

ASK THE EXPERT:

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH A WORKPLACE SPECIALIST



INTERVIEW WITH ANGIE EARLYWINE, WORKPLACE SPECIALIST



ANGIE EARLYWINE
Workplace Specialist,
Managing Director

**Lamar Johnson
Collaborative** 

c: 314.914.4032
e: earlywinea@theljc.com

What changes might we expect to see when we re-enter the workplace?

I think the global pandemic will prove to be the single greatest driver for the next evolution of the modern office as we know it today. All in the name of employee health, wellbeing, and safety we will see some welcomed and some not so welcomed improvements to the workplace. At the building entry you may be greeted by a nurse that will ask about your recent travel whereabouts, health history in recent days, and whether you have been around anyone known to have been exposed to COVID-19. Next you may be temperature screened and receive a “safety sticker” to indicate to others that you were screened. You may see shower and/or changing facilities for those that commute on mass transit into the office to freshen up and change shoes and clothing before entering the main workspace areas. Measures will be taken to ensure the office environment is as contactless as possible. An elevator may be dispatched for you and queuing lines will be in place to limit occupants to 2 people per cab. Signage will be prevalent to remind you of CDC guidelines and of any new office protocols put in place to keep workers safe. Social distancing decals on the floor and special arrows may direct you to the preferred direction of traffic for the short term. Stairwells may be refreshed and branded with witty encouraging phrases on stair treads (to keep you motivated at every step) and airflow in stairwells will increase in hopes that you do your part to reduce elevator demand. HEPA filtration and improved air quality measures will be invested in and UV lighting may be used to kill microbes in the air and on surfaces during off hours when the space is unoccupied. You will likely be on a first name basis with the cleaning concierge roving each floor sanitizing continuously to keep up the optics, and reality, that sanitization is continuous.

What layout/workflow changes can be done in a warehouse to help keep workers safe?

We are seeing temperature screening at the building entry as a common practice in industrial facilities and one-way directional signage may be used as a temporary measure on the manufacturing floor. We’ve seen in the media that companies like Ford utilize vibrating wristbands to alert employees in their manufacturing facilities when they are within 6 feet of one another. The use of plexiglass can be staged on the production line to provide a barrier between each work area to provide added protection to workers when distancing is difficult. We will also see sanitation stations located throughout the facility reassuring workers that their safety is paramount. Break times will be carefully re-assessed to stagger usage of group areas such as restrooms and break areas and taking a lap around the building may be more appealing than staying indoors.

INTERVIEW WITH ANGIE EARLYWINE, WORKPLACE SPECIALIST (CONT.)

How can managers/owners implement strategies for long-term work from home options?

As a human species, we are hard wired to want to be around other people, hence the psychological impacts we are seeing from the stay-at-home orders that have been in place. That being said my early prediction is that I believe employees will want, maybe even demand, to have both a workspace in the office and the ability to work from home (WFH) as necessary. It has now been proven in the largest work from home experiment of all time that even with many other distractions in the household that work can be accomplished remotely. One can argue whether WFH is more or less productive than being in the office, whether it is good for the individual vs. the team, the entry level employee vs. the tenured, etc. The answer is that it depends. In fact, that's why many organizations have struggled to define what is or isn't allowed. We must also consider that just because you can work from home, does not mean you should. We have heard tenured employees say they are more productive at home when not interrupted by junior teammates, and junior teammates feel they are not being mentored or supported. Considering all perspectives when determining a WFH approach and revisiting it annually is key to getting the WFH strategy right. Consider what is best for the worker, the team, the company, the customer, and the desired culture you are trying to build or maintain.

What do you think is the future for open floor plan office concepts?

Perhaps the office density pendulum swung too far over the past decade and the pandemic and social distancing protocols have created a welcomed opportunity to relax aggressive workspace density targets giving workers more breathing room, literally. In a pre-vaccine environment, companies will likely have a conservative gating strategy to slowly phase the re-entry of workers (up to 25% occupancy) and as more is understood about the virus and testing capacities increase, we will likely see increases (up to 50%). With the new consideration of "potential occupancy" which excludes those from your population that are immunosuppressed, have childcare issues, those in some stage of quarantine, etc. The true occupancy potential for our buildings is lower than what you might think. Your current occupancy potential may only reach a peak of 60-70% meaning costly wholesale changes to the workplace should be carefully considered so that there is both short and long-term ROI benefit. Open plan offices may need to be as generous in personal workspace as they have become for "we" space going forward, but we don't see open plan going away by any stretch of the imagination. For new buildings, instead of a centralized core in the building we may see each quadrant of the floor as an independent neighborhood with its own elevators, restrooms, workspace, and amenities as a means to contain transmission should there be the need to quarantine a quadrant. Workstations will be assessed to assure a 6' distance from chair to chair and no one workspace will directly face another occupant in the initial re-entry phase.

