

Will demand for office space recover after pandemic subsidies?

INDIANAPOLIS | APRIL 24, 2020

BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Ramping up to reopen

Infectious disease specialist: 'Do things very slowly and gradually'

By John Russell
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Dr. Cole Beeler knows people are itching to get back to business and resume their normal lives. But he warns employers and workers not to rush back to

the old way of doing business, at least not all at once.

Beeler, an infectious disease physician at Indiana University Health and medical director of infection prevention at University Hospital, said workplaces should follow a gradual,

methodical plan laid out by the federal government, in accordance with directions from state and local health departments.

Some gatherings, such as conventions and sporting

events, will take longer to get back to normal than others. The bottom line: The virus continues to spread, and people need to take appropriate precautions.

From a health perspective, how close are we to

getting back to normal in the workplace?

I've talked to a lot of people that are really anxious to get back to business as usual. And I think that what we've

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Offices prep for new logistics

Even passing in hallway could be no-no

By Anthony Schoettle
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Launch Fishers founder and CEO John Wechsler spends much of his time these days contemplating things like which direction people will be allowed to walk inside the popular co-working space and where he's

going to store the couches he's no longer going to allow tenants to sit on.

This week, he and his facilities chief marked floors showing people which way to walk. The answer to that seemingly bizarre question is, counterclockwise.

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Launch Fishers staffers put tape on the carpet to direct walking traffic for when members return to the workspace. (IBJ photo/Eric Learned)



Restaurants will be anything but cozy

'I think it's going to be a little awkward for everybody'

By Mickey Shuey
mshuey@ibj.com

The first time you head to a restaurant to eat in the dining room after public officials say it's allowed again, the host

might greet you with questions about your health.

Your table might be 6 feet from the next one. Your server might be wearing a mask and gloves. And someone might even ask to take your temperature.

Those are among the changes restaurants are considering to keep employees and customers safe as public officials start planning to reopen the economy.

See RESTAURANTS page 25A

Factories' new reality: Temperature checks

Firms also plot to space out workers

By Susan Orr
sorr@ibj.com

From production routines and work schedules to health screenings and visitor policies, Hoosier manufacturers say COVID-19 has forced them to rethink how

they operate—and some of these changes might remain even after the pandemic recedes.

In trying to keep the coronavirus at bay, manufacturers face challenges not found in other work environments. Production employees can't make engines

or shampoo from home, for instance, and production schedules typically dictate that workers take breaks at set times.

Within this framework, employers are coming up

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HEALTH

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seen in the last two weeks is certainly encouraging in the numbers and trends that this is not going to be as bad as we initially thought. And we should be grateful that that's the case, certainly, but we still need to approach things the same way right now. Currently, we are very cautiously moving forward.

Should we keep working from home indefinitely?

I would still recommend hunkering down, not doing mass gatherings or exposing yourself to other people. As the weather gets nice, I think there's a temptation to go back to business as usual and do your summer routine and, you know, having cookouts and being around people.

But in general, this whole strategy really is contingent on people uniformly approaching things the same way, which is just a very gradual exposure—based on guidance from public health departments—to other people and to the loosening of the social distancing recommendations.

So, we are getting close, but I would not yet jump on the desire to reintroduce yourself and put yourself at risk by being around other people that may be infected.

Is there a playbook for how to reopen a workplace—an office, a store, a restaurant or factory—in the midst of a pandemic?

There is. I think each company is probably doing things a little bit different. We do have guidelines from the White House that actually suggest how to open up businesses. And in my impression from reading it, it seems like it's pretty well thought out, with a tiered approach to how you start exposing people to each other.

The take-home point, I think, is to do things very slowly and gradually so that we can understand the implications and the consequences of the exposures.

Dr. Cole Beeler

Job: infectious diseases physician at Indiana University Health and medical director of Infection Prevention at IU Health University Hospital

Specialties: multidrug-resistant infections, hospital-acquired infections, Clostridioides difficile infections and medical education

Education: Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School; bachelor's from Indiana University; medical degree from IU School of Medicine.

Age: 35

Family: wife, Abby, and four children

Hobbies: running, reading, playing board games

Beeler's take on the near-term future

▶ The coronavirus is still highly infectious, but the surge of cases and hospitalizations in Indiana seems to be slowing.

▶ Workers and employers should continue to avoid large gatherings or even business lunches for at least another month, maybe longer.

▶ Companies should provide masks and alcohol-based hand sanitizer, and the opportunity for workers to frequently wash their hands.

