

cbt

RETURNING TO THE OFFICE:
THE QUESTION HAS CHANGED
FROM **WHEN?** TO **WHY?**



CONTEXT



IN 2020, OFFICE EMPLOYEES AROUND THE WORLD UNKNOWINGLY PARTICIPATED IN ONE OF THE GREATEST WORKPLACE EXPERIMENTS THAT WE'VE EVER SEEN.

Suddenly disconnected from the places and communities that we'd identified with over the years, professionals have found themselves in a disparate, disconnected, and uncharted place — both together and as professional communities. To be sure, some things have worked great; but now the challenges of a fully remote workforce are beginning to shape a new future back at the office. We're happier, we're healthier, we're bonding with home and family. So if we're finding that ever-elusive balance after decades of searching, ***why would we go back to what we had?***

Following a fall 2020 panel discussion with the NAIOP community, we reflect on some of the things we've learned, are still learning, and where we may go next.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE EFFECTS OF DISPERSING WORKFORCES?

COLLECTIVE INNOVATION HAS SLOWED

Innovation happens best when a few people are able to work through ideas in a free-flowing environment; we spent time designing places for social collisions. The common technology tools that we are using today in our remote work don't yet allow for that same exchange of energy and creativity upon which we used to thrive — and the collisions have disappeared. The loss of innovation opportunities isn't something that is easily measured, and it is likely being replaced by more intensive heads-down work that is done individually.

WITHOUT THE TACTILE, REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES AND OUR SHARED ENVIRONMENTS, IT HAS PROVEN A BIG CHALLENGE TO MAINTAIN THE QUALITY OF THE COMMON GROUND WE HAD.



COMPANIES' BELOVED CULTURES ARE SUFFERING

A company's culture is cultivated through years of shared experiences, in combination with strategic planning by leadership. Company events, shared team accomplishments, and the organic nature of a company's culture all contribute to the invisible glue that brings us together. Without the tactile, real-life experiences our shared environments, it has proven a big challenge to maintain the quality of the common ground we had. Those employees still in fully-remote working situations are, today, coasting on the shared culture that was created pre-COVID; and there is a common sentiment that this can't last forever.

Leaders of companies of all sizes acknowledge that their cultures rely on in-person contact, conversations, celebrations, and environment. Finding solutions to the upcoming hybrid workplace is top of mind for all company leadership teams. Technology is key to providing half of the solution. The other half lies in preparing the new workplace for safe, exciting, culture-rich spaces and experiences. **Do we need to reevaluate culture, or find ways to preserve what we once had?** Like with so many life scenarios today, we're likely looking at a hybrid of both.



TWO CRITICAL DRIVING FORCES OF HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS HAVE TAKEN A HIT FROM OUR NEWFOUND DISTANCE FROM EACH OTHER: LEADERSHIP AND MENTORSHIP.

THE REAL CONVERSATIONS ARE MORE CHALLENGING THAN EVER

Two critical driving forces of healthy organizations have taken a hit from our newfound distance from each other: leadership and mentorship. Previously, both of these happened in an organic fashion, and both benefited enormously from the face-to-face interaction that we had.

Virtual Leadership

When it comes to leadership teams with multiple constituents, getting all leaders on the same page is not as natural as it had been. Where once we could settle differences of approach around a table in one room together, we can't replicate this age-old method of consensus-building in the same way. One clear goal is to reunite leadership for the conversations that have forged so many solid companies, rather than operate in virtual and sometimes fractured spheres where the present circumstances can overwhelm those that we'll face in the coming months and years.

Leadership teams are looking to build safe and tech-savvy workspaces to allow better connections to happen in the new hybrid world of work. New developments include tech-forward conference rooms, collaborative online tools like Miro, Zoom, Pigeonhole, and others. Forward-looking companies are allowing — and supporting — employees who move closer to family many states (or countries) away.



Mentoring Virtually

In and out of the office, so much of what we learn is absorbed by accident. When we think about the impact of working physically apart from one another, our chances of overhearing something valuable or teachable decrease by about 99% (anecdotally speaking). Think of everything we used to do without realizing it: understanding how colleagues speak to each other and to clients or leaders; overhearing or seeing a valuable technique to accomplish tasks; and, most importantly, the ability to physically demonstrate experience through mentorship. These invaluable opportunities are all diminished in certain ways today. Now, conversations are planned to the minute, with agendas for even short exchanges. Some people are nervous on camera, others struggle to establish natural bonds through video calls. **How do we revitalize the ability to teach, coach, encourage, and support our colleagues if we never see them by accident?** How do we recreate incidental group conversations that inspire? Trial and error — another age-old method — is slowly becoming the teaching tool of today.

