

COVID-19 AND PLANNING FOR SOCIAL DISTANCING IN THE WORKPLACE

Practical Considerations by RMI Architects on
Developing 'Back to Work' Plans and adapting
offices to achieve social distancing

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As office based organisations begin to anticipate the lifting of the Coronavirus imposed lockdown and the government moves towards a phased reopening of the economy, business owners and office managers will need to ensure that employees can return to their offices in a way that is safe and that fully embraces strict social distancing requirements. This is likely to have major implications for how organisations run their businesses and on office based staffing levels, particularly if business premises are unable to safely accommodate the same numbers of staff as prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Most organisations will need to re-evaluate their existing space planning layouts to take account of social distancing, and many will need to develop new layouts to provide a safe working environment for staff and visitors. RMI Architects have been assisting public and private sector clients in reviewing their existing Spatial Planning layouts against social distancing guidance and best practice and preparing new layouts as part of those organisations' **'Back to Work Plans'**.

As many organisations will be grappling with similar challenges our Spatial Planning Team have been considering some of the key aspects that office based businesses will need to consider as part of developing their own 'Back to Work Plans'.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

In the short term all office based businesses will need to re-evaluate their current spatial planning layouts. Many are currently based on medium to high density open plan workspaces and businesses will need to consider how these can be quickly adapted to accommodate the new world where social distancing is the norm for the foreseeable future. Many businesses will also need to reflect on the immediate and long term impacts of the enforced exodus of office based staff to working from home, and consider how this will transform workplace dynamics in terms of work-life balance and productivity in the months and years ahead. In the shared office and co-working sector where flexible work spaces, hot-desking and casual break-out spaces aimed at encouraging social interaction have been part of the attraction, there will likely be significant challenges ahead. Social distancing will also pose major difficulties for high density call centre type arrangements.



It is impossible to predict exactly how the different types of office workplaces will be transformed by COVID-19 and to what extent such changes will be short, medium or long term. However, it seems inconceivable that there will not be major implications in the immediate to near future.

In the short term organisations will need to prepare risk assessments and develop 'Back to Work Plans' that can demonstrate to their staff, visitors and potentially to public health authorities that they have fully embraced guidance on hygiene and social distancing. Ultimately employers will need to be able to demonstrate that their workplaces are safe environments for staff and visitors. While there is consistent and generic advice in relation to hand-washing and hygiene, the implications of how social distancing will affect workplaces will need to be considered on a case by case basis and developed alongside the operational requirements and staffing strategies of each organisation.



WORKSTATIONS AND DENSITY

Typical occupant densities for offices tend to range between 5-10m² per person but can often be much higher, particularly in call centre type environments. With social distancing of 2m applied in offices this would require densities of 10m² or more per person and for many businesses this will have a major impact on how and where workforces are deployed. While it may still be possible for workplaces to operate at greater densities than the 10m², compensatory measures will need to be introduced. This could involve dividers between work-stations, back-to-back desk arrangements, provision of face masks to employees or any combinations thereof. In any scenario, it will be imperative that plans are risk assessed, discussed and agreed with employees and their representatives to ensure employees can have confidence that appropriate safety measures are being implemented in the

workplace environment. In the short term COVID-19 is also likely to see many organisations take the plunge and move as much as possible to the 'paperless office', to ensure that desks, keyboards and computers can be frequently cleaned. In the shorter term consideration will need to be given to how organisations can best adapt existing office furniture and avoid or minimise any need to adapt services such as data and power cabling, lighting and ventilation. Looking beyond the immediate need to reopen their businesses employers may also consider a return to more subdivision and cellular office arrangements.





- 1 Safe zones as part of flooring design around workstations
- 2 Clean desk policy throughout
- 3 Divider screens between where face-to-face desks and where 2m social distancing not achieved
- 4 Hand sanitiser & tissues at each workstation
- 5 Closed shelving units for easy clean
- 6 Carpet tiles denoting clockwise direction of movement
- 7 General signage throughout



CIRCULATION

While it is possible to reduce workplace densities by simply reducing the number of staff in a given area, creating social distancing in circulation routes can pose greater difficulties, particularly in corridors, aisles, doorways and lobbies where there can be pinch points and potential for congestion. In this instance consideration will need to be given to developing 'one-way' systems within offices and ensuring these are clearly communicated with directional and social distancing signage and alternate stairwells may need to be used for staff travelling up and down floors.

