

COLORADO REAL ESTATE JOURNAL

THE COMMUNICATION CHANNEL OF THE COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE COMMUNITY

JUNE 3-16, 2020

Construction, Design & Engineering Doing business in the COVID-19 world: What's next?

As Colorado begins to stabilize from the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home restrictions are being eased, businesses across the state are trying to navigate uncharted territory. What does it look like to bring employees back into the physical workplace while practicing social distancing? How do we protect employee health while also ensuring the health of our businesses? Add on the uncertainty and inconsistencies related to child care and home schooling that our working parents are facing, and you have a delicate dance to lead. With creative thinking, extensive research and the willingness to adapt quickly, our leadership team has led the firm through its COVID-19 lockdown and will now help guide its reopening of eight offices across the nation. While this situation is ever-changing and each of us is in a different situation, I'm sharing our approach for navigating "what's next" in the hope that it is helpful to others in the industry.

■ With such a hands-on industry, how will working in the office and working from home evolve for your teams?

We are a workshop culture that is built on collaboration gathering for "on-the-boards" meetings where we brainstorm ideas and provide real-time feedback on plans that are pinned on the wall. While this can take place virtually, we find that doing it in-person is much more successful thus a 100% remote-work environment



Becky Zimmermann
President, Design
Workshop

is not a long-term solution for us. We see our return to the physical workplace evolving very slowly in accordance with each local region's guidelines. In phase one, returning to our physical office is voluntary. Prior to COVID-19, we encouraged everyone to try to be physically in the office each day for core hours from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. to facilitate our workshop environment. We will table this request for the near future and continue to encourage our workforce to work in a way that is comfortable for them.

■ What reopening looks like for us?

Working in tandem with our human resources director, we developed a plan for re-opening that was shared with each of our offices for their input on local issues or challenges that we may have missed. We have a current plan in place to reopen offices two days after local restrictions are lifted. Each office location has determined how many people it can safely accommodate and is altering the physical layout of the office space to adhere to social distancing. There are strict guidelines in place such as a requirement to wear a mask and



wipe down all surfaces before and after use, no shared food, etc. We have planned for phase two and three of what operating in a COVID-19 world will look like depending on infection rates, antibody testing, treatments and a vaccine but we expect all of this to evolve and change significantly over time.

■ Construction observation is integral to our work. How will this evolve?

Since it takes place outside, handling local construction observation is probably one of the easier aspects of returning to work in the COVID-19 world. For local sites, one employee will visit the site wearing appropriate personal protective equipment and practicing social distancing to record a virtual tour for the rest of the team. This is either done live via FaceTime or recorded via drone and shared after

the visit. We also are trying out a new software solution that would make this process easier. The challenge is visiting projects that we cannot drive to. Until it is safe for air travel both domestically and internationally, we are asking our clients or another on-the-ground resource to provide images or video if possible.

■ How do you continue to stay connected with your clients?

To be honest, I am finding that I am talking to my clients more frequently because we are both at home. No one is on a plane to visit a site or attend an in-person meeting so we are all more responsive to emails. I value face-to-face interaction so I really miss seeing people in person but I am able to maintain my relationships now through the communication tools we have available especially video calls

as you can see facial expressions and body language. Picking up the phone and calling someone has never been more important so I spend a lot of time on the phone.

■ How are you maintaining employee morale?

Lots of communication. When the COVID-19 situation first began, I was sending email updates to employees on a daily basis as things were rapidly changing and we were trying to get ahead of misinformation. Now, I send a weekly email with a substantial amount of information including current updates related to our company, information about COVID-19 from reliable sources, employee recognition and any other random information relevant to employees. I've observed that people digest information at a different pace so by including lots of details in my emails, people can go back and find the information that is relevant to them.

Employee recognition continues to be a priority for us. Each office has a recognition champion and they coordinate virtual events to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, client wins and other noteworthy events together. Each office also hosts a weekly virtual happy hour, we call it beer:30. While it is not the same as gathering in person, it facilitates an opportunity for colleagues to foster those personal relationships that we all need to feel connected. ▲