

## PLANNING FOR A POST-COVID WORKPLACE

In some ways the past eight months have felt like eight years and in other ways the months have flown by. Many of us have journeyed through the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally, acceptance – some more than once, even over the course of a single day! Most of us do not want to accept that we have entered into a multi-year “new normal” or we continue waiting for the day that we can return to “normal” as we knew it in 2019. The truth is no one really knows when, or if, life will ever fully return to the way that it was twelve months ago. Or what aspects will return to a pre-Covid life versus what will stay permanent.

Having to reactively shutter most businesses in March 2020 was stressful. While some people have always worked remotely, the sudden and unexpected shift to 100% remote work was a drastic change for most employers and employees. Suddenly we were thrust into a new world of online meetings via “Zoom” and the chaos of life going on behind us, able to be seen by all. Work/life balance was both no longer feasible and suddenly all-consuming. But slowly, day by day and week by week, we did find that balance. Previous road warriors enjoyed lunch with their preschoolers; conference calls were taken on walks with AirPods keeping us plugged in; families were moved to geographical locations we thought would be reserved for our retirement; furry friends became our new officemates. We welcomed our colleagues and bosses into our homes, into our family life, into our kids’ classrooms. We showed humility, grace, understanding and compassion for one another. We found silver linings. And through it all, we worked. We gave presentations, we collaborated, we brainstormed; we bought and sold stocks, expanded business offerings, and closed deals.

When there is a vaccine and life can resume more normalcy than we saw in 2020, what will remain? What will the future of workplaces look like? There is no crystal ball, no time traveler who can share their wisdom. We have the power to create the world in which we want to live and work. We have been given a gift; the gift of curiosity and wonder, of reflection and introspection, of imagination and change!

When Chicago burned down in 1871, the City had no choice but to rebuild from scratch. The thoughtful reconstruction allowed Chicago to intentionally rebuild the streets on a grid system, thus making this large city incredibly manageable and easy to navigate. 2020 has been one giant fire and now it is time for us to intentionally rebuild how our workplaces look and feel. We do not have to return to the status quo that was 2019 where many of us worked from 9-5 in an office building, spending most of the day sitting in front of a computer or meeting together in enclosed conference rooms.

Some of us have loved the ability to work remotely. Some of us miss our colleagues more than we expected. For some companies, collaborations have continued easily despite the distance, whereas others are feeling stifled without the organic brainstorming sessions in the breakroom. How do we know what to do next as we return to the idea of a “post Covid world?” Now is the time to be proactive and plan for the future of the physical workplace and the workforce!

- 1.** Start with communication. Communicate with colleagues across all levels, positions and pay grades. Allow a chance for open and honest dialogue, understanding that these will likely be emotional conversations. Offer a safe place for feedback. And then listen and reflect on what you hear.
- 2.** Think about your people. Do your people want to come back to the office five days a week? Two? Do they want to shift the hours that they work so that they have more work/life balance? Do they want to only be on the road a couple days a week or a couple weeks a month? Do they have to live in your city or can you expand the reach of your applicant pool to find the most qualified, best fit for your company?
- 3.** Think about your physical spaces. If the office will not be filled up moving forward, is the same physical space going to be needed heading into 2021? Could you keep the space and re-imagine its use? Could you swap individual offices for more shared spaces to encourage future collaboration? Could you share your space with another company?
- 4.** Put pen to paper and come up with some solutions. Work through various options. Flexibility isn't a “one size fits all” model. Flexibility is just that – flexible. What works for one company cannot and should not work for another so while it is ok to review what peers are going to do, make the plan that fits best for your own company.
- 5.** Continue to stay flexible and open-minded. Recognize that the plan you put into place might need to be done on a trial basis and or tweaked as you go. Remote work is only possible with clear communication and trust so ensure you have the strongest team in place to set the company and the employees up for success.

Flexibility does not mean every company needs to be 100% remote – most companies will not thrive under that model either. Flexibility means really evaluating your own company's needs, the feasibility of implementation, taking your employees' opinions into consideration and being willing to evaluate and make changes to the new plans as necessary. Flexibility is reacting to the world we live in now and proactively positioning yourself to be stronger, more nimble and more willing to stay open-minded as we move forward together.

## MEG STANDING

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