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In-Person Still Matters

Post-COVID Work Environments are Challenging

The post-COVID 19 work environment is proving challenging for all types of businesses. The following are among crucial strategies for corporate clients and EAPs to consider in working together to develop the most efficient, and yet safest workplaces possible.

Remote meetings have kept many businesses going during the pandemic. But frankly, Zoom has its limits. As companies open back up, leaders are realizing that face-to-face meetings could really be beneficial—as long as those faces are at least six feet apart!

“Remote work may be the new normal, but there are also times when getting everyone together in the same room is extremely valuable,” says Howard Tiersky, owner of New York City’s Innovation Loft, which has made extensive updates for the coronavirus era. “Periodic in-person meetings—where you are thinking, strategizing, and innovating in physical proximity—make daily remote work far more effective.” For instance:

❖ *When kicking off a complex project or in other circumstances when it’s necessary to build strong relationships.* There’s a sense of connection and empathy that just can’t happen over video. Relationships are always the key to long-term business success, so from time to time teams **must** meet in person.

❖ *When tackling tricky or complex problems.* Being able to whiteboard together in person is still far better than doing so online.

❖ *When lengthy meetings are unavoidable.* It can be very demanding to remain on a conferencing platform for full-day, or even half-day, sessions. In-person meetings are far more natural and productive.

❖ *When brainstorming is necessary.* Idea-sharing is faster and clearer. People don’t have to wait to talk but can just jump in, and it creates a different kind of synergy (one idea building off the other).

❖ *When people need to be fully engaged.* Let’s face it; while on Zoom, it’s just too easy to turn off your video and throw in a load of laundry or even take the dog for a walk!

Challenges Abound...

But putting social distancing and other transmission prevention guidelines into practice is easier said than done. Doing so can be very challenging for any number of reasons:

❖ **Traditional corporate conference rooms aren’t particularly COVID-safe.** A room designed for twelve people to sit around a fixed table may hold only three or four people when seats are spaced six feet apart. Space across many conference tables is less than six feet, so meeting attendees cannot sit across from one another safely.

❖ **Walls behind seats in most conference rooms are often only a few feet back.** This means once the room is occupied, a safe exit can only be done starting with those closest to the door. What if someone needs to go to the bathroom? Everyone between that person and the door would also have to leave the room to maintain the six-foot social distancing zone.

❖ **Most masks block half the face from view.** It can be difficult to hear clearly, interpret facial expressions, and sometimes even identify people.

❖ **Most companies aren't staffed to disinfect rooms after each meeting.** Conference rooms are often used by team after team, and yet we're told the virus can live on surfaces for a period of time. In addition, many surfaces used in corporate environments, such as upholstery and carpeting, are porous and therefore not optimal for rapid disinfection.

...But Certain Guidelines are Effective

The following are guidelines that Tiersky followed as he converted his facility into a social distancing meeting space. Keep them in mind as solutions are sought for in-person meetings and other onsite work:

ENABLING SOCIAL DISTANCING

➤ **Avoid elevators.** Elevators present a huge challenge for social distancing. Tiersky is fortunate that his facility is on the second floor and has two stairways from the lobby, allowing rapid entry without the close proximity of elevators.

➤ **Make sure there's plenty of SPACE.** The Innovation Loft, with 6,000 square feet of an open floor plan, normally houses groups of up to 120. Tiersky has reconfigured it for groups up to 30 using an innovative social distancing layout. "Each participant has a seat spaced over six feet from any other. But it's more than just sitting in one place," Tiersky says. "We've created a 'racetrack' walking path on the outside perimeter of our large space, which is used in only one direction and is six feet back from the seating area. In this way, participants can go to their seats without coming close to others and can exit at any time without coming near other seated participants."

➤ **Be sure food is delivered safely.** Buffets are a common way to serve food and beverages at meeting facilities, but they are out of the question under pandemic conditions. The Innovation Loft has gotten around this problem by allowing participants to text attendants when they want a drink or snack. Items are brought to each person's

station by a masked attendant and left on that participant's personal service table, six feet behind their seat. After the attendant leaves, the participant can retrieve their food while still observing social distancing.

➤ **Leverage technology to avoid accidental closeness.** Even with protection, participants may accidentally forget social distancing and approach one another. The Innovation Loft issues each participant a proximity detector—powered by the social distancing app Social Safety—that buzzes when someone comes within (approximately) six feet of another person to remind them to keep their distance.

“Tiersky gives all meeting participants the option to use clear face masks, which enable facial expressions to be easily seen.”

REDUCING GERMS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

➤ **Insist on fever checks.** “We have contactless equipment for our clients, and any participants with a fever are asked to head home,” explains Tiersky.

➤ **Be vigilant about disinfecting.** Any facility used for meetings needs to be disinfected vigorously between every session. At the Innovation Loft, meetings are typically half- or full-day sessions, so it means needing to thoroughly disinfect only once or twice a day. The Innovation Loft has hardwood floors, and they are disinfected each night, as are all hard surfaces. Seats have disinfectable surfaces (no plush fabric) and are also disinfected each night. All surfaces are also wiped down with strong disinfectant between every meeting. Lastly, during the day, attendants who re-

main six feet away from participants, use UV wands to add additional disinfection to surfaces.

