Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | COVID-19 and the challenges of the architecture office

by Robert Natke, Design Evanston November 15th, 2021

As many of us have experienced, COVID-19 has changed how we work, gather, shop and communicate. Many businesses have been greatly affected by the changes we have had to make to our lives. Some have suffered greatly; others have flourished.

Our profession, architecture, benefitted from being part of an "essential" industry. The construction business has done well. Our firm, UrbanWorks, has grown. And fortunately, the prospects for work in 2022 and beyond are promising. But the architecture has always been a collaborative, team-oriented and multidisciplinary environment where design professionals at all levels of experience work side-by-side to create the best designs.

Architect Robert Natke, partner at UrbanWorks. (UrbanWorks photo)

At first, shutting down the office in March 2020 was about staff and family safety. But it quickly became apparent that we were not ready to be up and running remotely. While most staff members had remote access to our server, few were prepared for the necessary changes in communication style required by the use of online conferencing platforms. As time went on,

efficiency, team communication and traditional design processes began to suffer. Additionally, obtaining building permits, reviewing material samples and the general administration of construction projects became far more complex or tedious.

As others reportedly experienced, our days began to feel longer. We noticed frustrations with staff members who had to be home with their children all day long. Additionally, younger staffers, often living alone, were showing signs of edginess from not having the social interactions of everyday work life.

To achieve the necessary business management of the office, I had to go into the office at least once a week to retrieve mail, pay bills and check on the general disposition of a now empty office space. We had just moved to the Loop in 2019 and were now using our bright and airy office as a 3,800-square-feet computer server closet. Traveling into the Loop was eerie, but efficient. I would find myself walking down the middle of LaSalle Street without a single human being or moving vehicle in sight.

Throughout 2020, home networks would go down, audio quality would be inconsistent and deadlines were missed. Our usual pin-up and over-the-shoulder design process was not happening and projects were broken into distributed tasks that could be accomplished by a single participant instead of our normal team approach.

From the fall of 2020 to the summer of 2021, staff members would occasionally come into the office because they needed to have a more powerful and reliable computer interface or they simply needed to get out of their home environments.

We decided to officially reopen the office at the end of this past summer, but we keep a shared calendar so we can monitor office occupancy to maintain social distancing. Staff tend to come in for one to three days a week. While it's not unusual for half of the staff to be in, most of the time it is about 25%. Safety concerns related to public transportation and the incredible increase in vehicular traffic have led to resistance from staff to come to the office any more than necessary. The disposition of the staff has improved and it is obvious co-workers enjoy seeing each other once again. Team design coordination has improved as well.

The staff of UrbanWorks. (UrbanWorks photo)

As an operations manager of a design-oriented architectural office, the past 20 months have really opened my eyes.

In summary, I have learned:

1. Accountability. Are staff members really working at home? Self-motivated, flexible multitaskers who share the mission of our office do not need to be micromanaged.
2. Online conferencing platforms are here to stay. Get used to all 12 of them.
3. Some aspects of working from home will be the norm. This is true for most professions, not just designers. Make sure your staffers have the appropriate equipment and network capabilities so they can be as efficient as possible.
4. Staff members need to take time away from the home office to clear their heads. I have never seen such a large backlog of unused benefit time in the 17 years I have run the office.

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