How will shared workstations such as hoteling or touchdown areas change?

In a pre-vaccine environment organizations are likely to choose to either reduce or avoid the use of shared workspace altogether. If shared workspaces must be utilized, contact tracing will likely drive the need to assign spaces to specific individuals, on certain days, so that should someone contract COVID it is clear who is impacted. This is known as the practice of desk-sharing and it is based on an alternating schedule that two people share in a given week. In between each use the space would need to be sanitized and there is no sharing of any technology i.e. headset or keyboard. In free address environments, workers may now have the option to select their workspace from a kiosk upon entry that informs you about which spaces are sanitized and ready for your use.

INTERVIEW WITH ANGIE EARLYWINE, WORKPLACE SPECIALIST (CONT.)

How can managers/owners encourage collaboration in an office environment while keeping safety a top concern?

During the pre-vaccine phase of returning to work, occupancy will be limited and with people working both remote and in the office, there will need to be a hybrid approach to how collaboration happens. With both virtual and in-person team members, technology will continue to play a role in how teams collaborate virtually. Tools like Miro, a digital white boarding tool, can help teams iterate and brainstorm virtually leveling the playing field so that you don't feel like you're missing out when it's your day to work remote. As for in-person collaboration within a traditional conference room, it is likely that only one-third of the seats can be occupied when factoring in social distancing, therefore either booking a larger room or two separate rooms may be a viable option. Initially, we will likely see a surge in demand for collaboration spaces due to pent up demand from months of pausing on collaboration sessions with our teams that are better had in person. With summer upon us, managers could lead the way and schedule casual meetings that take place in outdoor courtyards, on building rooftop spaces or make it a walking meeting all while social distancing, breathing cleaner air, and taking in your daily dose of vitamin D.

What policies or protocols do you think employers may require before employees re-enter the workplace?

Companies may have employees participate in workplace safety training prior to their return to work to ensure new behaviors, facility use protocols, and health and safety guidelines are communicated. They may receive a "welcome back" kit at their home with all the necessary PPE, sanitation wipes, and instructions for how to use the new social distancing app and contact tracer tool. We are creatures of habit and we know that we cannot rely on human behavior alone to keep us safe. The workplace will have signage and visual cues to help remind us of our new (ab)normal. Employers may introduce restrictions on all non-essential business travel and put measures in place to have workers self-quarantine on their return. We will also likely see specific guidelines or policies on when, where, and what PPE will be required when in the workplace. Safety captains may rove your floor to help remind you to put your mask on and that your meeting has exceeded the allowable occupant load.

How do you suggest owners/managers ensure safety in shared spaces (bathrooms, kitchens, break rooms)?

Some organizations may limit or curtail the use of group gathering areas altogether in the initial phases of re-entry to the workplace. Those that remain in use will have attention paid to standardizing on contactless restroom fixtures, self-opening doors wherever possible, and enhanced cleaning protocols for all high touch surfaces such as microwave and refrigerator door handles. Ice machine and water dispensers will likely migrate to touchless and break times will be scheduled in order to ensure a controlled occupancy count in each gathering space. Community dishes and utensils will be removed in the near term and cleaning will be required after each group utilizes the break area and restrooms will likely limit occupancy depending on size.



INTERVIEW WITH **ANGIE EARLYWINE**, WORKPLACE SPECIALIST (CONT.)

Are there any benefits or unexpected positive outcomes that have come from the fallout of the pandemic?

The pandemic has forced us to take a step back and realize how important personal health and wellbeing is and how it should not be taken for granted. Now daily exercise replaces what would have been commute time and eating at home more has aided in healthier eating habits. I think with our obsession with social distancing and sanitation practices people will be more in tune with their personal health and will be more likely to stay home if they are symptomatic, whereas in the past some would have come to the office with a cold. We may see that handshakes as a business greeting and traveling across the country for a one-hour meeting are a thing of the past. Arguably, the greatest benefit has been watching our planet begin to heal as we experience bluer skies, cleaner air, and clearer waterways as a result of less commuter traffic, pollution, and use of our natural resources.

ABOUT RBN INSURANCE SERVICES: RBN Insurance Services is an independent insurance brokerage agency headquartered in Chicago. We provide commercial insurance, employee benefits, and personal insurance products for middle market businesses and their leaders. Since our inception in 1993, we have served clients across the United States in a wide variety of industries.

ABOUT LAMAR JOHNSON COLLABORATIVE: Lamar Johnson Collaborative is a pioneering architecture and design practice creating exceptional outcomes for complex projects through emerging technology and integrated delivery methods. We believe our work is a fundamental expression of optimism in the future, and that design is a means to effect positive, enduring change.