➤ **Be careful about infected air.**

Many studies have shown that viruses can be carried by HVAC systems throughout a facility. The Innovation Loft is installing a UV irradiator in its air conditioning system to reduce this possibility. The facility's heat is provided by a hot water boiler system that does not circulate the air.

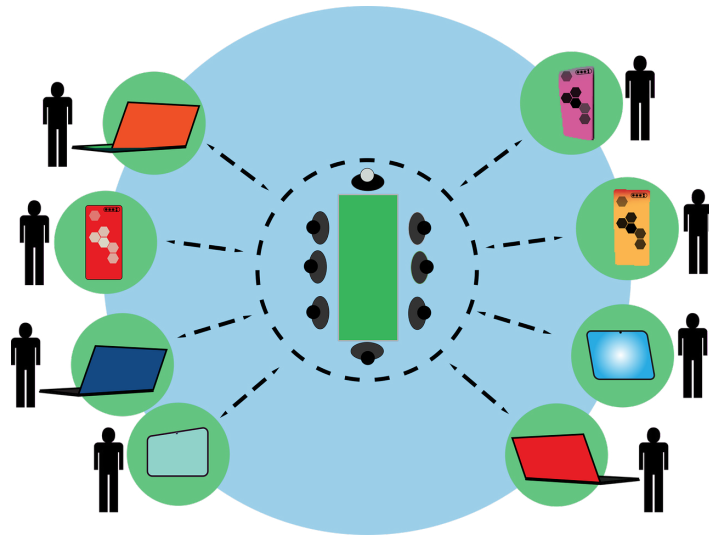
➤ **Account for the “shoe problem.”** Scientists warn that one way disease can be spread around a facility is through shoes that can track virus in from outside. Tiersky gives participants two options to avoid this: They are given a bag to place their shoes in on entry if they wish to go shoeless, or shoe “booties” can be used to avoid germs being tracked onto the floor.

➤ **In general, make sure the space is in full compliance with new OSHA guidelines.** “The Innovation Loft has been scrupulous about making sure every detail is in compliance, and of course, we go far beyond those requirements,” says Tiersky.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS

➤ **Provide see-through masks for participants.** “Masks are a common tool to reduce disease transmission, but regrettably, they also reduce communications,” Tiersky says. “Non-verbal cues, including smiles and other facial expressions, go a long way toward building trust and creating strong relationships.” Tiersky gives all meeting participants the option to use clear face masks, which enable facial expressions to be easily seen.

➤ **Maximize audio amplification.** While someone can typically hear a fellow meeting



attendee who is speaking six feet away, if you have a meeting of more than four or five people, some colleagues may in fact be over 20 feet away. That's a long way to be heard when speaking in a normal voice. As a result, Tiersky provides microphones at each seat so participants' voices are subtly amplified and can be heard by everyone in the meeting.

➤ **Make whiteboarding easy and effective.** Being able to draw on whiteboards is a classic and highly useful collaboration technique during meetings. Tiersky provides one behind each participant's seat. If a participant is sharing their whiteboard thinking with the whole room, a camera is used to put their whiteboard content up on screens around the room, similar to how one might share a computer screen.

Summary

The bottom line? The increasing demand for COVID-safer meeting spaces reflects the realization that business is all about connections, and connections happen best in person. ■

Howard Tiersky is a successful entrepreneur who has been named one of the “10 Digital Transformation Influencers to Follow Today” and by Enterprise Management 360 as “One of the Top 10 Digital Transformation Influencers That Will Change Your World.” For more information, visit impactfulonlinemeetings.com.

When a Teleconference is Still the Way to Go

In order for a teleconference to run smoothly, participants must follow certain rules of etiquette. Consider the guidelines below for your teleconference – especially for first-time participants.

Be on time, and stress the importance of being on time to other participants.

If someone does arrive late, don't immediately cut into the conversation to introduce the newcomer. Wait until there is a pause, and then simply say something like, "Sorry for the interruption, but it seems that John Doe from Chicago has joined us."

Choose a location with little background noise.

If some background noise is unavoidable, use the mute button when you're not speaking. Simply turn off the mute feature when you want to contribute to the conversation.

Select a phone with an attached headset.

Cellular and cordless phones often add annoying static to the call. Speakerphones can also be a pitfall because they tend to pick up a lot of background noise. In addition, speakerphones can make it sound like you're speaking into a tunnel, worsening the feeling of remoteness to the meeting.

Turn off the call waiting feature.

Everyone in the conference can hear the "beep" as someone tries to reach him or her on the other line. Again, this is distracting and annoying.

Identify yourself before speaking.

It's essential to be clear who is doing the talking, especially if: A) The meeting is NOT being recorded; B) Someone is taking minutes.



Address people by name.

Again, this is important to keep everyone on the same page who is doing the talking. If participants have to guess, their attention will turn to trying to figure out who it is, and not on the message the person is trying to convey.

NEVER put your phone on hold.

This forces the participants left on the call to listen to the music the phone plays for those on hold, which as we all know can be very aggravating! If you absolutely must step away from the phone, put it on mute. ■

Sources: Marty Brounstein, consultant, trainer, and author of "Communicating Effectively for Dummies" (a Wiley Brand).

Susan Friedmann, president of The Tradeshow Coach, an organization that works with national and international exhibitors in planning trade shows and other special events.

Dirk Zeller, CEO of two nationally known companies, Real Estate Champions and Sales Champions.