

HOW FACILITIES SOLUTIONS IS HELPING TO CREATE MORE AGILE, PRODUCTIVE WORK SPACES

**Aubrey Mc Elnea,
CEO Tsebo Facilities Solutions**



Covid-19 has given us a unique opportunity to reconsider how we create agile workspaces that function to keep employees physically safe while enhancing mental wellbeing, communication and culture. Aubrey Mc Elnea, CEO Tsebo Facilities Solutions, talks about how his team is working to create flexible solutions that lead to more productive work environments.

One of the most profound effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on business has been the rapid shift to remote work with businesses adopting digital technologies to work from home and hold virtual meetings.

While the successful implementation of remote working across a number of industries has proved popular on some levels, Aubrey Mc Elnea, CEO Tsebo Facilities Solutions, cautions against potential overreaction by disturbing operations to the level that they can't turn back without incurring excessive additional cost.

Most businesses have developed procedures that may have been disrupted and which, together with additional structural disruption, may prove to be dis-enablers once business volumes start to recover. In a country like South Africa, where unemployment is a reality we need to consider employment-rich opportunities. Remote working tends to lead to discussions around the necessity of staff and associated costs in many industries. Technology works best when used to enhance our employees' skills – freeing up their time to concentrate human-centric tasks such as client engagement and communication – not as a tool to replace them.

"The more happily employed people we have in South Africa, the larger our consumer base and healthier our economy," says Mc Elnea.

To this end, "Work from home is not a silver bullet, it can reduce productivity and erode a company's culture. Executives are required to spend greater time communicating with their teams to enforce the culture and the ethos of the business.

"It can also be a challenge in a developing country where employees struggle with unstable electricity and utility supply and a younger workforce, who reside in compact residential structures, are often unable to afford the infrastructure needed for a comfortable home office. Distractions are also a reality whether its young children, pets or home improvements, staff are human and the temptation to slip off the radar can be overwhelming for some individuals.

"That said, Covid-19 has forced us to consider the possibility that there will be other pandemics in the future and we need to take these left-field eventualities into consideration relooking at workplaces through strategic facilities management and workplace design."

From this perspective, Covid-19 has given businesses an opportunity to redefine their workspaces to become environments that enhance employees' physical, emotional and mental wellbeing and, in turn, boost their productivity.

As a first step, this means focussing on physical health by implementing measures such as screening and monitoring, hospital-level cleaning and disinfection, installing touchless technology and regular sanitations points, HVAC maintenance (to ensure filters remain clean and germ free), and pest control to mitigate the risk of communicable diseases. The next step is to look at the number of employees and reconfigure the special design of offices and other work places to accommodate social distancing and reduce the need for people gathering in any one space at a particular time.

"Workspaces are having to become agile to cater for the change in demand for how they are used. Many businesses are approaching us to find solutions around creating more flexible work environments that allow for work from home and the office," says Mc Elnea.

"Employees require agile environments to sit in on meetings, print documents, catch up on ideas with colleagues and leave with as little administration and box-checking as possible. Staff now used to home comforts will become more demanding of their employers, which may become a factor for many industries from the view of skills retention."

From Tsebo's perspective this means creating agile, innovative solutions that allow a mix of services that can be switched on and off as businesses need them. Solutions like Tsebo Agile offer clients significant cost saving by providing a tailored mix of facilities management; maintenance and repairs; ad hoc solutions; office and business support; catering and cleaning and specialised services. "While staff returning to the office may want home comforts, they will still demand the high standards expected of any large corporate enterprise," says Mc Elnea. "Balancing these demands with cost reality and productivity will become the differentiator for those organisations competing for the best talent."

By signing up for customised service solutions, clients can access Tsebo's 24/7 helpdesk to request a particular service. Generally, the commercial structure of this service can be split between fixed and variable costs. So items such as regular cleaning and generator maintenance could fall under the fixed-cost portion, while additional items like the repair of a broken

window could fall under variable expenses. Reactive callouts and third-party services are logged at the call centre and billed accordingly.

"We've put a lot of work into figuring out how to make our teams as agile as possible to create solutions that can proactively change with the client's business environment. A number of companies have given up their office space over the pandemic period, but we anticipate that many of them will return to the office space in some form or other once Covid-19 is under control," says McElnea.

It's in this area of back-to-work that things are becoming exciting from a facilities management perspective. Backbone Solutions, a subsidiary of Tsebo Facilities Solutions, specialising in workplace design and project management has been exploring functional designs looking at creating flexible workplaces that optimise space while considering safety and social distancing. This includes the support of all of Tsebo's Divisions such as the Critical Engineering team to ensure that critical infrastructure continues to be well maintained to avoid business disruption as well as the Catering Division to ensure that the Beverage Solutions team satisfy the demands of staff wanting an exceptional cup of coffee, or a healthy breakfast served in specially packed Covid-safe box meals.

"We've gone through various evolutions in office design from the industrial revolution where everyone was squeezed into battery chicken type space to adopting large modular offices, back to open plan, and now to work hubs and hotdesking," says McElnea. "Now we are looking at how to provide collaborative environments that still have enough open areas to maintain social distancing allowing staff to feel safe and comfortable in the office environment. We need to create appealing spaces that attract talent and tempt people to return to work now that they have become comfortable working from home."

In response to this Tsebo is working with its clients to infuse innovation into corporate space design and to provide creative spaces that are adaptive and collaborative while allowing focus areas for individual creativity. "By rethinking how we structure workspaces we can create environments that are agile, appealing and adaptable to employees' needs. The extent to which we are able to achieve this will lead to greater communication, collaboration and productivity," says Mc Elnea. "Remote work can be incorporated into a mixed solution but at the end of the day everyone wants to work with or for a company that cares about its employees."

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