SO, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? AND DO WE DO IT ALONE OR TOGETHER?

THE IN-PERSON OFFICE ENVIRONMENT IS GOING TO NEED TO CHANGE IN ORDER TO DRAW PEOPLE BACK AND MATCH OUR NEW NEEDS.

When we have taken stock of the changes that we have experienced as a society, our workplaces will need to hold up to our new health concerns and work expectations. The workplace will no longer be a hive of tightly-packed workstations — it will need to be resemble more of an event space where work gets done. What will this look like? The end of the cubicle?

- **The new working suite will be made of a combination of the best of both your home office and work office:** the new office will be a blend of both comfort and rigor, without people having to choose one. After many months of working alone, employees will not be looking to revive open offices or the tightly packed environment for many hours and days at a time.
- **You'll have a different kit of parts than you do at home:** a variety of spaces designed for productivity that can't be replicated at home, and a hybrid of ways to accomplish your work, either alone, in pairs, or in small groups.
- **Technology will be needed more than ever:** technology and collaborative tools — all designed to meet your team's workflow needs — will be indispensable with some people in the office and others in various locations, "the new hybrid." Creating experiences that are seamless, more organic, and collaboration-based

through technology is a current and high-priority goal for companies everywhere. Struggling with devices, logins, hardware, and individual controls can be a thing of the past.

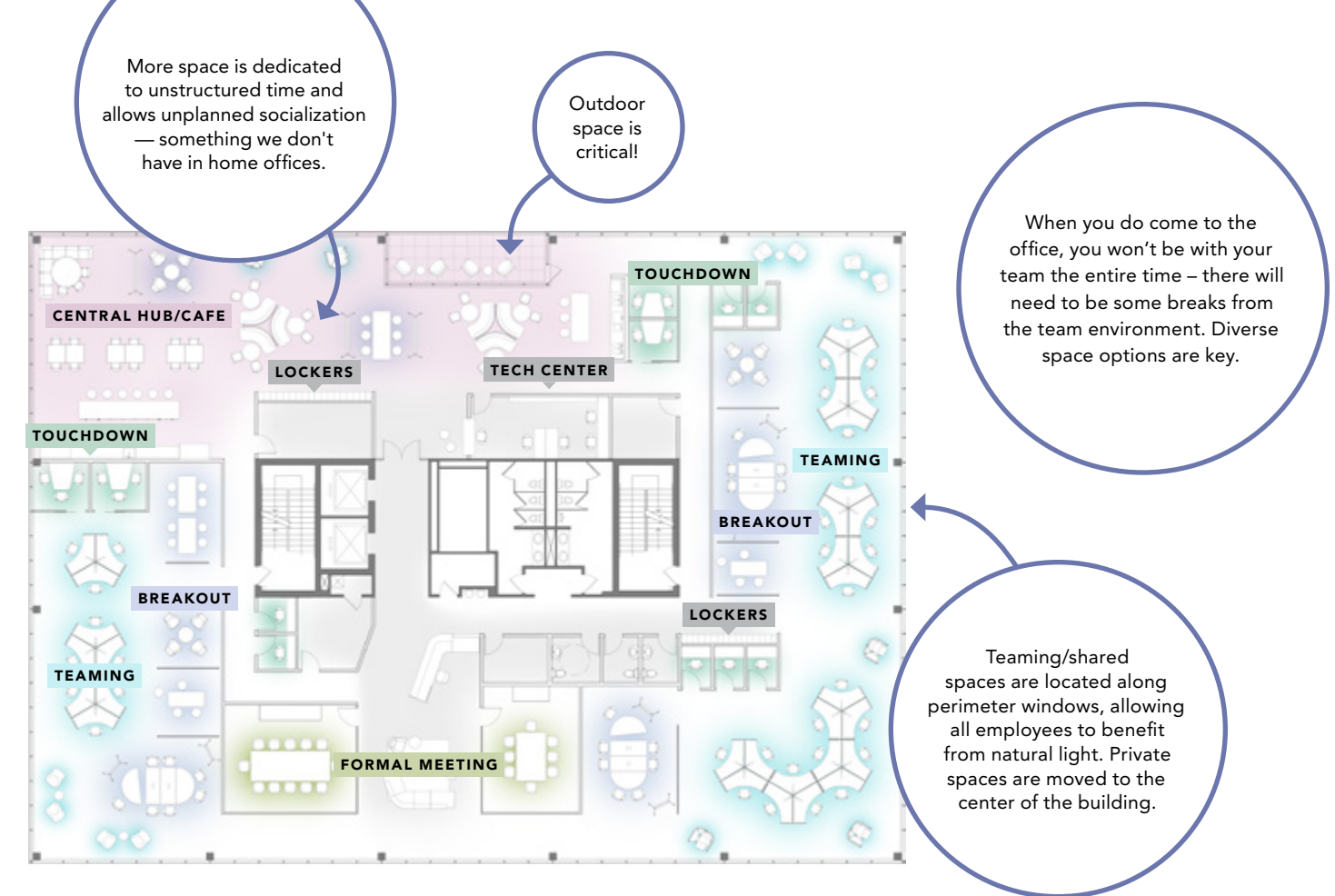
- It will have amenities that aren't about passing trends, but that are about reducing the friction in your life: ways of conveniently meeting safely with others and streamlining your week through air quality and filtration, controlled acoustics, and improved access to light and outdoors. Employers will need to think about supporting commuters' needs, catering meals, and specialized support services to improve the in-office experience for staff. Gone are the days of people spending time in the office playing ping-pong or picking up dry-cleaning; those are home-based activities.