Source: Dr. Cole Beeler

Can you summarize those guidelines?

Yes, so it's President Trump's Opening Up America Again plan. It has criteria the medical community would consider to be promising trends in pandemic response. It looks for a decreasing, over a two-week period, of influenza-like illness reports, COVID positivity, COVID syndrome and positive tests, as well as the ability of hospitals to treat patients effectively.

Every two weeks, you can start gradually exposing businesses to varying levels of more exposure.

How gradual is it? How long before businesses can reopen?

There are essentially three tiers to it. For the first tier, you go through two weeks of decreasing epidemiology and appropriate response from the public health department. You still kind of take things conservatively, but you start considering more necessary services.

And then once you've done four weeks straight and met all of those conditions, then you start liberalizing. You're still doing telecommunication and conferences as much as possible, but you start phasing in certain aspects of business life, where workers should probably still be wearing masks but could be integrating a little bit more together ... in person.

And then in the final phase, what it eventually comes down to is essentially business as usual. And that's after three two-week intervals.

As you know, this virus has killed more than 40,000 Americans, and it's still spreading, with no vaccine available yet. Are we all susceptible to getting infected at work?

This is one of the main debates that we're having in the infectious disease community. Is everyone going to get infected or exposed no matter what? And I think what we're trying to get to is the potential for herd immunity, meaning that the people who have been exposed or infected are able to protect the people who haven't been exposed or infected.

I think it's such an infectious virus and we're only seeing the tip of the iceberg. I think that we're learning right now, especially with new data out of California, that the much larger fraction of patients who are infected are actually asymptomatic or never knew that they had the infection.

So that to me says there's a lot of people who have already been infected, but probably still a lot more who are going to get infected. But it seems like the mortality rate is a lot lower than initially anticipated. So yes, very infectious, but maybe not as deadly as we initially thought.

Is there a way to make the office environment safer, perhaps by moving desks farther apart or putting arrows on the floor to show that people should not be walking toward each other?

Yes, there are a lot of creative things that I've heard like this. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] actually does have guidance on this.

Certainly, spacing people out, making sure that common-area usage is at least discouraged as we start opening up.

Companies need to make sure that people have access to masks, to alcohol-based hand hygiene products, and wash their hands frequently.

Also, the office workspaces being decontaminated or cleaned on a regular basis is probably the best way to make sure that office staff is protected.

What exactly would contaminate an office?

People who are infected. A potential way to contract COVID is by touching something that someone else coughed or sneezed or breathed on and touching your mucous membranes like your eyes, your nose, your mouth.

That's thought to be a potential way to transmit the virus. And the best way to prevent that is just by making sure that you're cleaning off your workstation and that the high-touch areas, we call them, are cleaned on a regular basis to try and eliminate the virus that's on them.

With all the emphasis on keeping 6 feet apart, is it safe to get into elevators?

At this point, we're nowhere close, in my opinion, to being comfortable with a bunch of people together.

Overall, I think there's still a lot of work that we need to do as it relates to building up the public health infrastructure for contact tracing as well as being able to test people rapidly and as many people that need to be tested.

So, until that time, I'd be cautious around close contacts in elevators. The one thing about elevators that's not super scary to me is that you're usually in and out of them pretty quickly. And as far as we know how this virus transmits itself, you need prolonged close contact with people. It probably has to be upward of 10 minutes that you're spending with people, and I don't know many elevator rides that take 10 minutes.

Should workers across Indiana wear masks when they go back to work? If so, for how long?

I think it kind of depends. I think it's kind of embedded in our culture right now—there are going to be people who want to wear masks. I think that the recommendation for society will be to wear masks until we're not seeing COVID at the rate that we have.

It's hard to know when that will happen. I think it will eventually go away. But throughout this tiered response, I think that that's going to be a potent way to help protect ourselves when we need to be closer together when some of these social distancing mechanisms dissolve.

Should restaurants start spacing tables farther apart? Should the servers wear masks?

Places like restaurants where you have clustering of people need to be treated a little bit more conservatively. I think it's important to restrict the amount of people that are in a given space until ... there's been more time. In general, I think that masks and appropriate hand hygiene will be probably universal, even throughout all of this tiered response.

How about business and social lunches? When will it be safe to dine together again?

At this point, I would say it's probably premature. We're just now starting to see decreases [in COVID cases] in Marion County, at least at the hospitals that I serve around. And while I think that's encouraging, we need it to be a durable decrease.