MEETING ROOMS

With most meetings now moved onto Microsoft Teams or Zoom, meeting rooms can either be 'thinned out' to reduce the number of meeting participants to achieve social distancing or be repurposed as office space to allow more staff to be office based. In the latter scenario consideration may need to be given to the provision of services to accommodate a new layout.

RECEPTION AREAS & LOBBIES

As the first place that visitors and staff will experience on arrival at the workplace it will be important for organisations to demonstrate that they are dealing seriously and competently with the threats posed by COVID-19. Seating areas will need adjusted and perhaps some seating removed. Magazines, journals and marketing material which have tended to adorn lobbies will need to be stripped back. Automated doors and sign-ins will become more commonplace to avoid the need for staff and visitors to touch door pulls and handles. Circulation to and from lobbies and limitations on the number of people using lifts will need careful consideration and management. Hand sanitiser should be readily visible and available in reception and lobby areas, together with clear signage that COVID-19 Management Protocols are in effect within the premises.



KITCHENS & BREAK-OUT SPACES

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges is what role staff kitchens, shared dining areas and break-out spaces will have going forward. Where up until now these areas have enabled staff to socialise while preparing lunches, snacks and topping up on tea and coffee, they have inherently involved a high volume of staff sharing small areas. This now throws up obvious risks in terms of both airborne and surface transmission of COVID-19.

Clearly a combination of frequent cleaning, provision of hand gel in high contact locations, restrictions on numbers in kitchens at any one time, staggering of staff break and lunchtimes and encouraging staff to bring in home-made lunches will all need weighing up by employers.



SIGNAGE



Communication will be hugely important, both in terms of keeping staff informed and engaged and also to provide clear direction on company policies. In terms of adaptation of existing offices a range of signage types will be required: directional signage to indicate people flow where one-way systems have been introduced; generic hygiene signage with more emphasis on 'high-touch' areas perhaps at receptions and around shared use items such as printers and photocopiers; more generic social distancing and spacing signage; and signage indicating maximum numbers in meeting rooms, kitchens, receptions etc.

It is also possible to incorporate social distancing into the interior design concept and finishes for example through the flooring design which could denote safe zones around workstations and carpet tiles which indicate circulation routes.

Signage can of course be at its most basic quickly generated in-house and quickly deployed or for the more blue chip companies can be developed in line with their established corporate branding.

SERVICES & TECHNOLOGY

Although the immediate pressure will be on 'thinning out' and re-organising workstations and circulation to accommodate social distancing there may also be implications on data and power cabling, lighting and ventilation that may need to be considered. With increasing emphasis on limiting or avoiding 'touch-points' there is likely to be an even greater tendency towards automated access control at doors and lifts, whether through voice, facial or fob activation. Much of this technology is already widely developed and in use at the higher end of the corporate scale but this may now become more standard across mid-level office accommodation.



SURFACES & MATERIALS

In recent years there have been significant developments particularly in the healthcare and laboratory sectors in relation to nano-coatings, anti-microbial, anti-viral and anti-fungal coatings. Such developments could be particularly focused on high 'touch-point' locations such as at door handles, kitchens and shared surfaces. In the short term though, the emphasis will likely remain for most employers on creating clear and easily cleanable surfaces and good hygiene practices.



USEFUL LINKS

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/sites/default/files/Covid-19-Working-Through-This-Together.pdf>

<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>

<https://www.hseni.gov.uk/publications/example-covid-19-risk-assessment-template>

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5eb97e7686650c278d4496ea/working-safely-during-covid-19-offices-contact-centres-update-11-may.pdf>

IN SUMMARY

As countries across the globe begin the process of moving from strict lockdowns and allowing businesses to reopen, the prevailing advice is that social distancing is going to be with us for some time.

It is also clear that public health authorities and staff will expect that in order to reopen, businesses will need to ensure strict social distancing measures are put in place. At present it is unclear whether there will be any scaled up compliance checks in this regard, which is something that is under consideration in other countries. Irrespective of any such compliance checks it is clear that organisations will need to prepare risk assessments and plans for their workplaces that embrace social distancing requirements, give confidence to staff and visitors that they are working in a safe environment and allow organisations to plan how and where their workforce can be deployed.

If you are starting to think about reopening your office and are looking for help in terms of spatial planning to create a safe working environment then please contact us at workplaceplanning@rmi.uk.com.



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