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THE VIRUS CRISIS

Miami offices are reopening, but many will still telecommute

■ Miami-Dade is reopening for business after the coronavirus shutdown, but few employees are returning to the office. The success of telecommuting means many employers will continue to allow working from home.

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Tony Argiz, CEO of a big accounting and advisory firm with offices stretching from Coral Gables to New York and India, was a bit of a telecommuting skeptic. Until the coronavirus pandemic hit.

Literally overnight, Argiz's firm dispatched 700 employees home to work safely and remotely. After a slow start, business is

now up 10% over last year, Argiz said. Telecommuting worked out so well that when more than half of his employees at Morrison, Brown, Argiz & Farra told their bosses in a survey they wanted to keep working from home, executives readily agreed.

"We've been killing it on all cylinders," Argiz said. "So we're going to be accommodating. We're probably going to get no more than 40 to 45% of our employees to show up to the office. We're OK with that."

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Argiz's experience is hardly unique. Miami-Dade County may be reopening for business, but not many people seem to be rushing back to the office.

Having discovered the joys, savings and surprising efficacy of having employees work remotely during the pandemic, executives and workers at a broad range of law, accounting and architecture firms, banks, public relations and marketing agencies and trade and business groups say they're perfectly content to keep doing so — at least in the near future, and quite possibly beyond.

To make one thing clear here: No, it probably won't spell the end of the office, as some pundits have posited. But none of the executives who spoke to the Miami Herald are demanding that employees return to their office desks right away, with some exceptions for essential personnel who need to be in-house, like tech teams maintaining servers.

When workers do come back, it could be to a different sort of workplace.

Like Argiz, executives are carefully watching how the pandemic plays out as they get ready for the return of at least a portion of their employees who either prefer to or need to come back to the office setting. They are reconfiguring floor plans, staggering cubicle or shared workspace seating and adopting flexible, alternating schedules to maintain required social distancing amid beefed-up visitor screening and cleaning and sanitizing protocols.

And, to be sure, virtually every office employer is also taking a hard look at whether they really need all that expensive real estate if a good chunk of their employees end up working mostly from home after the pandemic wanes — posing a potential long-range hazard for what has been a booming South Florida office market.

"You've got to look at every aspect of your business," Argiz said. "Our rent bills are humongous. Outside of employee expense, it's got to be our second expense. Right now, I would say there is a 50-50 chance we're going to need less space."

What's most likely to happen, experts and executives say, is that the COVID-19 epidemic will sharply accelerate what had been tepid growth in telecommuting, pushing employers to adopt a flexible, blended approach for their workers — that is, some combination of working from home and in-office time.

"Working remotely in some fashion is here to stay," said Alfred Sanchez, president of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, adding that he's giving most of his 25 employees the choice of continuing to work remotely. "A lot of us are going to see this as a real plus."

When chamber employees do come back, Sanchez said, they will work in staggered intervals, so that if one worker gets the virus, it won't be transmitted to people on other teams. If that flexible approach works, he said, that could mean that businesses and organizations may be able to manage with much smaller offices or rely mostly on shared workspaces like We Work.



A photo of architecture and engineering firm Gensler's office in Oakland, Calif., shows workstation seating has been staggered and separated.



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"Maybe they're hurting now, but I think it's going to leapfrog and accelerate," he said. "Down the line, people will realize, 'We don't need 10,000 square feet, we need 2,000. Or we need space every once in a while for a team to come in and get together, instead of a conference room that sits empty most of the day.'"

But in the middle of a pandemic of uncertain course that's forcing rapid changes on a weekly basis, there's no telling how extensive or how permanent those sorts of shifts might be, said Eddy Arriola, founder and CEO of Apollo Bank. As an essential business, the Brickell-based community bank kept some personnel at its branches even as it sent most of its administrators and lending officers home.

Arriola said he's bringing back people in slow, careful phases, while evaluating long-term space needs for its offices and bank branches. If social distancing becomes a long-term thing, he noted, that might call for more, not less, space as the bank grows.

"We're still functioning the same way we were a month ago," Arriola said. "But forget about what we want to look like in May 2020. What will we look like in 2025?"

"Anyone that I hear that thinks to have the answer is wrong. We're all figuring it out. There are so many little factors. Maybe you keep a space because rents come down. Do we need more space between employees? Do we need larger break rooms?"

Any long-term effects on Miami's office market won't play out for months, as leases come up for renewal. Right now, brokers and the Downtown Development Authority say, firms and companies continue looking for and leasing office space in Miami, though at a slower rate because of the pandemic. But New York firms looking to move out of Manhattan for tax and cost reasons have helped keep things moving.

Lease negotiations now often entail concessions from landlords as existing

tenants reconfigure floor plans to allow greater social distancing, said Cushman & Wakefield Vice President Brian Gale.

Some new leases include calculations for space needed per employee to accommodate the recommended six feet of social separation as well as rotating shifts, said Tere Blanca, chief executive officer of Miami's Blanca Commercial Real Estate.

But Elliot LaBrecche, vice president of the Easton Group, said he has five office tenants looking to shrink between 15% to 25% of their footprint. Some landlords are offering up to six rent-free months for long-term leases, though he said rent rates haven't budged.

Gale, whose firm is leasing 830 Brickell, a new 57-story tower designed by the same architects as Dubai's Burj Khalifa and due for completion in 2021, said he doesn't antic-

"The office is not going away," he said. "Can you work from home? Yes. Is it as productive? No. Forget about the dog barking and kids in the background, you lose the camaraderie when you work from home."

Executives agree: There will likely always be a need for offices. The question is, how much?

Getting people together is essential to building trust and collegiality, training new employees and fostering a company culture and work ethic, they say. For creative, collaborative jobs in particular, and even for keeping clients satisfied, they say, there is no substitute for human proximity — even though it doesn't mean employees have to be in the office every single day.

