Hybrid Work Series

Planning and Designing for the Flexible, Unassigned Workplace

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In Spring of 2020, the shutdown of offices around the globe upended employees and created a remote work tidal wave. Since that time, companies of nearly every size have been rethinking their in-person versus work-from-home framework, brainstorming ways to bring employees back safely while fostering productivity both on and off site. One of these strategies entails a flexible, free address workspace model within the hybrid workplace ecosystem.

For the first in its Hybrid Work Discussion Series, where Knoll convenes workplace leaders across North America for peer-to-peer discussion around the changing workplace and the impacts of Covid-19, Knoll invited leaders with experience in flexible and free address work environments. To kick off the series that seeks to identify how work-from-home and greater business uncertainty are influencing work and the workplace, three corporate executives shared their experience in designing and implementing unassigned workspaces. What follows is a snapshot of their advice and best practices shared at a virtual roundtable of their peers.

What We Learned: Three Takeaways from Flexible Workspace Experts

Insight #1

Free Addressing has moved into the mainstream, although its pace of adoption varies as companies pilot a variety of frameworks. For those who are less familiar with the term "free addressing," it is essentially the creation of workspaces with no assigned spaces. But whether or not this trend is new to your organization, the benefits of the free address workplace have become more commonplace. In fact, as Cisco's John Labus noted, his company's evolution toward this physical setup goes back to the 1990s. What was originally driven by the needs of Cisco's field sales staff has expanded into ways to connect teams and leverage talent. Companies with a workforce comprised of many people who travel the majority of the week—such as Ernst & Young (EY) for example—have identified similar needs and adopted comparable strategies.

And while Covid-driven remote work has not changed Cisco's course, Labus credits the pandemic as having broadened

the field of those in need of options—and accelerating the transformation to a more flexible workplace while realizing some additional benefits. He notes that Cisco's program has expanded far beyond its initial sales force focus. "It has allowed us to be a much more agile organization, to connect teams across the globe, to drive innovation, and to leverage talent to be nimbler and more responsive to market transitions."

> **"The pandemic doesn't change our course in terms of where we were going from a free address perspective. But it has accelerated our transformation.**
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> **We see our world going into three pockets as it relates to workplace.**
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> **+ How do we support the resident population going forward?**
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> **+ How do we strengthen the support of our employees who are working remotely?**
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> **+ How do we provide the resources at our major sites for employees to come together as a team?"**
>
> John Labus

As advanced mobile working allows more companies to adopt free address policies, organizations have been able to not only reduce space requirements, but also leverage more flexible working options as a tool for talent attraction and retention.

At Siemens Energy, where unassigned workplace policies began nearly a decade ago, unique working profiles and flexible space design are a strategy as integral as sustainability,

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diversity, health and employee well-being that comes with being an employer of choice, according to Wendy Parent, Siemens Energy.

And as Grace Paul of EY explained, by having more flexibility, employees can use space in a way that it's intended to be used. "Depending on what you need that day, people have access to the right types of spaces for the right types of activities, as opposed to being tethered to a single location." Trust on the part of management is a factor, too—a tendency that was bolstered by necessity as teams worked at a distance during the Covid shutdowns of 2020.

The panelists agreed that even before the pandemic, an unassigned workplace strategy not only achieved economies in space utilization, but also proved that employees can work successfully at home or in another remote location, thus allowing the office to become the place for collaboration. As Paul noted, the key is to get the team comfortable with the idea that you "just need to get work done regardless of where that is." In other words, she noted, it's a matter of staff asking themselves where they need to be—and when they need to be there.

Insight #2

Implementation of space reservations may vary, but employee confidence in "having a space" to work and collaborate is key. On the topic of reservations for space, the panelists had slightly differing experiences. For example, Parent discussed Siemens Energy's success with using a simple reservation system specifically for securing use of conferencing and collaboration rooms. She notes that employees often congregate toward specific "neighborhoods" in various locations within the facility, whereby employees can seek out certain groups or divisions when they go into to the office. But if an employee wants an actual room, it is part of the booking system, she explained.

> "Organizations realize that, yes, you can work effectively from home. So, we expect the purpose of the office to be a place for collaboration."
>
> Grace Paul

Paul, on the other hand, described EY's approach as being a little more fluid. "We don't necessarily have assigned neighborhoods. You can just go and find a desk and be at that desk. So, your space is not necessarily reserved within a particular location—but everyone has a city that's their home base." Interestingly, while EY's reservation system has been in place for a long time, the company was finding that employees booked space simply based upon habit instead of need. Thus, they've been phasing out the reservation system and opting for a completely free address model with no "neighborhoods."

TECHNOLOGY:
THE KEY DRIVER THAT POWERS THE SUCCESSFUL SHIFT TO FLEXIBLE WORKSPACES

One underlying theme throughout the discussion was the role technology has played in making these workplace evolutions possible. This includes technology in the physical workplace itself as well as that (literally) in the hands of employees.

