



A LEADER'S GUIDE

How to rebuild, retool, and reopen buildings during a global pandemic

A curated roundup of the best strategies and techniques from global real estate leaders for operating properties with agility in the new normal.

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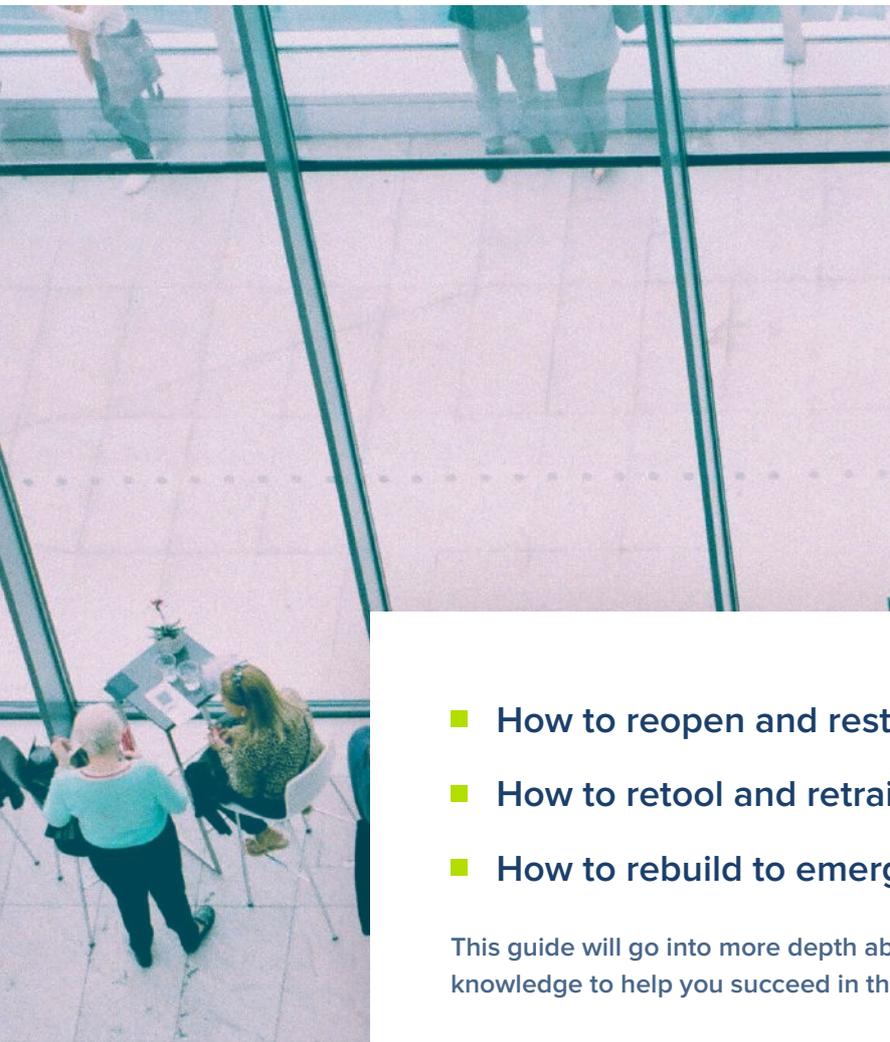
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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought real estate and property operations to a standstill. As economies paused, commercial spaces were shuttered.

But leaders in real estate and property management don't see the COVID-19 crisis as just a one-off event. They see it as an opportunity to train for an unpredictable future. These leaders don't want to return to the status quo—they want to make bold moves today to build an advantage for tomorrow.

With every passing week, owners and property operations leaders are shifting their focus—from straightforward response and recovery, to retooling, upskilling, and preparing for the new reality.



How are global RE leaders navigating this complex, unusual journey?
What visions do they have for the post-COVID world of commercial real estate?
What moves are they making now to become clear winners in the future?

We interviewed global experts in real estate and property operations and curated expert insights to find out. As they recover and rebuild for the future, these key themes are top of mind:

- How to reopen and restart operations
- How to retool and retrain to thrive in the new reality
- How to rebuild to emerge as a future leader

This guide will go into more depth about each—offering firsthand, practical knowledge to help you succeed in this uncertain future, too.



Disclaimer: The Property Operations Leader's Guide is a compendium made available for informational and educational purposes. It is a synthesis of insights represented by individual views, expert opinions, and publicly available information on the web.

