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Short-Term Solutions for Returning to Business as (UN)Usual

Abramson Architects Offers Rapidly Implementable Ideas for the Post-Pandemic Workplace

CULVER CITY, CA: As architects and designers, we are constantly adapting to transformations in environment, culture and technology and we pride ourselves in our ability to craft designs that endure these constant shifts. The changes we have seen over the two months, however, have been unlike anything we have ever experienced in both suddenness and scale.

While employees are just getting settled into the work from home environment thanks to widespread “stay-at-home” orders, the C-Suite and other leadership groups are tackling the delicate challenge of transitioning their staff back to the workplace. In the healthcare market, we realize there may be a serious case for discontinuing agile desk configurations due to the increased potential for disease transmission in these settings. Conversely, many of the creative offices and technology companies we partner with have expressed that they plan to leverage their remote working infrastructures while they seek more reliable long-term solutions for face-to-face connections. These companies typically had a 50-60% rate of remote working, even prior to the pandemic-driven requirements.

We in California are looking ahead to how this impacts the reopening of non-essential facilities and creative offices, such as architectural firms. As such, we wanted to share some of the ideas we have been discussing with our clients over the past few weeks. Most of the following suggestions can be implemented quickly and inexpensively to better prepare your offices, and employees, for their return to “Business as (UN)Usual”.

Adjust Your Open Office Layout

We suggest implementing the “empty middle seat” concept, named after the ideal airline seating configuration for most of us who travel as couples. When combined with a rotating work from home schedule, this option allows density to be reduced without having to reconfigure your office’s existing desks and workstations. Here’s how:

- Create an alternating “Work from Home” schedule with at least two groups. We suggest engaging your staff in coming up with mission-driven or branded names for the groups
- Adhere to Social Distancing guidelines by staggering desk assignments within each group
- Increase the efficiency of this effort by alternating the desk assignments between the two groups
- Ask employees to limit the number of items on their desks to aid in deep cleaning efforts

Collaborate Safely

- Reconfigure conference rooms by removing every other chair, as needed
- Limit in-person attendees for meetings and augment by using “digital collaboration tools”
- Post room occupancy limits outside the physical room and on any digital calendaring software

Rethink Essential Office Procedures

- Clearly designate a distinct drop-off and pick-up area for all deliveries, including lunches

- All catered lunches should be ordered as boxed lunches since “family style” will not go over in the post-coronavirus workplace
- Convert to “touchless” technologies where possible, such as door handles and plumbing fixtures
- Reinforce (or introduce) an effective communication platform and prepare staff for the likelihood of rolling lockdowns or in the event a colleague contracts the virus
- Increase the frequency and visibility of cleaning efforts for sanitation purposes and employee peace of mind
- Make sanitization supplies readily available for employees and delivery personnel
- Introduce or reinforce HR Policies that allow employees to stay home sick, even for a minor cold
- Screen employees entering the office with a temperature test

One additional comment from our clients has been that buyers and decision-makers must remain cautious of vendors contacting your facilities groups offering “quick fixes” or expensive solutions that have yet to be tested in the real world. Our FF&E team suggests a better course of action is to contact your trusted design team or research your existing furniture system to see if they are currently offering any privacy/separation panels for items in your office. Reputable furniture companies are quickly adapting their products for the post-pandemic workplace and their architectural partners are still inviting trusted companies to participate in virtual product demonstrations of innovative products.

We have been continuously inspired by our incredible team of designers and architects who are working tirelessly to ensure that all our projects are progressing without delay or interruption. Witnessing the resourcefulness of our clients, our team, and the entire design community at-large has given us hope and optimism as we navigate the next difficult transition.

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Abramson Architects is a design firm based in Los Angeles, California. Our multi-faceted practice, initially focusing on single-family residences, now encompasses commercial, educational, healthcare, retail/hospitality, and institutional work. Our goal is to find the perfect balance in every physical space by merging boldly calculated yet deliberately spontaneous thinking to create experiential harmony. And our designs are inspired by an earnest desire to elevate the human soul, to facilitate connection, and to improve the lives of the people they serve.