It needs to be a consistent decrease over a two-week period, before we even start considering interpersonal interaction. And even then, if it's just been two weeks, I would say it should only be the essential stuff.

When we start stringing together serial

two-week periods—so maybe we go four weeks, maybe we go six weeks, then that's when we can start feeling a little bit more comfortable with being around people in non-essential ways and enjoying company together in the ways that we used to.



Beeler

How about business conferences, sporting events, conventions and other mass gatherings?

I think it's the same sort of thing.

What would be the worst thing for a company to do at this point?

I think the worst thing for business to do would be to jump all in at one time, go all the way back to business as usual. That could really end up hurting people.♦

INDIANAPOLIS BUSINESS JOURNAL

Established 1980 • Locally owned
One Monument Circle, Suite 300
Indianapolis, IN 46204-3592

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OFFICES

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He's also designating hallways and stairways for one-way travel.

And in a move that just two months ago would have seemed downright creepy—if not an outright invasion of privacy—he has started planning for the placement of video cameras that will alert him if too many people are congregating in one place inside the sprawling facility. Today, that move is seen as a matter of public health.

Wechsler is not alone in his effort to make existing office space work during a pandemic.

Jeremy Johnson, CEO of Carmel-based Protective Insurance Co., is trying to secure 55-gallon barrels of hand sanitizer for clients and contemplating the rearrangement of furniture—including organizing desks in a diagonal formation—to maintain social distancing.



Johnson

David Liddicoat, the Indianapolis site leader for tech firm Genesys, is contemplating how many of his 800 local employees will be allowed in the bathroom at once. Elevator occupancy is a concern, too. When he headed Genesys' Asia Pacific division, he saw elevators marked with X's showing people where to stand. He wonders if the same will be the case here soon.

"We're in a new world," Johnson said.

New, indeed.

Issues that workers and bosses will be dealing with in the coming weeks and months when Gov. Eric Holcomb lifts the stay-at-home order that's been in place since March 23, and the economy begins to reopen, are those that most of us left behind in junior high: No touching, keep daylight between you and your friends at all times, no congregating in large groups, walk this direction and not that one, clean up after yourself, and so on.

But this isn't child's play. If Americans have learned one lesson in the last two months, it's to take COVID-19 seriously: It's contagious, costly and deadly.

"The number of new challenges we've had to respond to is extraordinary," Johnson said. "But the cost of not doing so is even higher. Much higher."

Mike Reynolds, CEO of Broad Ripple-based tech firm Innovatemap, said he's spending about three hours a day on reentry challenges. Wechsler said that, for the last 10 to 14 days, "it takes up the better part of my day."

Most firms have just begun to wrestle with what they—and their workers—will face. The stay-at-home order is set to expire May 1. But it's been extended twice, and observers say it will likely be extended again, although in a less restrictive form.

Either way, the new normal will be a heavy load for bosses to manage and a tricky path for employees to traverse.

"We're not going to rush back," said Liddicoat, who just landed in Indianapolis in March after three years working in Genesys' Manila office. "We want to do things in a very staged process."

A dozen local executives interviewed for this story agreed the most difficult part of dealing with the pandemic and workplace reentry is the uncertainty.

"Business leaders are being called upon to make big, important decisions without a huge amount of hard data," Johnson said. "Not only is the data ambiguous, it's constantly changing."

But business leaders agree on one certainty: The changes will not be short-lived. "I think we have to be prepared to work in a very different way until there's a vaccine," Johnson said.

Cubicle concerns

One immediate challenge for employers is furniture arrangement. Cubicles have been an office staple since the 1970s. But about five years ago, design trends shifted to more open concepts, including dramatically lowering cubicle walls. Barriers that used to stretch nearly 6 feet high are now often less than a foot high.

And the standard desk these days is 4 feet wide and a mere 2 feet deep. It's not uncommon for desks to sit face-to-face and touch one another on one side. That has enabled companies to pack far more people onto a single floor.

One office design expert told IBJ some big Indianapolis companies have as many as 400 people working on a single floor.

Another trend that might now be risky is "hoteling," in which workers don't have assigned desks. They can set up in any location, meaning multiple people might work at the same spot throughout a day.

At Launch Fishers, Wechsler and his staff are planning to fastidiously clean open desks and also plan to issue 2-foot-by-3-foot disposable placemats on desks used by multiple people.