HOW TO REOPEN AND SAFELY RESTART OPERATIONS

As the world shifts from crisis-mode to resumption of activity, it's critical that real estate leaders and operations teams prioritize safety of their commercial spaces. Clear communication, strict safety measures, and comprehensive contingency plans are key as people start returning to workspaces.

immediate response to the pandemic, re-entry and recovery may be the most challenging, as it relates to local and federal regulations, health trends, and benchmarks with peer companies."

At a recent [CRETech talk](#) on COVID-19, there was a consensus among leaders that "While owners are dealing with an

Mahesh Ramanujam,
President and CEO at U.S. Green Building Council,
believes the real estate community must take the lead. He explains,

"As we move to re-open our buildings and communities, we must do everything we can to support sustainable solutions that contribute to a stronger economic recovery, while ensuring people feel safe and secure."



There are three key areas real estate and property operations leaders are prioritizing for restarting operations.

Ensure safety for everyone

Announcing a return to normalcy is one thing. Assuring people that indoor commercial spaces are safe is a completely different challenge. A high degree of occupant confidence is vital for businesses to return to pre-pandemic production levels.

Bob Wislow, Chairman and CEO of Parkside Realty in Chicago, sees the challenge. "Every employee and their family are acutely aware of—and deeply concerned about—safety and well-being in the workplace," he says.



Bradley Kirshenbaum, Director of Innovation at CA Ventures, says that RE leaders must be empathetic towards occupants in this journey. He explains,

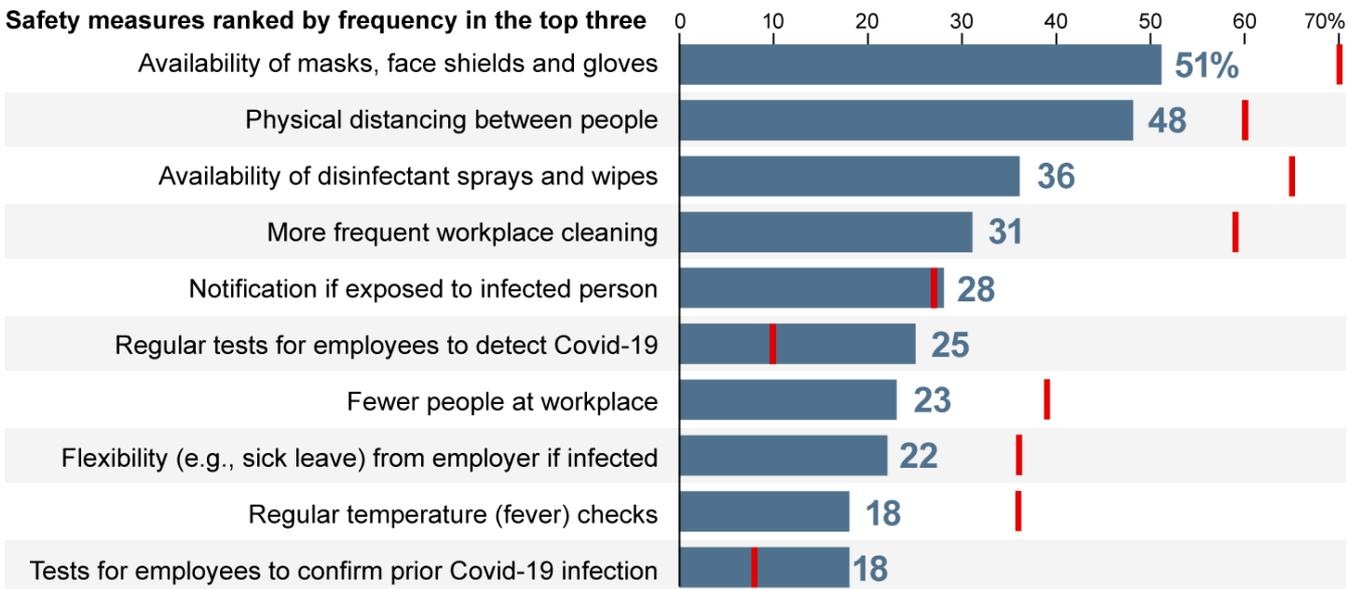
"We want to make sure that our residents are safe and that their family members, who are trusting us with their health and safety, know that we're doing everything we can to ensure that."

According to a [survey by Bain & Company](#), property operations teams must adopt several safety measures to alleviate workers' fears before they can go back to work.

Which of the following safety measures are most important to you in addressing your Covid-19 concerns about going back to the workplace?

