

Planning the post-pandemic office

Employees will need more space, HVAC systems will have to be upgraded and commuting to New York could become less attractive

BY LINDA LINDNER

Low touch/no touch fixtures, glass partitions, sneeze guards, desks spaced six feet apart – these are some of the suggestions office owners are considering as they prepare to safely welcome back employees who abandoned their desks in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic to start working from home.

NJBIZ spoke to several experts in the state about how they're helping clients plan on reopening and readying their offices for returning workers. Businesses of all sorts will be getting back inside before there is a vaccine for the disease, meaning that integrating distancing measures into office plans is a must.

What will the new protocol be? While the extent of the changes remain unclear new design features might include higher partitions of either glass or acrylic; in this regard, companies like 3Form are already implementing some retrofits and benching systems. All types of touchless devices will need to be added throughout the space. Buttons, door handles — anything that could become a hot point of contact among workers would need to be reconfigured, as well as how individuals use their work stations and their technology. These items will need to have some sort of hands-free functionality.



Lance Blake, president, Rotwein + Blake. – AARON HOUSTON

Lance Blake, president of Livingston-based architecture and design firm **Rotwein+Blake**, believes the pandemic has changed our behavior and office space design will need to evolve to address the employees' need to feel safe at work. "As to the degree – we just don't know to what extent that will be. Companies are going to spread out. They will probably do it in shifts. Something like having workers come in only twice a week for certain industries and in others they are seeing they may not have to come in at all."

Many companies have realized that working from home is effective. People have become adept at technology and workers are proving to be productive without being physically in the office. Blake said he feels there will be a few companies that squeeze people in. But generally, there is a need now to be more spread out and get a six-foot pe-



From left, Interior designers work with Director of Interiors Cammy Hardison. From left, Kenha Mistry, Hardison and Taylor Maxson. – AARON HOUSTON

rimeter around each person.

Colliers, in its April 2020 COVID-19 special report said: "Some changes might be obvious, such as fewer common areas and automatic doors and elevators. Other changes could include antimicrobial finishes and upgrades to HVAC systems to include ultraviolet lights near the coils to prevent bacterial growth."

Cammy Hardison, Rotwein+Blake's director of interiors, said structural changes could include installing more sophisticated air filtration and HVAC systems to purge stale air. Hardison and Blake both cited LEED and wellness certifications for buildings and believe landlords will be more interested in better HVAC filtration. "These types of upgrades will be more expensive, but well worth the costs. Ventilation and fresh air intake are going to be very big," Hardison said.

Blake also said there will be discussions on how to handle office density as open offices come into question. What will replace the open office concept is still unknown, but square footage per employee could increase marking a shift away from the recent trend toward more density.

"What is going to be very interesting is the turnaround companies will go to from trying to densify as much as possible and going beyond the 100-square-foot per person, almost down to the 85 and lower – in suburban parking ... where your office build was being made as four parking spaces per 1000 square feet – this concept will go away totally."

The one thing that might turn out to an advantage in New Jersey is companies realizing that having employees commute into Manhattan as too big of an ask. Companies are realizing that working across multiple locations – by working from home – did not hurt collaboration as they initially thought. So executives may decide to lease space in New Jersey. "The PTSD mentality will come into play, and you'll see an exodus of employees out of the city as rents are cheaper in New Jersey compared to the city too," said Blake.

Peter Bronsnick, president of the New Jersey region at **SJP Properties**, said tenants who have one central headquarters are asking about ways to bifurcate operations across several sites, ways to manage staggered commuting, and how to make remote working as efficient as possible. In addition, tenants who are located in urban centers are thinking about suburban locations.

"When it comes to commercial real estate strategy, particularly with office properties there's going to be a healthy balance between the urban centers and suburban markets," said Bronsnick. "We're already seeing, and anticipate seeing many more, companies realize that decentralization of their operations is safer for employees who can now avoid mass transit, and smarter considering the time we spend commuting to urban centers. Opting to keep your headquarters in Manhattan and also taking space in New Jersey, where maybe half of your workforce lives and commutes from, creates an inherent business continuity plan. Additionally, the efficiencies in the New Jersey markets will drive down the cost of occupancy and will allow these companies to have more space per employee in their secondary office locations."



Peter Bronsnick; president, New Jersey Region; SJP Properties – SJP PROPERTIES

Blake and other architecture firms have also considered what builders and landlords will want do about their amenity spaces. Amenities have been the gravy of the new office spaces and residential buildings. And now cafeterias and fitness centers may not be as attractive. Designers may be tasked with how to change these amenities into usable spaces.