Melissa St. John, owner of Indianapolis-based Relocation Strategies, said employers don't "have any idea what's going to be coming to hit them in the face" when their employees come back.

St. John, whose firm helps clients relocate, renovate and reconfigure workspaces, said some employees likely will revolt over conditions that were the norm before the pandemic.

"People will be petrified to work face-to-face with a co-worker just 48 inches apart, with nothing more than a 9-inch barrier between them. Employees won't work the way they did before," St. John said.



Liddicoat

When employees come back

Employers are considering a number of mandates and policies for when employees return to the office after the stay-at-home order is lifted. Here are some ideas being considered.

Personal space

- ▀ Require employees to stay 6 feet apart and wear face masks.
- ▀ Limit the number of people on elevators to four, and the number of people in break rooms to eight.
- ▀ Install cameras to monitor how many people are in spaces, hallways and rooms, with people removed if limits are exceeded.
- ▀ In waiting and checkout areas, add floor markings that designate 6-foot spacing.

Layout

- ▀ Spread out desks and chairs.
- ▀ Raise height of cubicle walls; use fewer open-concept layouts.
- ▀ Arrange desks in a diagonal formation; no sitting face-to-face even if employees have desks between them.
- ▀ Remove all soft-surface furniture, especially pieces—like couches—that encourage people to sit close together.

Procedural changes

- ▀ Institute rotating, staggered schedules.
- ▀ Group employees into teams, with no in-person interaction between teams. High-risk employees would be grouped for extra protection.
- ▀ Require employees who travel to self-quarantine for two weeks afterward, and employees who are the least bit sick to stay home.
- ▀ Check employees' temperatures; test employees for COVID-19.

Traffic flow

- ▀ Add directional floor markings that institute a one-way office traffic flow, to eliminate face-to-face passage.
- ▀ Designate certain stairwells for going up and others for going down.

Sanitation

- ▀ Start daily and even hourly cleaning in some areas, with mandatory cleaning of conference rooms after each use.
- ▀ Eliminate water coolers that don't have enough clearance to allow tall containers to be refilled without touching the cooler.
- ▀ Prohibit storage of opened or partially consumed food in break-room refrigerators.
- ▀ In offices where employees share desks, cover desks with disposable placemats that are changed after each use.

Source: IBJ research

"If you don't want to have retention and recruitment issues, you better have an office people are willing to work in."

In recent years, the shift to lower or no

cubicles was all about collaboration, production and cost savings.

"It never, ever was a health concern," St. John said. "Now it has to be."

Many firms are hesitant to give up their open concepts. St. John recommends at least "seated-height" privacy walls between workers, which extend about 2 inches above the head of a seated person.

Not everyone agrees.

"It's either caves or campfires. We like campfires," Innovatemap's Reynolds told IBJ this week. "We like a free flow of communication and openness. When thinking about dealing with [the coronavirus], my mind doesn't immediately go to barriers."

Christopher Day, owner of Indianapolis software firm DemandJump, also wants to continue to work in an open concept. DemandJump, on the 19th floor of Market Tower downtown, has 33 employees, and Day said they have plenty of room to spread out.

"I don't think a cubicle is going to make an impact," he said. "Simulations show someone can sneeze at the grocery store and a person an aisle over can be contacted."

'Walking a fine line'

Instead of worrying about cubicles, Day is trying to procure face masks for his employees.

But every challenge seems to lead to more questions.

For instance, one employer with 400 local workers told IBJ it was trying to secure up to 1,500 face masks. But when asked if those would be cloth or disposable, the company official was uncertain.

That matters because—if the company distributes disposable face masks and each employee uses a new one each day, as many medical experts recommend—1,500 wouldn't get through a week. And at this point, masks are in extremely short supply, along with hand sanitizer and a number of other essential items to combat the spread of the virus.

Many employers said they intend to bring workers back slowly, perhaps in waves. But when pressed for details, few were forthcoming. Many are still formulating plans.

A handful of executives said only those who absolutely need to come in will. Others said they will make coming in voluntary, at least through early summer. One executive said as little as 10% of the staff would come into the office in the first month after the stay-at-home order is lifted. Still, most employers expected to have most of their employees back in the office sometime in June—unless the virus rears its ugly head again and the number of cases, and deaths, surges.

Travel is another concern. Several employers said they are considering

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Day



St. John

RESTAURANTS

Continued from previous page

by the food service and hospitality industries, including hotels (although those are already permitted to operate, as an essential business). He said the last industry to

be phased in should be entertainment.