= Employer adoption rate

Safety measures ranked by frequency in the top three



Notes: Employer adoption rate is according to workers currently going to the workplace; responses for importance include all respondents
 Source: Bain/Dynata American Workers Survey, Wave 3 of 3 (April 18–25, May 8–15, May 29–June 5)

Globally, commercial properties were quick to implement basic infection control guidelines at the onset of COVID-19. Hand-sanitizers were made available in common areas, shared surfaces were carefully disinfected, and the number of people going in and out of buildings was controlled. There was an immediate response to slow the spread.

[Andrew Cooke](#), VP Property Management at Hines, says their efforts to protect employees go beyond masks and social distancing. “We are seeking to ‘create a perimeter’

around each of our offices to ensure employees are safe from the time they walk up to the door to the time they sit down at their desk,” he explains.

Similarly, [Sumith Sukumaran](#) from Quality Group, who leads property operations and maintenance programs across top Dubai firms, says that beyond the immediate response of ensuring safety of all occupants, they quickly adopted tech-driven approaches for disinfection and sanitization.

Key Takeaways

- Implement key safety measures to boost occupant confidence.
- Efforts to protect employees must go beyond just masks and social distancing.
- Digitize processes to execute disinfection and sanitization in high touch areas.

Establish open and clear communication with occupants

Real estate and property operations leaders emphasize the need for clear, transparent communication in times of crisis. They are finding ways to work closely with tenants and occupants to keep them informed—and to make everyone feel safe.

In a recent [“Back to Work” report](#), Bain & Company notes that to improve compliance and ensure safe restart of

operations, real estate companies must focus on clear communication of measures and guidelines.

Scott Rechler of RXR Realty says that his team is reassuring occupants that they are on top of the situation: “We need to ensure a high level of transparency because there's nothing worse than uncertainty. We are creating a peace of mind for our residents.”

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RXR Realty, whose tenants include UBS and Bank of America, is using technology to create new communication channels with their tenants and occupants. “There's a high degree of anxiety, as you can imagine,” says [Scott Rechler, CEO of RXR Realty](#).



As workers across RXR's properties in the US return to the office, Rechler says they want to make everyone feel safe by keeping them informed of the measures being taken. The company [deployed an app](#) to help tenants coordinate employee work days and timings for minimizing social contact. Employees can also see heat maps of restrooms and request deep cleaning of workstations by scanning a QR code.

[Rechler added](#) that RXR will also create health indexes, use thermal scanners, and have a wellness concierge in building lobbies to make workers feel comfortable about returning.

“Increasing the use of technology can help CRE organizations enhance tenant engagement. Companies are likely to benefit from using apps and other tools to communicate with tenants and other stakeholders,” notes Deloitte Insights in its [article on COVID-19 implications for commercial real estate](#).

[Prabhu Ramachandran, founder and CEO, Facilio](#), says the company is helping its customers make data-driven decisions and create advanced dashboards to track sanitation and display them in lobbies to ease occupants' minds about safety. Ramachandran explains that landlords are trying to boost confidence and reduce worker anxiety as people start going back to offices.

Key Takeaways

- Work with tenants and occupants to keep them informed and make them feel safe.
- Practice clear communication of measures and guidelines to improve compliance.
- Use technology to enhance tenant engagement and experience. Use apps and tools to consistently communicate with tenants and automate status reports with stakeholders.

Collaborate with your ecosystem to build more resilient operations

With the current COVID crisis, now is the time for real estate firms to innovate to embed more resilience into their operations. This innovation should include revamping plans and mapping people, processes, and channel partners to support critical business services—which will push companies to redesign operations for agility and to become appropriately balanced to mitigate risk.

Your ecosystem of partners—including owners, channel service providers, and technology providers—should collaborate toward this end.

Working together, you'll be better equipped to provide differentiated services that balance health and safety, plus yield time and cost efficiencies.

Ramachandran explains,

"What's really important is a collaboration between ecosystem partners. This will help all parties to quickly identify best practices, understand what works (and what doesn't work), learn from each other, and help improve fast, effective decision making."



Some of the ways in which companies can differentiate in the marketplace today:

- Find new ways to serve tenants through closer partnerships
- Accelerate launch of new services and digital solutions to make occupants feel in control of their environment
- Define a clear digital strategy as business changes and rapidly scale portfolio-wide rollouts in priority categories

Key Takeaways

- Real estate firms should look at ecosystems as partners.
- Quickly adapt to new SOPs and launch services that tenants demand today.
- Be agile and prepared as business continues to change through this period.

HOW TO RETOOL AND RETRAIN TO THRIVE IN A NEW REALITY

Businesses will have to "recalibrate reality" as they move forward during the coronavirus pandemic, Rechler of RXR Realty [said at a recent event](#).

