Practice Advisory: Reopening firms, helping clients

Open, open, open

During the month of March 2020, COVID-19 began to spread across the country and the state of Michigan and the country responded. Architectural firms across Michigan quickly pivoted to remote work environments while attempting to maintain progress on projects, by staying connected to their clients albeit remotely. As the United States begins to carefully reopen the economy, firms are pivoting once again, developing plans on how to safely reopen workplace operations.

Michigan made great efforts to reduce the spread of the virus, and the spread was controlled to a satisfactory rate of infection. State businesses has started to reopen, following Governor Whitmer's MI Safe Start Plan. Governor Whitmer has issued strategies via Executive Orders. On June 1, 2020 Governor Whitmer issued Executive Order 2020-110 which rescinded the previous Executive Orders 2020-69 and 2020-96, i.e. portions of the Safer at Home order. This moved the entire state into Phase 4: Improving of the MI Safe Start Plan. Districts 6 and 8 (portions of the Upper Peninsula and the Traverse City area moved into Phase 5 at that same time. Phase 4 is defined as: "*Phase 4: Improving: Epidemic clearly decreasing and health system capacity is strong with robust testing and contact tracing*." The Executive Order describes how additional businesses can reopen given adherence to strict safety measures." Governor Whitmer's goal is to shift the state into *Phase 5: "Containing: Epidemic levels are extremely low and outbreaks can be quickly contained. Health system capacity is strong with robust testing and tracing.* This will hopefully occur sometime in mid-June. Under the most recent Executive Order issued on June 5 regarding workplaces, Executive Order 2020-114, a list of requirements for workplaces is given. It notes "All businesses or operations that require their employees to leave the homes or residences for work must, at a minimum…" You should refer to that Executive Order for the specific requirements of the State of Michigan. Copies of those executive orders can be found here.   Most businesses can

reopen given adherence to strict safety measures as described by the governor for various business types. What does this mean for the industry? The time to get back into work is nearing!

Reopening offices and returning to the workplace will not happen overnight. It will take a gradual, phased-in plan that prepares office environments and employees for a safe and healthy return following the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The workplace will need to be cleaned and prepared to safely practice social distancing. Look at your office policies and update those relevant to the post-pandemic workplace, such as sick leave and remote working. You may also want to contact your attorney or insurance company to discuss if you are covered for various COVID-19 related claim exposures. Leadership must meet with staff ahead of reentry to train them on new social distancing and cleaning protocols, as well as changes to the office layout. Staff should also be prepared for a daily health assessment protocol, whether it is with temperature checks at the office or self-assessments at home. When possible, offices should utilize telework options and modified work schedules to help maintain social distancing.

As Cushman & Wakefield suggest in their Recovery Readiness: A How-To Guide for Reopening Your Workplace, there are a handful of primary focus areas applicable to most business operations. Whether your firm is large or small, or even if you have multiple locations, the following Six Readiness Essentials should be focused on:

> 1. Prepare the Building: cleaning plans, pre-return inspections, HVAC & Mechanicals checks

> 2. Prepare the Workforce: mitigating anxiety, policies for deciding who returns, employee communications

> 3. Control Access: protocols for safety and health checks, building reception,shipping and receiving, elevators, visitor policies

> 4. Create a Social Distancing Plan: decreasing density, schedule management, office traffic patterns

> 5. Reduce Touch Points and Increase Cleaning: open doors, clean desk policy, food plan, cleaning common areas

> 6. Communicate for Confidence: recognize the fear in returning, communicate transparently, listen and survey regularly

Prepare a list of conditions that will guide your office operations and make everyone aware of those requirements to protect your employees. Among other Michigan requirements you must also prepare a response plan for dealing with a confirmed infection in the workplace, including protocols for sending employees home and for temporary closures of all or part of the workplace. The specific requirements of the State of Michigan are available via the link above.

Once you are prepared, help your clients! The architectural profession is uniquely positioned to leverage itself to help forge a new era of public health awareness through the power of design. Architects, through their unmatched spatial awareness, can be leaders in risk mitigation for a society now hyperaware and concerned with health standards. Utilizing tools, such as the AIA Re-occupancy Assessment Tool, can help architects promote enhanced safety measures with their clients to better protect communities as they begin to enact phased opening procedures. This is an opportunity for architects to lead by example within their own offices and to champion innovative design solutions. Providing better standards for healthy environments is not just essential, but fundamental to your charge as protectors of the public.

And most importantly, communicate! Presently, there is no such thing as overcommunication. Talk to your staff. Reach out to your clients. Let everyone know the everchanging plans to keep them at ease and engaged. If nothing else, the Pandemic has brought us closer in ways we never imagined and has created a new sense of community among our colleagues, clients, friends and family, and our profession. Let us use this newfound camaraderie to keep one another safe and healthy.

Re-Opening Guidance & Resources
- MIOSHA: COVID-19 Workplace Guidance: Employee's Guide
- MIOSHA: COVID-19 Workplace Guidance: Employer's Guide
- MIOSHA: COVID-19 Workplace Reopening Checklist
- Governor Whitmer EO 2020-116 Youth Work Permits
- AIA's Re-occupancy Assessment Tool
- ARC Document Solutions: Reimagine and Reopen Health & Wellness Essentials to Keep Teams and Visitors Safe
- SmithGroup: Holistic Approach for Returning to the Office
- Cushman & Wakefield: Recovery Readiness: A How-to Guide for Reopening your
- Workplace
- CBRE: Reopening the World's Workplaces
- JLL: Reentry: A guide for working in the next normal
- AIHA: Back to Work Safely
- Wiley: Employer's Guide to Reopening the Workplace
- CDC Best Practices for Travel
- CDC Infographic: Workplaces During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Should you consider opening?
- Risk Strategies Creating a Return to Work Action Plan
- Michigan Governor Whitmer's Executive Orders relating to COVID 19