

BUILDING DIALOGUE

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Proximity: We Cannot Zoom Our Way to Business Success



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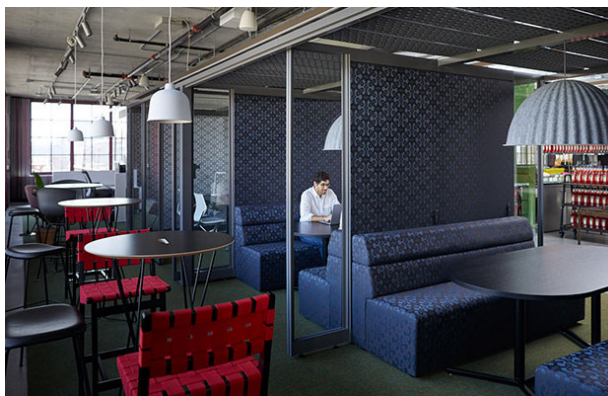
What would we have done over the last six months without Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other similar video-communications platforms? These technology-enabled collaboration tools have proven lifesaving for so many businesses. We'll never operate the same way again.

However, for all the utility they've provided, it would be a mistake to consider these platforms a replacement for in-person interaction. Some companies have already embraced remote working as a permanent solution, using the success of work-from-home during the pandemic as evidence that the physical workplace is unnecessary. Research into human-centered design strongly suggests otherwise.

The ultimate goal of business remains to optimize employee engagement, teamwork, and culture to help organizations thrive and reach new heights. The reality is that humans need other humans. Relationships inside and outside of the workplace are more important than ever. There is a vast amount of research that indicates a loneliness epidemic, and the volume and pervasiveness of technology tools in the workplace is a key contributor.

The best and brightest talent will continue to want to develop strong mentor and mentee relationships. Those relationships are better developed and nurtured face to face. High-performing employees will also continue to seek the 'super experience' and will be attracted to places that inspire them. With inspiration comes new ideas, innovation and collaboration. Place is powerful.

• **Proximity and the importance of the physical workplace.** I predict that proximity is a word we will begin to see and hear more in the coming months. Proximity is the natural human tendency to develop tight interpersonal bonds with the people and things that are the closest to us. Proximity exists at the foun-



Creative wall enclosures allow employees a safe way to work.



The silent silo offers a quiet place to work.

ation of every great team. It is why we want to work hard for others and be part of something greater than ourselves. It is why the physical workplace is critically important.

Every business will have to determine how much real estate it needs to achieve the right team alchemy while keeping employees safe given the ongoing pandemic.

Our industry's best real estate and architectural firms have provided extensive guidance regarding what organizations need to do to return safely. What is missing is how work will get done. We need to start with our human beings and understanding what they need to feel safe and be successful.

Human-centered design is a mindset that overlays design thinking to ensure that products and solutions are actually relevant and beneficial for the people they are intended to serve. Right now, for the workplace experience to be maximized, people need to feel safe and they have to want to be there. They must believe that it is the right place for them to be or else returning will be counterproductive. For our part, we have designed a timeline to help businesses sequentially make human-related decisions as well as the traditional facility-related decisions.

My biggest piece of advice to clients as their people begin returning to the office is to develop ways to celebrate the reason your workplace exists. It is no longer just a place to sit and get work done. We have proven we can more or less do that from home. Our workplaces need to become the catalyst for connection, to reinforce our cultures, and to build on the benefits of proximity.



Adaptable workspace is more important than ever.

• **Building in greater workplace flexibility.** While the far-reaching impacts of this pandemic are still largely to be determined, I remain convinced that monumental positive outcomes will come out of all we've discovered so far. We've learned that not only is there value in flexible workspaces – which was already clear from the rise in popularity of the coworking model – but that workplaces (the businesses themselves) can indeed flex to meet the needs of workers while ensuring business continuity.

Flexible workspaces and/or “workspace as a service” models originally emerged to support employees’ changing needs on any given day or over time. The design and use of real estate can shift and adapt to enhance the productivity and experienc-

es of employees on a given day, thus maximizing the potential of a company’s real estate portfolio. Our firm has long showcased and provided diverse work settings to give employees the option of selecting the environment that will help them produce the most inspired work outcome.

With safety in mind now, an even larger variety of spaces will emerge, especially in the open plan. Mobile collaboration tools and devices will transform previously stagnant environments into dynamic settings to work in teams or alone while maintaining distancing requirements. In response to the current situation, in addition to room scheduling devices, at our offices, we have developed an online system that will allow employees to reserve any seat in the building.

The flexible workplace is more about flexibility in business protocols and giving employees more choice in where they choose to work geographically to best accomplish their work for that period of time. As a company, we continue to support remote work with a primary goal of that setting providing the right atmosphere to accomplish “deep work.”

To attract the best and the brightest, the bottom line is that people want choice. We need to continue to believe in and invest in placemaking, provide flexible workspace, and give employees inspiring places where they want to be. If we do, our businesses will thrive, along with our people. \\\

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