+ EY has developed an app and tech tools to help employees navigate the "neighborhood-free" system and find spaces according to type of work needing to be done.

+ Cisco leverages machine learning and AI systems that recognize users in conference rooms to make meeting setup simpler.

+ In the U.S., Siemens Energy utilizes existing platforms for meeting room reservations. For individual workspaces, employees tend to gravitate toward designated neighborhoods.

+ Multiple organizations use sensors and beacons to anonymously track "bodies" in spaces via motion and heat to prevent overuse (or underuse) of specific areas/spaces.

While the organizations may utilize differing reservation systems and workplace models, the reliance on technology tools to manage space and occupancy in real time was universal.

These tools go a step further, too. The insight they provide helps organizations refine their "space configuration model" for the future by facilitating evaluation of the collaborative and single occupancy spaces being requested by the workforce—and identifying those spaces that are underutilized and could be repurposed.

The panelists discussed the fact that reservation systems address a variety of behaviors and presumptions of the workforce. As Labus explained, even the most basic of reservation systems needs to "give people a level of assuredness that there's a place for them to work when they come in." At Cisco, the reservation system is primarily tied to technology experiences and necessary closed door spaces or scheduled meetings. Otherwise, they've moved away from carving out definitive places and spaces. While some jobs are place-specific, that number is a lot smaller than people had presumed. Labus added that as resistance to free addressing wanes and people become more comfortable, the organization must make sure that people have a variety of choices in places to work. He credits the pandemic with leading employers and workers to the realization that there is more than one way to be successful.

Insight #3

Unassigned free address workplace design is evolving to keep employees healthy and happy. Bundled in with the evolution of remote work and free addressing is the reality that whatever space is provided to a workforce, it needs to be safe. Parent touched on some of the changes Siemens Energy is making to its space post-Covid, including factoring in social distancing protocols and enhanced cleaning practices. Panelists agreed that a key aspect of maintaining safe spaces involves monitoring the number of people within a given space at any given time. Systems that track body heat and lighting that monitors occupancy allow observations to be done anonymously.

Similarly, Paul pointed out that overall, the use of sensors and beacons to ensure that maximum occupancy isn't exceeded are not intended to track/identify specific workers; rather, all tracking is anonymous. In general, tracking the real-time use of space along with reservation requests can inform an organization's future space

design requirements and identify underused space that might be reconfigured. And certainly, health precautions will prevail as companies take the hygiene of spaces into consideration; in fact, Labus predicted that, as is typical in parts of Asia, behaviors like social distancing, face masks and germ prevention will be part of the longer-term post-pandemic culture.

In terms of physical space, some employees certainly require individual workstations or sit-to-stand desks, depending on their roles/tasks; ergonomics of these setups continue to be important for employee comfort and health. But in addition, larger tables and group-friendly setups are on the rise. These can foster collaboration in unassigned environment but be flexible for both safety and utilization, which can be an appealing option in an uncertain climate when planning is difficult. For example, a conference table originally designed for 10 people might now be used only for four. Similarly, a large library table can host a town hall, then flex to be hotel space for drop-in work by employees who are working "alone, together."

> "We continue to make changes in the way space is utilized and evaluate future space requirements. Within open office environments, more collaborative space may be needed to support team work with adaptive solutions for individual work."
>
> Wendy Parent

In fact, Paul suggested that there is an opportunity as free addressing and flexible workplaces coincide with the post-Covid workplace re-imagining, pointing out that organizations who may not have used an unassigned strategy yet—but now need to adapt for safety—can employ some of the measures today that they may have had on a later horizon. There will always be employees who are better served working in a company location—for example, if they have personal circumstances that make productivity difficult at

home. Or, Paul added, people might just be "tired of being at home and are looking for that change of scenery—or are feeling as though they need to see their team."

Whatever type of reservation process is used, and whether groups cluster in specific neighborhoods or are simply grabbing a seat and opening up their laptop wherever there is free space, the key will be to offer as much flexibility as possible for whatever type of work needs to be accomplished. That means factoring in individual task needs while fostering productivity through collaboration in the free address space, thus ensuring that all employees can thrive when they join together onsite.

Panelists agreed that evolving from a traditional assigned workplace environment to one where managers, direct reports and colleagues may be working and succeeding from separate and remote locations requires a culture that supports choice. Managers may have to change their management style or companies may need to adopt robust employee targets and new ways to measure success. It also means developing a trust-based corporate culture that enables all employees to feel comfortable in their environment— wherever that environment may be. **K**

For Further Reading

Knoll k. Talks: https://www.knoll.com/design-plan/resources/research/k-talks

US Department of Labor/Occupational Safety and Health Administration: https://www.osha.gov/news/newsreleases/trade/06212018

 "Unassigned Workspace Etiquette": https://www.knoll.com/document/1356094707583/wp_Knoll_UnassignedWorkspaceEtiquette.pdf

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