For lawyers, accountants and planners who help clients map out their future, deciding delicate matters like wills and finances, a secure Webex link can't replace the human touch, said Joseph Saka, CEO of Miami-based Berkowitz Pollack Brant Advisors, which has 380 employees in South Florida and New York.

"Some of these meetings last two or three hours, and

you're with a family and dealing with strategy that will impact their lives for 20 years, so it's ideal to be together," Saka said. "There is something to face-to-face meetings. It's still really important to look people in the eye, or when you're working on deadline to be able to walk across the floor to collaborate with someone."

That said, his firm decided to send its employees home to work though it was an essential business. And now it's not requiring that they hurry back to the office, especially those who may not feel comfortable just yet, Saka said.

"We're not going to be pressured in any way," he said. "We're going to go back when we feel we are able to protect all our people."

Surveys suggest that the go-slow, flexible approach will be a common option. A Miami Herald Survey-Monkey poll of business owners found that nearly half say they don't plan to reopen immediately, citing continuing concerns over safety for customers and workers as well as the success of virtual work.

A report from the Brookings Institution, a prominent think tank, estimates that up to half of American workers are now working from home because of the pandemic, more than double the proportion who did so at least sometimes in 2018, and its experts believe that some of that growth will be permanent.

The report notes that those who take advantage of telecommuting tend to be higher-paid professionals. For them, working from home has advantages, including savings on the cost, time and stress of commuting, and improvement in job satisfaction. Disadvantages include the potential professional isolation and hindrance to career development and advancement.

Three leading U.S. companies, Facebook, Twitter and Nationwide Insurance, have fully embraced telecommuting, telling many or most of their employees they can keep working from home permanently.

Law firms have also found that telecommuting hasn't harmed the quality of their attorneys' work, especially as judges began allowing hearings, depositions and mediation to occur virtually, said Michael Landen, a labor lawyer and partner at Kluger Kaplan. The firm's 25 attorneys, who occupy a full floor in a downtown Miami building, have been mostly absent from the office since March with no ill effects, he said.

At Miami-based legal giant Greenberg Traurig, several years worth of investment in secure and encrypted virtual communications technology — there are no longer even office desk phones at the firm — paid off during the pandemic. The firm, which occupies five floors at its main office in a downtown Miami tower, saw "a resounding success" after sending all its lawyers and support staff across the country home to work, said Jaret Davis, co-managing shareholder of the Miami office.

"That tech has allowed our lawyers and business staff to seamlessly provide service. It doesn't feel at all different," Davis said. As a result, the firm, which has about 500 employees in its Miami-Dade and Broward offices alone, is now undertaking a "deep dive" evaluation of its space needs.

Reducing the in-office workforce can have other advantages, from reducing employees' exposure to the coronavirus, a second wave or a new pandemic, to employers' legal exposure as well, Landen said.

Since they need to travel often to where clients and projects are, employees at creative companies like architecture and design firms have long been accustomed to working remotely and collaboratively through sophisticated design software. But some say they still miss huddling over a desktop screen and sketching out designs with colleagues at the office.

"We miss the culture of the studio and being around the table together," said Lawrence Kline, managing director of the Miami office of global architecture firm Perkins & Will, who supervises 65 architects and designers, all

working remotely since mid-March. "We've had colleagues in the firm who have said, 'Why return?' But we crave the normalcy of being in the office and designing together. Virtually gets you part of the way there. But not all the way there."

Perkins & Will's open-plan office occupies a full floor of a downtown Coral Gables tower. There are no private offices. Kline is considering a cautious June 22 return to the studio, to be done in phases — starting with a volunteer group that he calls "the willing and the curious," while others keep working from home. The firm is also developing its own app for employees to conduct and report a daily health check on themselves. At least initially, there will be no clients or consultants allowed in, Kline said.

Eventually, though, that will happen. "The office will evolve, but it won't go away," Kline said.

Clients are already asking for modifications that suggest the broader direction office design and operations may take after the pandemic wanes, Kline and studio interior design director Elina Cardet said.

What Perkins & Will and other local design firms are recommending includes increasing use of flexible furnishings that can be easily separated or brought back together if future epidemics occur, and installation of improved air-filtration and circulation systems. Landlords and employers will increasingly turn to touchless features activated by motion or voice to turn on faucets and lights and open doors.

"People nowadays, they don't want to touch anything," said Anabella Smith, a principal at Zyscovich Architects, which is incorporating some of the changes it's recommending to clients in its own downtown Miami offices.

In the future, she and other architects say, office circulation will be designed so no one has to walk too close to work stations, and seating may be arranged in checkerboard patterns to allow for social distancing and to avoid having work spaces or cubicles where employees face one another directly.

For the Miami office of global architecture and design firm Gensler, that has meant a total stop and redesign of its own project — its new offices in a Wynwood office building. The firm, which is known for workplace design, is rethinking collaborative, common spaces while allowing for necessary social distancing and ensuring employees' well-being, said Diana Farmer-Gonzalez, managing director and principal.

"We are rethinking everything. We completely changed the design of our space because we're going to be living in a COVID world until there is a vaccine," she said. "We are reconsidering who is going to be in the office and why do you need to be in the office. There will be a post-pandemic workplace that's flexible. Landlords and brokers and clients and design firms are all working right now on what does the future workplace look like."

The lesson from the coronavirus pandemic that's likely to last, she said, is this: Cities and employers must be ready for the next one.

"When 9/11 happened, we forget it took five years until we all adjusted to new security protocols. We didn't stop traveling. We're not going to stop going to the office. But we will be a work-anywhere culture," Farmer-Gonzalez said.

"The office culture will be catapulted into the future."

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