

REIMAGINE, REALIGN, RECONNECT: TIME TO ACCELERATE BUILDING'S 'DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION'

Recent news reports about the construction industry have made for distinctly uneasy reading. Coronavirus has resulted in the scaling-back, postponement or even outright cancellation of numerous projects, and countries across Europe have begun to report dramatic slumps in activity.

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No one doubts that these are profoundly unsettling times for all industry stakeholders. Where projects are still taking place, they are often subject to supply-side and personnel challenges, while social distancing is (quite rightly) having a profound effect on implementation. The ongoing easing of lockdown in countries around the world should see activity levels begin to pick up, but it's sure to be a rocky road for suppliers and sub-contractors for many months to come.

Although it is difficult to derive many positives from this crisis, there is something to be said about the fact that it forced us to reconsider who we are and what we value. Many of us used the last weeks to reevaluate established procedures and started to think more rigorously about how we want the next generation of buildings to function – both in terms of day-to-day operations, and the role they can play in realising a lower-carbon future.

"Coronavirus has brought construction to a near-standstill in countries around the world. But amidst the uncertainty there is also opportunity to think anew about the operational phases of buildings", says Priva Building Automation's VP strategy and commerce, Peter Vandendriessche.

The term 'digital transformation' has achieved significant traction in recent years, not least for its manifestation in the kind of integrated building management systems (BMS) that allow businesses to monitor and optimise their use of energy. Many companies now place responsibility to assure optimal operation and occupant wellbeing in the hands of external specialists, and it's no stretch to imagine this becoming an even more appealing option given the additional challenges that Covid-19 is presenting to facilities managers and their teams.

Our customers can be assured that – like many other companies in the sector – we are currently devoting considerable time to making sense of what's happening and letting our conclusions inform the development of new solutions. But even at this relatively early stage, some opportunities for what might be termed 'post-Coronavirus enhanced digital services' have become apparent.

Integration with Internet of Things-style technologies, including 'track and trace' apps that will help facilitate the return to work, is one specific example. More generally, though, building and facilities managers are bound to have a heightened awareness of the need to maintain healthy and fully ventilated workplaces, so we expect intelligence-driven building control solutions to be in huge demand. These platforms are sure to be used in conjunction with air filtration and conditioning systems that may have to be substantially reengineered so that the focus shifts from recirculating air to bringing in fresh air from the outside.

With more people working from home spelling a reduced demand for commercial premises, Harvard professor Joseph G. Allen makes a compelling case that demonstrably healthier workplaces will be at a major advantage going forward: "I think that the offices with the premier health story will get the

premium rent and get the tenants, and the offices with a lagging health story will lag.” (1)

No one can be sure how long Coronavirus will be with us, but a greater awareness of the importance for **healthy buildings**’ is certain to be one lasting legacy of the crisis. With more complex working practices to be observed, we believe that a growing number of organisations will seek advanced building management technologies and the specialist service providers who can ensure they are always optimised to deliver healthy working environments.

Sources:

(1) <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/why-covid-19-raises-the-stakes-for-building-health>

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