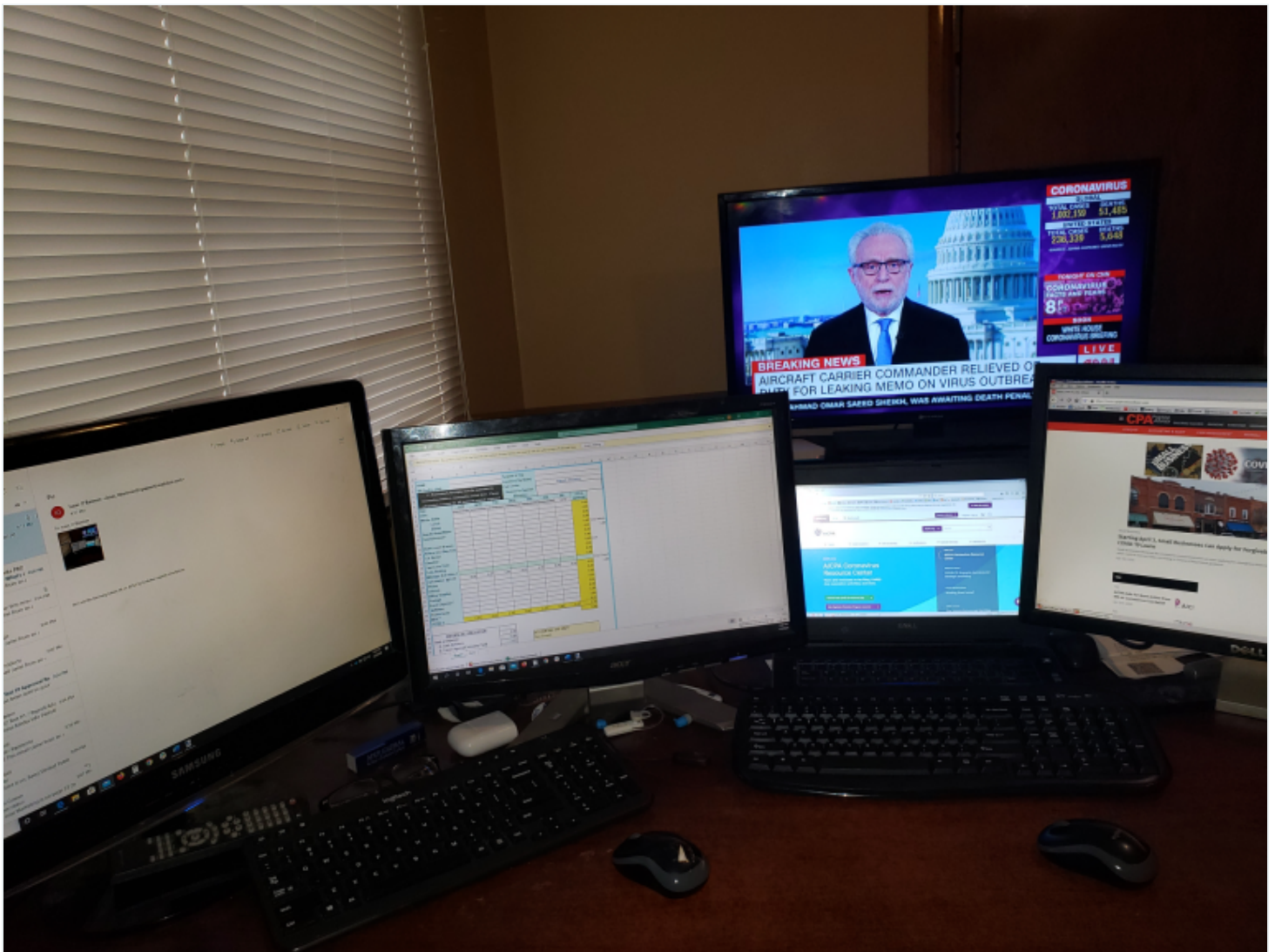


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as workers settle into that rhythm, it is uncertain how many will actually need to report to the office five days a week after a coronavirus vaccine is found.

May. 27, 2020



The COVID-19 pandemic is not only changing the configuration of offices as employers seek to safeguard the health of their workers, but it also is raising questions about the long-term place of the office in commerce.

