



How the Workplace Works: CRE Leadership Forum Takeaways

Perspectives and predictions from the industry innovators, thought leaders, and practitioners who are tackling the future of CRE head on

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CRE Leadership Forum

New York, NY





“We’re here today to unlock answers.”



The commercial real estate industry is under a microscope, and the headlines aren’t buried in the business section: they’re on the front page. What’s foot traffic downtown? Who issued the latest in-office mandate? Importantly, who is engaging employees and earning back the commute? Getting the workplace right matters in more ways than we might first think. Buildings aren’t just owned by real estate firms — much of their equity comes from workers’ retirement nesteggs. People’s futures depend on CRE finding a soft landing. Together, let’s explore how.”

JESS JOHNSON

Global Head of Enterprise Partnerships

On November 30, 2023 HqO welcomed 35 CRE owners, operators, occupiers, and workplace leaders from across the Northeast to a discussion around the current state of the office and the increasing importance of investing in real estate experience (REX) in order to succeed into the future.

The group closely examined the market, focusing on the challenges facing both landlords and occupiers. Throughout the day, participants shared their experiences and the strategies they’ve tried and tested as they’ve worked to navigate the ever-evolving workplace landscape.

While discussions covered several different topics ranging from amenity usage to measuring success, the conversation always seemed to come back to one common theme — that occupiers and landlords must work together to meet the needs of employees and property end-users in order to increase employee and tenant retention.

This report highlights the top five takeaways from the forum. Read more to learn about where CRE has been, is now, and is going in the future.

01 Amenities continue to drive RTO, but employees still want and need productive workspaces.

In the post-pandemic world, employers are increasingly turning to amenities to attract employees back to the office. From swanky rooftop terraces and barista cafes to nap pods and meditation rooms, these perks are designed to make the office a more appealing and enjoyable place to be. And it seems to be working. Several participants at the forum shared that they see more employees in the office on days when special events or special amenities are being offered. This is further supported by a [JLL study](#) which found that **73% of employees who have access to amenities want to return to the office at least some of the time.**

However, it's crucial not to get lost in the "amenity arms race". Employees also need and want productive workspaces. This

means having access to quiet areas where they can focus, well-equipped conference rooms for collaboration, and ergonomic furniture that supports their physical and mental wellbeing. In fact, a 2022 report by [Framery](#) found that **57% of workers agree that access to privacy is the best office perk.**

Striking the right balance between playful amenities and productive environments is key to creating an office that truly meets the diverse needs of today's workforce, and earns back the commute. Ultimately, occupiers and landlords need to be investing in spaces that are both enjoyable and productive. This will not only help employers boost morale, in-office time, and productivity, but it will also help property owners and occupiers retain tenants.

Participants discussed the high importance of using digital tools to understand the wants and needs of end-users of space. Collectively they agreed that data and insights derived from products like HqO's Intelligence are critical when designing and outfitting a property or office space.



02 Wellness in the workplace has transcended its traditional boundaries, evolving into a cornerstone of the overall employee experience.

No longer confined to mere fitness centers or occasional seminars on healthy living, wellness in the workplace now encompasses a holistic approach that prioritizes mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

Leading employers have recognized that investing in employee wellness isn't just a moral imperative — it's a strategic business decision. By nurturing a culture that values wellness, organizations are witnessing enhanced productivity, reduced absenteeism, and increased employee retention rates. Beyond gym memberships and ergonomic workstations, workplaces are integrating mental health support,

stress management programs, and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) — just to name a few. Organizations taking a more comprehensive approach to wellness are seeing more engaged and productive employees.

But the concept of “wellness in the workplace” doesn't just impact benefit offerings however, it also directly influences workplace design. Properties, offices, and even amenities are now being built, and rebuilt, through the lens of wellbeing. Air quality, natural light, and access to outside space are increasingly top priorities for occupiers. While sometimes expensive to consider, these elements are quickly going from “nice

to have” to “must haves” for tenants and their employees.

While participants unanimously agreed that an increased prioritization of workplace wellness was likely coming to CRE at some point, it's clear that the pandemic accelerated it. Remote work, isolation, and heightened stress levels have underscored the importance of proactive wellness measures, and as a result, wellness in the workplace is no longer an added perk, it's a fundamental component for landlords and occupiers alike.



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03 Employees expect the same seamless technology experience at work as they do at home.

In today's digital landscape, seamless technology experiences are no longer a luxury, but an expectation. From ordering groceries to streaming movies, we navigate our personal lives with effortless ease, thanks to intuitive interfaces and intelligent algorithms. But what about at work? A study by *Salesforce* found that **71% of employees want the same level of technology they use at home in the workplace**, a mindset that is leading to a critical shift in tenant and employee expectations.

