
# The Post Pandemic Office: Perspectives on the New Normal

Cities with their dense populations, crowded public transportation systems and busy high-riseoffice buildings, present many challenges in the prevention of the spread of the COVID-19. As Governors across the country prepare for the return to the workplace, employers and building owners have embarked on plans for re-opening the office.

On May 5, 2020, Zetlin & De Chiara LLP hosted a webinar that discussed the Post Pandemic Office. The expert panel including, Mitch Simpler, Jaros, Baum & Bolles, Andrew Demming-Gardiner & Theobold, Joanna Frank-Center for Active Design, Christopher Sharples-SHoP Architects, and moderated by Z&D Partner Tara Mulrooney, offered its perspectives on what steps should be taken immediately and how offices might change in the future.

To watch a recording of the webinar, click here.

To review the key information from the discussion, click here.

To review additional questions posed to the panelists and their responses, click here.

# Understanding Virus Transmission

While wistful for a return to the pre-coronavirus word, most people are pragmatic in their focus on returning to the office safely and as soon as possible. To understand the steps that need to be taken to create a safer work environment, panelist Joanna Frank stressed that it is important to understand how the virus is transmitted.

**Person to Person** transmission occurs when there is close proximal contact between an infected person who sneezes, coughs, spits or sheds while in close proximity to others.

**Surface to Person** transmission occurs when a surface becomes contaminated by an infected person who sneezes, coughs, spits or sheds on a surface. According to a recent New England Journal of Medicine study (get link), the virus remains contagious (active) for varying lengths of time, depending on the material—with copper being among the shortest and ceramics, followed by wood, the longest.

**Person to the Air**, Aerosol transmission occurs when the air carries the virus as particles float up and droplets fall onto people and surfaces.

# Steps to Take in the Office, Building Lobby, Elevators

The office is an important aspect of work life. Office interactions can help promote creativity and collaboration to produce better work product. These communal qualities of the workplace cannot yet be replicated when colleagues are in remote locations. However, the virus has changed how we approach work and the impact of such widespread and prolonged work from home will certainly influence and alter the way in which we proceed back in the office. Many of the solutions recommended by the panelists will entail an increase in costs, but those pertaining to air quality, as described by Mitch Simpler, can be done quickly without a large investment. Andrew Demming focused on changes that can be made by rethinking existing resources such as internal staircases, multiple exits and entrances, working/arriving/departing in shifts and retrofitting older buildings.

**1. Social Distancing: Maintaining a Six-Foot Perimeter**

**The Office**

- Move workstations to create a checkerboard configuration
- Leave empty chairs or remove every other chair in conference rooms
- Designate one-way direction for foot traffic
- Decrease density. Continue to work remotely
- Stagger the number people in the office, one third in the office, two thirds working from home
- Make use of communications technologies: ZOOM and other video conferencing applications and creative technologies such Miro and The Wild (augmented reality)

**Building Lobbies**

- Eliminate use of revolving doors
- Use handsfree turnstiles

- Stagger arrivals and departures
- Utilize multiple entries/departures
- Have clearly marked spacing, similar to a grocery store

**Elevators**

- Use the stairs instead, particularly for lower floors
- Limit the number of people in elevators
- Consider single use elevators
- Stagger arrival and departure times
- Make elevator buttons hands-free

**2. Fever Screening** is not a panacea and does not necessarily signal that someone has the virus. Sometimes people are asymptomatic. Fever screening will catch people who are ill and should go home.

**3. Cleaning and Sanitizing Protocols**

- Handwashing for no less than twenty seconds
- Follow-CDC Protocols for frequency and products to use for cleaning surfaces (link)
- Make office, common areas doors and switches hands-free

**4. Air Quality: Disinfect, Filter, Humidification, Fresh Air Intake**

**Disinfect**

- Ionization
- Probiotics (creates barriers)
- Chemicals
- Remove viral Loading from the Air Systems

**Filter**

- MERV15 removes 85-90% of virus [suggest putting with or immediately after the increase fresh air portion]
- Clean outside air

**Humidification**

- Virus thrives at 0-45% humidity
- Virus does not thrive in 45-60% humidity
- Most offices do not have humidification systems-follow the example of health care facilities which have been using artificial humidity in the winter and dehumidifying in the summer.
- Adding humidification will be easier in newer buildings

**Fresh Air Intake**

- Dilutes viral concentrations
- Reduces ability of virus to be contagious
- Increase air change rate inside the space
- Increase fan capacities

- Increase/modify distribution and intake locations

**5. Communication** is key to creating trust that employee's safety and security are being addressed.

Inform employees of:

- Steps building is taking to disinfect the lobby and elevator as well as office if this is applicable
- Steps the building is taking to avoid crowds on the lobby and elevators
- PPE being made available by management or ownership
- Steps the business is taking to avoid density
- Policy on WFH
- Sick Leave policy
- Steps the business is taking to sanitize the common areas
- Changes in work protocols to help prevent person to person contact

## Looking to the Longer-Term Future

Two of the over-arching questions addressed in the webinar were whether the virus signaled the end of the open-space plan for the office and whether working at home will become more commonplace. Chris Sharples offered this perspective, "One of the primary purposes of the office is to enhance collaboration and creativity among teams… (The office is also important for training and developing young people.) There may be no substitute for close proximity, but when working from home, technologies such as Zoom, Miro and The Wild are enabling people to artificially feel closer…When people need to work, heads down, private spaces in the office or at home is optimal. Design will evolve, but (remember), the world did not stop building skyscrapers after 911 or buildings near the water after Super Storm Sandy. This is temporary."

What does seem clear is that workspaces will be less dense, with greater flexibility about working from home, and greater and renewed emphasis on healthier environments. This will be manifested with more access to sunlight, nature and fresh air. The design of workplaces will likely involve antibacterial surfaces, more electronics to prevent touching and a greater use of technology to overcome distances. If there can be a silver lining from a pandemic, it is that it will result in a healthier workplace.

For the most reliable and up to date information, links to the CDC and other reliable sources of information can be found on the Zetlin & De Chiara website.