THE NEW OFFICE ENVIRONMENT MUST HAVE PLENTY OF LIGHT, CLEAN AIR, AND SERVE AS MORE OF AN EVENT SPACE THAN A PLACE TO COME PUT YOUR HEAD DOWN AND DO FOCUS WORK.

- **This will be a new era of teamwork:** spaces that support teams who are sharing the same air and rooms will need to be specially designed to reintroduce the in-person work experience. Nontraditional furniture arrangements will be needed to engender creativity and innovation, and will certainly go through various generations as we learn along the way.

WHAT WILL COMPANIES DO TO STAY SUCCESSFUL AND EMBRACE THE FUTURE?

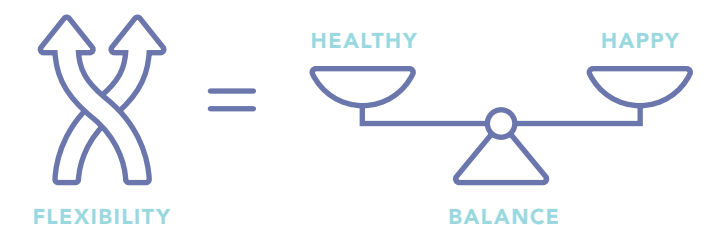
- Design a flexible workforce — own the home office as part of the office suite, including the individual quirks that come with it; help with Wi-Fi, ergonomic solutions, and individualized tech solutions.
- Consider a new generation of responsibilities within the organization, such as staff dedicated to managing the space, helping to guide users, coordinating technology — generally, approach the office more like a hospitality environment.



- Increase the fresh air in office space that will be part of the new "suite."
- Redesign of office space to be focused on team-oriented activities.
- Implement immersive, seamless tech solutions throughout the working environments.
- Create a schedule for specific teams to be in the office together — this could be a whole week at a time, or specific days of the week.
 - a. Adhere to that schedule — remember, **it's about the team.**
 - b. Create a simple reservation system that focuses on team-based reservation packages - this could be certain zones that include enclosed rooms and open seats — whatever a team might need while they are in the office.
- Focus on how to reshape your company to meet the imperatives of the future of workforce and workplace, and, ultimately, **create a model of organizational sustainability.**
- Create a space that motivates — and not simply satisfies — the people who will come to the office.

LET'S FOCUS ON WHAT WE'VE LEARNED THIS YEAR.

- **We are healthier and happier with more flexibility.**
- Our home environment is part of the new office suite, and employers need to pay lots of attention to what their staff has access to. **Employers now have new responsibilities in making the flex model work.**
- Clean air is critical — inside and outside — every building (this is nothing new, but is no longer an option).
- If we learn from this, and don't spend our energy trying to return to the past, **the all-elusive life balance can be achieved.**



The best talent, now and into the future, has a different set of expectations from their employer. We must understand that we've all been compelled to accept a new reality, and therefore the path to collective success needs to change. Not only the way that we succeed, but the very definition of success needs to be one that embraces a human-centric and technically-agile model from now on.



This piece was written by CBT principals Dave Madson LEED AP and Vickie Alani AIA, following a group discussion presented by NAIOP Massachusetts in September 2020 ("NAIOP at Noon: Why will employees return to the office?"), which featured Vickie Alani alongside design industry peers and workplace experts. CBT is a research-based design firm working worldwide to create transformative and responsive designs at all scales. CONTEXT is our ongoing series of design thinking relative to the changing world around us.

Dave Madson LEED AP
Director of Workplace
madson@cbtarchitects.com

Vickie Alani AIA
Principal
alani@cbtarchitects.com