The virus outbreak has forced entire employee populations to work from home. And

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are going to rethink: 'Do I really need this amount of office space?'"

Not everyone agrees. Commercial real estate brokers say until there a vaccine is developed, there will be an appetite for telecommuting.

"But there are two large occupiers in our market that are going through campus renovations that include putting their people in denser environments, and neither of those firms has wavered from their plans due to COVID-19," said Patrick Mulready, senior vice president at CBRE in Hartford, the commercial real estate services firm. "So I don't see a seismic shift in how companies occupy office space long term."

Office leasing is seen as a key barometer of economic health and employment growth.

In downtown Hartford, Connecticut, an uptick in office leasing in the last year is seen as integral to the city's revitalization and Hartford taking its place, though a latecomer, in the country's "back-to-cities" urbanization movement.

In the last five years, downtown has added hundreds of new apartments a year, UConn opened a regional campus at Front Street and the Yard Goats successfully settled into a new minor-league ballpark.

This week, the state is taking the first, tentative steps toward reopening its economy beyond essential workers: outdoor dining at restaurants, outdoor museums and zoos – and offices. Offices can only bring back up to 50% of their workers but the state is still encouraging working at home whenever possible.

For office workers who do return, they will likely enter spaces radically altered from those they left in March, well beyond wearing a face mask and keeping six feet apart.

CHANGING OFFICE DESIGN

In recent years, office design had moved to open floor plans accommodating more

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Rita Joy, director of client development at Interscape Commercial Environments in Farmington, said in a recent webinar on the future of office space that employers will have to stagger workstations, either removing every other one or taping them up so no one sits next to each other.

Collaborative areas, often used for brainstorming, will likely be used as work areas, and seats are coming out of conference rooms, Joy said.

“Where conference rooms once held 12, now it’s just going to hold six and we might be putting up a plexiglass screen down the middle of the conference room table to help protect people who are across from each other,” Joy said.

When buying new furniture, companies are likely to consider the cleaning of coverings, Joy said.

“We had a client, we were working with them on a new order of furniture and, at the very last minute, when this COVID happened, they switched their fabric to a bleach-cleanable fabric,” Joy said. “We’re going to see a lot more of that – anti-microbial fabric and furniture, non-porous, solid surfaces.”

Jonathan Putnam, executive director at commercial real estate services firm Cushman & Wakefield in Hartford, said you might be handed a disposable desk blotter if you share a workspace or be assigned to a team of employees that only works certain days in the office.

“No matter where you work, the return to the office is going to be very gradual,” Putnam said. “Everything will be a test case, a first time – let’s see how it’s working – and then make adjustments.”

FEW QUICK RETURNS

In the Hartford area, insurance giant Travelers Cos. has about 7,000 employees, the

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Of the 7,000 employees in the Hartford area, about 1,200 already have some kind of telecommuting arrangement with the insurer, allowing them to work remotely from one to five days a week.

While a COVID-19 vaccine is still under development, the number of workers returning to the office is not likely to rise above 50% – and long-term that may mean more employees with telecommuting agreements.

“Do I think we will have some additional people working from home? Yes, I do,” Bessette said. “But I think there is an importance of a company having people come into the office at some point, for a lot of different reasons, for meetings and camaraderie” and collaboration that is best done face-to-face.

Some of the spontaneity of brainstorming and innovation could be lost with more people working remotely, Ziplow said, but he also says a new “watercooler” could be created with ongoing online chat rooms.

“On a regular basis, people respond to those ideas, and the chatting back and forth reimagines how we can invigorate those types of discussions without being at the watercooler,” Ziplow said.

## URBAN CENTERS

In 2015, Boston-based Paradigm Properties bought downtown Hartford's CityPlace I, the state's tallest office building and the firm's first purchase in Connecticut.

Five years ago, Paradigm saw the seeds of revitalization taking root and the recent increase in office leasing, boosted by corporate moves from the suburbs and encouraging deals from companies outside of Connecticut, was an encouraging sign.

Increasingly, employers have sought to establish locations near where their desired

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possibilities,” McCall said. “But I think the desire to live and/or work in active, exciting urban environments is part of the DNA of millennials. I think that will win out over the competing possibilities.”

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