can return without discussing with Facilities how it's team will implement additional cleaning measures. Or if Security wants to reduce the number of entry points but doesn't have a conversation with HR about staggering when people arrive. A cross-functional team, however, avoids blind spots because critical divisions are included in long-term decision making.

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS PREVENT BLINDSPOTS BECAUSE EVERYONE IS INCLUDED IN LONG-TERM DECISION-MAKING

"One of the greatest benefits of a cross-functional team is that it fosters innovation. By bringing people with multiple areas of expertise together into a productive and encouraging work environment, you're creating fertile ground for fresh ideas and new, game-changing insights to flourish" (CMOE)[1].

1 https://cmoe.com/blog/9-must-management-skills-successful-cross-functional-teams/

Adjusting workplace strategies for a post-COVID world requires a big-picture mindset. In addition to members from your C suite, your cross-functional team can include:

- 🏢 Facilities
- 👤 Human Resources
- 🔒 Security
- 💻 IT
- 👤 C-Suite
- 📣 Marketing
- 👥 Front-line Managers
- 👥 Employees

Crisis vs. Continuity Planning

Crisis management is inherently reactionary. Even if your business has detailed crisis plans in place, there's no way to predict when an emergency will happen. Even with previous outbreaks of SARS, MERS, and avian influenza, few companies could have accounted for the mass disruptions caused by COVID-19. And that's left many in a perpetual state of crisis, narrowing their ability to think outside the box. As the global pandemic continues to evolve, organizations need to shift out of crisis management and into continuity planning.

Along with its twin change management, continuity planning is proactive and systematic. It's a deliberate and tactical pivot to a new organizational goal, company identity, or internal process. Its objective is to create a foundation for change with a clearly defined path to success. Strategic planning boils down to the difference between survive and thrive.

Just look at Google. In the 2008 economic downturn, co-founder Sergey Brin made a powerful statement in that year's Founders' Letter[2]:

> *"I am optimistic about the future, because I believe scarcity breeds clarity: it focuses minds, forcing people to think creatively and rise to the challenge. The dark clouds currently looming over the world economy are a hardship for us all, but by the time today's children grow up, this recession will be a footnote in history. Yet the technologies that we create between now and then will define their way of life."*

Brin understood that a company cannot get stuck in a cycle of negative thinking. Investing in today's successes leads to tomorrow's wins. His letter discusses then-emerging tools that are widely used more than a decade later: YouTube, Google Books, Google Maps, AdWords, and Google Docs. Had the company been caught in a continuous loop of crisis management, it might never have broken free to reach the heights it has today.

2 https://googleblog.blogspot.com/2009/05/2008-founders-letter.html

Your company is at a similar crossroads. Organizing a cross-functional team should start by creating a list of organizational priorities. Think of this exercise as a decision tree of essential needs. Your team needs to establish what are the most pressing concerns in this new climate and how to address them. These might include business-wide challenges like:

- $ Revenue
- Growth
- Market share
- Customer loyalty
- Talent recruitment and retention

There will also be department-specific issues caused by the pandemic, such as facilities being tasked with additional cleaning, HR navigating privacy concerns over temperature screenings, or IT having to install proprietary software on laptops.

Base Decisions on Data

If you don't want to be blown around by the winds of change, use data as your anchor. Data-driven decisions effectively and strategically serve your company in the long run. Without analytical insights, your cross-functional team will be lost at sea.

"It's important to first find people's pain points by gathering information from stakeholders in each department about what they need from the project. Then, in an initial meeting, come equipped with hard facts and data about all of the pain points contributing to the core issue"
-- MIT Sloan[3]

What are your top pain points related to real estate and workplace layout? Data will help your team work through new solutions. Every company will have unique considerations, but start with three areas:

1) REIMAGINE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE:

Many companies need to reexamine their definition of workplace experience. Rather than amenities like foosball tables and food trucks, everything is focused on safety and physical distance. Because there's no one-size-fits-all solution, you need good data before shifting your workplace.

2) EVALUATE SPACE:

Consider conference rooms, for example. These gathering points are generally off-limits or converted to single-person occupancy right now. But given the cost of real estate, neither is a long-term solution. Idle space, even for safety purposes, still represents a cost. But without usage data, you can't anticipate which is the right way to adapt those spaces.

3) TO RENEW OR NOT TO RENEW:

What if your lease expires next year and you want to calculate if it's better to leave meeting rooms untouched or to modify them? Or what if you want to determine if two people can use the conference room while still social distancing? Software like an Integrated Workplace Management System (IWMS) provides digital insights that can help your cross-functional team test different solutions.

3 https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-lead-effective-cross-functional-teams/

Run Tabletop Exercises

You don't know how employees are going to react to returning to the office. What was common before COVID-19 may never be common again. But part of strategic planning is accounting for both the impacts of internal and external circumstances. Everything from global and national disruptions to industry-specific and company-wide challenges should be examined. By running through a wide range of scenarios, your cross-functional team can map out how your organization will respond.

Your cross-functional team should imagine scenarios that are forecasted, likely, and even improbable. In this brave new world, nothing is too far-fetched to entertain. Because everyone is tasked to think like a futurist, your team dynamic must be based on trust and a willingness to hear all perspectives.

QUESTIONS YOUR TEAM MIGHT ASK:

- What if there is a third COVID-19 wave in 2022?

- What if travel isn't advisable in the next year?

- What if the majority of employees aren't comfortable coming back to the office?

- What if public transportation remains suspended or intermittent?

- What if there are ongoing shortages of cleaning supplies or personal protective equipment (PPE)?

- What if 50% of our workforce permanently works from home?

Your cross-functional team needs to be armed with quality data to work through these uncertainties. By planning ahead for disruptions, your company will have a playbook of strategic moves to help adjust your workplace to new realities.

Plan for Uncertainty with Confidence

Strategic planning remains the gold standard for assessing your organization's strengths and weaknesses against major disruption. Scrambled decision making never leads a company to firmer footing during an emergency. COVID-19 has only reinforced how important it is to anticipate challenging times and their impacts across your business.

When grounded by workplace data, a cross-functional team can navigate continuity planning from a solid vantage point. It provides them with a stable baseline to forecast necessary pivots. Data is the road to recovery.

Checklist: Strategic Planning for a Post-COVID Workplace

☐ *Assemble a Cross-Functional Team*

   ○ Create an interdisciplinary panel of stakeholders

   ○ Tap leaders from HR, facilities, security, IT, and even marketing

   ○ Task them with looking at the big picture

☐ *Shift to Continuity Planning*

   ○ Strategically plan for your new normal

   ○ Take this opportunity to uncover ways to thrive, not survive

   ○ Identify organizational priorities that need to be addressed

☐ *Base Decisions on Data*

   ○ Anchor your strategic planning with analytics, not guesswork

   ○ Identify your pain points for adjusting your workplace

   ○ Focus on concerns such as the employee experience, space allocation, and leases

☐ *Run Tabletop Exercises*

   ○ Work through a wide variety of scenarios

   ○ Consider situations that range from possible to improbable

   ○ Ask hard questions about future complications related to COVID-19

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