But restaurateurs, including Sahn, say reopening eateries as part of an early wave could be costly for the industry.

"I think we're going to be looked at to be one of the first that opens up, because that will signify some normalcy," Sahn said. "But in all reality, I really hope that's

not the case. I hope restaurants continue down this path of social distancing, and being leaders in the community, in really keeping everyone healthy."

Sahn acknowledged his businesses are suffering the same as other restaurants, but he has no plans to "just jump in" when the governor rolls back restrictions.

"I think the first thing we're going to look at is what the new standards are and make sure that we understand what the CDC is suggesting and what they think is the safest route," he said. "Let's figure out how we can maintain some bit of restaurant normalcy and still maintain all of those standards."

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imposing a quarantine on employees returning from business trips.

"We're walking a fine line," said Greg Feary, president and managing partner for Indianapolis-based law firm Scopelitis Light Garvin Hanson & Feary. "First and foremost, we're trying to keep our employees safe, but we're also trying to keep our firm vital and relevant."

Feary said it's important for top leadership to be involved in coronavirus policies. In early March, Scopelitis, which has 175 employees, including 100 locally, formed a COVID-19 task force composed of nine partners, led by Feary.

"Some of the things we're dealing with might seem like minutiae, but we're talking about things in this day that impact the health of the company and, more importantly, the health of people," Feary said. "At this point, this is top of mind for the people at the very top of this firm."

Matters that were previously so mundane they wouldn't have registered a thought are now serious concerns. For instance, how many people should be allowed in an elevator—and who's going to police that?

One local executive said he would be comfortable riding an elevator with up to six people. But a handful of workers told IBJ they wouldn't get on an elevator with even two or three people. One said she'd rather climb the stairs to her eighth-floor office than risk riding with just one person—especially if that person wasn't wearing a mask.

Heavy-handed?

There's also the issue of companies mandating policies and procedures versus making suggestions. Many firms wrestled with this in early March when they began to comprehend the seriousness of the virus.

Companies often started letting employees work from home, followed by suggestions that they do so, then strong suggestions, then—when some workers clung to the routine of coming in—bosses dropped the mandate.

"Eventually, we closed and locked the doors," one executive told IBJ. "We just couldn't afford to leave it up to the employees any longer. The risk was simply too high."

St. John said she didn't hesitate to mandate masks. "Unless your head is down and you're in a cubicle on a Zoom

call, your mask is on," she said. "I wear mine everywhere."

Count Wechsler among the most aggressive local executives with respect to coronavirus rules. In addition to Launch Fishers, he operates the Indiana IoT Lab and heads the Indiana Co-Working Task Force.

In addition to taping off lanes for foot traffic, he's eliminating communal meals and governing what goes into the fridge. He's also employing "spatial analytics"—using video cameras to alert the building administrator if too many people are in certain areas at once. Those people will immediately be told to disperse.

"We know some of these things may seem radical—even dictatorial," he said. "But we're willing to lead from the front. I think if people realize we're doing this for the greater good, they'll respond positively."

But many employers and building managers are making suggestions and counting on workers to police themselves.

"The problem with that is," St. John said, "in any workplace, especially a large one with a lot of employees, you're going to have divergent opinions. Not everyone is going to agree what to do for the greater good."

One thing that will not be tolerated, local business operators said, is someone coming to work even the least bit sick.

"I come from a world, like a lot of people, where you rub some dirt on it and tough it out," Wechsler said. "That can no longer be the case. If people come in and they're sick, we're going to have to engage with that person and deal with the situation." He stopped short of saying the person would be removed.

While some companies said they are trying to get COVID-19 tests for employees who want them and others said they would offer temperature checks, few said those would be mandates. Executives agreed offering medical advice could create liability concerns.

"We're not physicians," DemandJump's Day said. "For us to start taking people's temperatures ... it would not be prudent for us to opine on that."

The business sector needs to get going, one way or another, he said.

"I've been on numerous calls in the past week, and there's definitely a growing sentiment that we have to move forward," Day said. "The stimulus package is a short-term Band-Aid. We have to find a way to coexist with this situation."

"Yes, we have to be smart and safe, but we also have to be thoughtful of the consequences if we don't keep the world moving forward. As of now, we believe we can bring our employees back to work safely."



Feary



Relocation Strategies Design and Project Manager Jennifer Upton measures a desk in office space she's designing at 9430 Priority Way for Apex Benefits. (IBJ photo/Eric Learned)

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