

Planning Dining Service in the Coronavirus Era

How to react as companies, colleges and institutions change their ways

Dining Insights, Summer 2020

When This Cruel War Is Over” was a popular song on both sides during the U.S. Civil War. It could be the theme song now for companies, colleges and institutions planing for the future as they confront the extended pandemic and its aftermath. The results will require changes for on-site dining services.

“Americans have spent a lot of time wondering when things will go back to normal. But what if normal isn’t coming back?” ask Matt Burr, CEO, and Becca Endicot, editor, at Nomadic Learning, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*.

“The office has lost top billing as the place where white-collar work gets done,” they wrote. “Newly remote employees will soon begin to see that productivity, innovation and creativity remain strong, if not stronger, under new conditions. Organizations will learn that they benefit tremendously from losing the limitations that come from traditional office settings.”

Nomadic Learning provides digital training courses for companies and institutions.

With the experience of forced remote operation of their organizations, corporate and institutional leaders are deciding whether to continue this practice in some form. Among other benefits, it reduces the need for expensive office and classroom space and support services like security, dining and janitorial.

Will working and studying remotely be a viable solution? See ‘What will business be like when (almost) no one’s in the office?’ at dininginsights.blogspot.com

Campus Changes

“Several forces have aligned to revive the hope that the internet may finally disrupt higher education,” *Time* magazine wrote in 2012, quoted that year in *Dining Insights*.

The pandemic is now one of those forces.

Sixty-three pct. of the 1,040 colleges and universities tracked by the Chronicle of Higher Education plan to offer some degree of in-person teaching, the Chronicle reports. Eighteen pct. propose a hybrid model and 8% will offer on-line classes only. The others are still deciding or considering other plans. For all, de-densifying classrooms, lecture halls, residence halls, and dining halls are major considerations in their plans.

Corporate Reaction

Working away from the office has been around for some ten or so years, noted in the summer and fall 2011 issues of *Insights*. The degree of uncertainty entailed in planning, both short- and long-term, is illustrated by this comment by a Clarion corporate client whose 1,000 employees moved into new offices with a large café days before the virus lockdown hit its city:

“As to what that new normal will be, we will see. Naturally, we will adjust the operation to address demand. If demand decreases, we will be prepared to close stations in the café and perhaps consolidate offerings.”

A Clarion client moving to a new headquarters has eliminated employee dining altogether. Its 1,200 employees will bring their own meals or visit local restaurants. Its food service operator stocks employee pantries generously and delivers light meals and refreshments to conference rooms. All major events are outsourced to local caterers. Its dining facility footprint and staff is a small fraction of what it had been with a full-service dining operation.

Exploiting Social Contact

“Once we reopen, we will be sure to avoid any self-service in the cafes for sometime,” reports another Clarion corporate client who serves 3,000 employees in two cafes. “My gut feeling is that people are hungering for social contacts now and once we are open we will exploit this to the fullest.”

Some solutions have emerged that promise to provide services to employees at lower labor and operating costs. A company called Fooda with operations in Chicago and other cities, and Northeastern regional food service contractor NexDine in Boston provide companies with meals from a rotating group of local restaurants instead of operating an employee café. There’s no or minimal need for food preparation facilities, just a servery.

Other Options

The multi-tenant office building café that serves all tenants, a long-time option, is now gaining fresh interest.

“More building owners are emphasizing food service as a means to attract tenants,” says David Lanci, CEO of NexDine, which operates cafes in multi-tenant buildings.

Many operators are planning to offer only remote ordering and pickup or delivery of packaged meals until the virus threat is over – and maybe longer.

A very recent development may offer a solution that would help both corporate and campus dining services. Amazon is now offering its “Just Walk Out” (JWO) technology to operators. Like the unstaffed micro-markets now widely used, a JWO store is stocked with grab-and-go products. In a JWO, the customer uses a credit or debit card to access the unit. The technology recognizes each item as it’s picked up and charges the customer’s card. The customer just walks out. The micro-market’s weakness, voluntary payment, is eliminated. *justwalkout.com*

The extent to which working and studying remotely continues as the pandemic remains and technology improves will affect each organization differently. Planning now will help your organization meet the future.

Clarion can help you thread your way through the Covid-19 maze and out the other side. Call Tom Mac Dermott, 603/642-8011 or Ted Mayer, 617/875-7882 or e-mail us, info@clariongp.com