

# Staggered seating, upgraded HVAC among changes in pandemic-era office design

But companies shouldn't hit the panic button, and solutions will vary, experts say

BY DOUGLAS J. GUTH

Among the countless challenges presented to companies by the coronavirus pandemic is how to reassess office layouts. Employees returning to work may be welcomed by sanitation stations, seating prioritizing safe physical distance and Plexiglas dividers that act as a kind of "sneeze guard."

However, anyone mulling a COVID-era office redesign doesn't have to lose their cool, or their wallet, said local design and architecture firms interviewed by Crain's.

"Sheer panic is the first reaction: 'We're all going virtual for the rest of our lives,'" said Debbie Donley, co-founder and principal of Vocon, which serves as architect of record for Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. and Jones Day, among other high-end clients. "Our advice is to be patient, to not overcorrect and tear apart your workplace. Don't spend a bunch of money not knowing what you're getting into. Space plans can be about phasing people back without making major modifications."

Vocon is conducting webinars and client teleconferences to determine how to safely accommodate workers, particularly in creative settings where face-to-face interaction is preferable. Vocon's Prospect Avenue headquarters in Cleveland is operating at 50% capacity, staggering employee schedules throughout the week and reducing conference room capacity.

As not every employee needs to be physically present at all times, busi-

nesses may opt for smaller meeting spaces that foster collaboration through virtual innovation. Downsized conference areas harnessing seamless telecommuting technology can replace rooms seating dozens of people without losing engagement. Donley envisions a near future of "innovation lab"-type spaces with the ability to define organizational culture.

"It's a really exciting time," Donley said. "There's lots of opportunity to move away from what were non-transparent organizations to transparent spaces that are dynamic, thoughtful and flexible."

## Making measured changes

Earlier this year, architecture firm Bialosky Cleveland released a pandemic workplace guide for companies considering a return to the office. To foster cleanliness and safety, organizations are adding sanitation stations as well as directional signage that navigates traffic through a space.

Infrastructure upgrades are a necessity for businesses eyeing worker wellness, said Ted Ferringer, business development director at Bialosky. Improving air quality and ventilation — thought to be a key factor in mitigating virus spread — may mean replacing an HVAC system entirely.

"Regardless of space design going forward, there will be probably be bigger changes to HVAC so offices can have an increase in fresh air," Ferringer said.

Bialosky associate principal Tracy Sciano Vajskop said collaborative out-



door workspaces — already trending pre-pandemic — are getting a closer look as 2020 draws to a close. Companies are installing monitors and other devices to conduct meetings in these open-air, café-like spaces.

"We're going to see a combination of everything, but it's going to be specific to each organization," Sciano Vajskop said. "What we tell clients is no one size fits all."

Social distancing guidelines recommend maintaining at least 6 feet between individuals to reduce the potential of COVID-19 transmission. To that end, some businesses are focusing on movable, lightweight furniture solutions — lounge chairs, small tables and more — to provide adequate distance in shared spaces.

Sciano Vajskop cautioned executives against overreacting, and subsequently overspending, in response to the latest pandemic headlines. Furniture manufacturers are flooding the market with Plexiglas screeners when companies might be better served integrating functional sanita-



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Companies can limit the capacities of their conference rooms, like this one at Vocon seen before the pandemic, to help promote distancing. | MATTHEW CARBONE

tion areas into the workspace.

"People are putting up screens without knowing the science behind them," said Sciano Vajskop. "The virus may be able to pass over screens."

### Long-term changes possible

Office retrofits are filling the workdays of Sol Harris/Day Architecture

Inc. of North Canton. Chief executive officer Matt Sutter said clients are requesting electronic foot sensors and hand-swipes for doors in high-traffic areas. Substituting manual flush valves with touchless toilet sensors is another popular ask in the COVID-19 age.

Office "hoteling," a rising design trend that eliminated assigned seating in shared workspaces, will at least be temporarily paused even as companies rely more on telecommuting.

"You would find a desk, and that's



Architecture firm Cleveland Bialosky helped create an open design at ABA Insurance Services in Shaker Heights even before the pandemic. | CHRISTIAN PHILLIPS PHOTOGRAPHY

your desk for the day," Sutter said. "That's just not something people want to do."

The pandemic won't spell the end of the corporate office, but there could be permanent changes in the geometry of workstations, Sutter said. Rather than sitting people face-to-face, you may see checkerboard or

staggered workstation patterns. Replacing desks with more private offices is another option for companies concerned about keeping workers healthy in an open-plan office.

"There's been a push for (spaces) with fewer offices, but that number is going in the other direction," Sutter said. "Our clients are not going to



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rush to judgment, especially with a lot of firms still working from home. They're taking a wait-and-see attitude. It's the long-term onboarding of employees that there's some nervousness about."

Ferringer of Bialosky said the most innovative companies will remain flexible when rethinking their office blueprint in a COVID-19 world.

"They'll work through iteration rather than spending six to nine months trying to perfect a thing that doesn't work," said Ferringer said. "I don't think the open office will go away, but we will see a new version of it."

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