

## Developing a COVID-19 Return to Work Plan

By Geoff Williams, CFM, FMP, SFP, IFMA Fellow

As we continue to wrestle with a global pandemic, we are also each looking longingly at the future and the opportunity to return to a greater sense of normalcy than we have seen throughout most of 2020. I say sense of normalcy because there is a strong likelihood that we are talking about a “New Normal” as the world may never look the same. That said, the light is glowing at the end of the tunnel and we each are now in problem-solving mode to craft the best possible “New Normal” for our respective organizations.

The great news for facility professionals is that we are superb problem solvers and have an exceptional opportunity to showcase our knowledge, skills and abilities to the organization(s) that we support. But there are a few wrinkles in getting this problem solved:

1. What is the “New Normal” Vision? One of the best ways to bridge a gap between where we are and where we want to be is to very clearly understand the desired end state. From there we can test feasibility of a myriad of solutions as we build the bridge. Each organization will likely have a different vision for what the “New Normal” should look like. Therefore, a deep dive with your stakeholders is necessary to truly understand where you are trying to get to.
2. Where do our priorities lie? The problem that we are about to solve has massive risks associated with not adequately mitigating against them. Each organization may articulate this slightly differently; but the primary risk should be the health and wellbeing of our occupants. You have likely heard that people are a company’s greatest asset and if compromised there is a cascading effect of other risks that are likely to follow. Those would include: Reputational; Financial; and Legal to name a few.
3. What exactly are we trying to overcome? This is where it gets interesting. There has been and continues to be a mixture of fact, supposition and misunderstanding surrounding the spread and control measures to counteract the spread COVID-19. From this perspective, the problem that we are trying to solve for may be fluid.

With a firm understanding of the gap that we are trying to bridge it is then possible to begin testing the feasibility ideas for a composite of solutions. The great news is that the global FM community is sharing tremendously, and ideas are plentifully without needing to reinvent the wheel. As a starting point, consider the following:

- Take, test and repurpose ideas that either match or could be adapted to your individual vision for a “New Normal”.
- Leverage industry frameworks, standards and associations (like IFMA and ASHRAE) for best-in-class information.
- Make note of where research is lagging, and hypotheses are still to be tested so that you can monitor progress.
- Engage subject matter experts to assist and de-risk through expertise.
- Recognize that occupants and occupancy will drive change as they begin using space in a new way.

- Leverage technologies that are proven and beware of unsubstantiated claims.
- Build a plan that is flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions.

Once a workable plan is drafted, take the time to properly socialize the plan with key stakeholder groups in order to solicit feedback, make modifications as necessary before starting to implement and jointly develop a change management plan. The change management plan will play a significant part in making what are likely to be significant changes. Key messaging should be tied back to the occupant health and wellness. Keep in mind that emotions may be tempestuous, and that COVID-19 has likely affected the mental health of a significant portion of your occupant population.

This is a problem to solve just like any other and facility managers are well positioned to solve it. Stay calm and good luck!

*Geoff Williams, CFM, FMP, SFP, IFMA Fellow is Director of Operations at Angus Consulting Management Limited. He has over 20 years of experience in facility management including direct management of campus facilities, operations efficiency consultation to building owners, CMMS development and life cycle asset planning. As a senior member of the ACML team, Geoff is responsible for operations in Eastern Canada.*

*Throughout his career, Geoff has been actively involved as a volunteer with IFMA. He currently serves on the IFMA Americas' Advisory Board, is a past President (and current SAG Leader) of the IT Community of IFMA, a past Director on IFMA's Global Board of Directors and the past President of the Toronto Chapter of IFMA.*

*Geoff is also very involved in preparing the next generation of facility managers as an instructor at Ryerson University, IFMA and the University of Toronto.*

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