Friction and frustration plague many workplaces, with clunky software, slow internet speeds, and outdated hardware hindering productivity and morale. Employees waste precious time navigating complex interfaces, troubleshooting technical issues, and waiting for applications to load. This not only impacts individual output but also creates a negative work environment, breeding dissatisfaction with the office. Participants at the forum all agreed that it is hard to ask employees to come into an office that offers lackluster tech setups when home offices operate seamlessly.

Participants also all supported the idea that companies that prioritize investing in elite in-office digital employee experience reap significant benefits. By providing user-friendly tools, reliable infrastructure, and robust tech support, landlords and occupiers alike can:

- Boost productivity and efficiency
- Improve satisfaction and engagement
- Retain and attract talent and tenants

The group collectively acknowledged that bridging the gap between home and office technology is not a one-time fix, but an ongoing journey. Landlords and occupiers must continuously invest in user-friendly tools, provide adequate training, and foster a culture of feedback and improvement.

By prioritizing a seamless technology experience, organizations can unlock the full potential of their end-users and thrive in the digital age.



04

There isn't a "one size fits all" approach to measuring real estate experience success.

Almost unanimously did participants agree that REX traditionally hasn't been measured. CRE leaders more often than not simply focused on the hard numbers. If office vacancy was low and employee desks were filled, as far as they were concerned, their REX was a success. But today's workplace landscape is nothing like it once was. Hybrid models are the new normal, so success can no longer be measured by the number of cars in the parking lot or keycard swipes into the office.

Instead, assessing REX success today requires a more flexible and personalized measurement framework that can involve multifaceted metrics:

Engagement: Surveys, pulse checks, and project participation can reveal how connected employees and tenants feel to their work, colleagues, and the property as a whole.

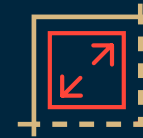
Productivity and Efficiency: Track task completion rates, meeting effectiveness, and resource utilization to understand how well the office environment supports optimal performance.

Sense of Belonging and Inclusion: Analyze diversity and inclusion initiatives, Employee Resource Groups, and feedback on office culture to assess whether everyone feels valued and respected.

Physical and Mental Wellbeing: Monitor access to healthy food options, ergonomic furniture, and stress-reduction resources to ensure the office environment promotes holistic employee wellbeing.

By gathering data from multiple sources, CRE leaders can gain a deeper understanding of what truly drives real estate experience success. This holistic approach allows them to identify areas for improvement, create targeted interventions, and ultimately foster an environment where every end-user feels engaged and empowered to thrive.

A successful workplace experience doesn't start with a single metric, but with a commitment to understanding and nurturing the diverse needs and aspirations of each individual. By embracing a tailored approach, property owners and employers can unlock the full potential of their workforce and end-users of space and build a thriving workplace for all.



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05

Commuting continues to be a leading deterrent for employees being asked to go into the office.

Despite the allure of in-person collaboration and the push from employers, commuting remains a major obstacle for many employees considering, or being asked, a return to the office. Reasons typically center around concerns about time, cost, and even environmental impact.

While these factors combine to create what many think is a powerful argument against return-to-work mandates, still, before the end of 2024 90% of employers will have implemented an RTO policy. Those which ignore the commuting conundrum though, risk losing valuable talent, hindering morale, and ultimately, failing to create a workplace experience that truly meets the needs of their employees in the post-pandemic world.

So, what can companies do to overcome the commute argument? A one-size-fits-all approach won't work but companies successfully navigating this often lean on offering hybrid work models, implementing flexible start and end times, and subsidizing commuting costs. Another option debated by the group was around the impact of having senior leaders physically present in the office and how that can set a valuable tone and encourage lower-level employees to come in more often. Most agreed that when senior leaders make the effort to come in more frequently, it sends a powerful message that the office is valued and seen as a vital space for collaboration, team building, and fostering connection.



Participant Perk Idea

Participants discussed offering free shuttle services to employees and how programs like this have been a tremendous support in getting people excited to come back into the office.



Connecting Real Estate to the People

We connect real estate to the people — making it less about the structures, the walls and windows, the floors and halls — and all about the people within them. At HqO we believe that digital connection to the end-user is at the center of real estate. We aim to create unique customer-centric experiences and solutions that support tenant and employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention.

Through a suite of powerful applications and services, HqO's REX Platform is proven to boost tenant and employee retention while increasing net operating income and driving efficiencies in operating costs. The Platform assesses the health and performance of end-user experience within a physical space, while providing the necessary tools for operators and occupiers to manage and optimize it, all from one central location.



Interested in learning more
about how HqO can help
your property succeed?

About HqO

HqO is leading the transformation of the way people experience real estate. Through its Real Estate Experience (REX) Platform — a powerful and dynamic suite of applications and services — HqO has powered over 400 million square feet at over 700 properties across 32 countries. The world's most innovative organizations rely on HqO to drive operational excellence by maximizing and boosting tenant and employee acquisition, retention, and engagement.