"It's not going to be business as usual, nor should it be. We're coming back to not the new normal, but what I like to call the new abnormal, which is about how we are going to co-exist while the virus is still out there," Rechler explains.

The following are the top learnings for real estate and operations companies to thrive in the new reality.

Upgrade the quality of workspaces

Real estate leaders and operations experts are working with their occupants to upgrade workspaces to accommodate social distancing and frequent sanitization. Controlled environments inside buildings can help alleviate worker anxiety and fears.

"A big part is getting people enough of a level of comfort and the tools they need to create a place where the new abnormal feels normal," [says Rechler](#).

Workspaces must be reassuring as businesses help their workers feel a sense of normalcy.

[Ramachandran of Facilio](#) recognizes that the key question is how the existing investment of building systems, workflows, and skills can be rearchitected to restart operations for this "new abnormal".

[Phil Zito, CEO of Building Automation Monthly](#), says that workspace quality is even more important now. "Real estate leaders and property managers must upgrade their spaces to be safe, inviting, and comfortable. Let's make the environment conducive to work," he explains.

Leaders are going beyond the basics and adopting more progressive initiatives across their portfolios. For example, [Deloitte predicts](#) that "companies will have to invest in technology and tools that enable virtual collaboration and create an environment that promotes mental and emotional well-being."

Here are the more popular changes firms across the industry are adopting today:

- Touchless visitor entry/exit systems.
- App-based elevator calls.
- Access control solutions across buildings to reduce surface transmission.
- Close monitoring and control of HVAC systems for better ventilation, filtration, and optimum air quality.

COVID-19 has pushed operations teams to think about air quality, says [Sukumaran from Quality Group](#), a leading player in facilities management in UAE. Quality Group has also leveraged a modern property operations platform to upgrade its hygiene management routines, prioritize customer requests, and manage planned maintenance—without any interruption to service quality. "With the new reality, all these tasks take on extra significance," he adds.

CA Ventures is implementing touchless controls for visitor entry, lighting, ambient temperature, and elevator controls. [Kirshenbaum](#) says that they see this as an opportunity to make touchless systems a future standard for all their properties.

Key Takeaways

- Upgrade workspaces to be safe, inviting, and comfortable. Make the environment conducive to work.
- Build indoor spaces that promote social distancing and the emotional well-being of occupants.
- Add touchless comfort control, create zero-contact visitor entry/exits, and manage HVAC performance to meet IAQ compliance and dynamic occupancy.

Adopt technology for remote property operations

COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies across industries. Real estate and property operations are no different.

"Many of us have been on this journey to shift to a cloud-first strategy and adopting process automation through SaaS offerings."

James Whalen
Chief Information & Technology Officer
Boston Properties



Real estate leaders don't want their operations teams onsite in big numbers in the middle of an infection spike. There is a growing shift to remote operations to improve decision making while keeping in mind the new protocols in place. The questions they are asking are:

- How can our teams safely shutdown and restart systems remotely?
- How can we remotely monitor these tightly coupled systems and control significant events?
- How can we regularly benchmark equipment, test system performance, and monitor energy usage with minimal onsite presence?

Progressive real estate companies were already making that transition, but COVID-19 added a sense of urgency.



"Now that we've been hit with this crisis, owners see a greater value in investing in better controllability of their building's systems." explains [Ruairi M. Barnwell](#), [principal at DLR Group](#), and a renowned expert in high-performance building design. He continues, "better controllability leads to a better ability to perform meaningful analytics to optimize building operations, energy use, indoor air quality and occupant comfort."

Ruairi M Barnwell
Principal, DLR Group



"With the right technology in place, the entire building operations—including equipment, HVAC, elevators, and more—can be operated remotely. Even with reduced staff, real-estate owners can continue managing everything,"

Prabhu Ramachandran
Chief Executive Officer
[Facilio Inc](#)

[Zito of Smart Buildings Academy](#) is a longtime advocate of using remote access technologies for property operations. He is cautiously optimistic on how the pandemic can increase adoption of these technologies. "This pandemic can help everyone realize the benefit of remotely accessing building automation systems, of remote monitoring, of analytics," he says.

Ramachandran's [experience with Facilio's customers](#) confirms this expectation in growing demand for cloud technology after COVID-19. He says, "more owners and operators are relying on technology to engage with tenants and to automate processes and building performance for time and cost-efficiencies".

Meanwhile, [Zito is bullish about how](#) real estate and operations leaders can improve their processes with technology. He explains that companies must automate processes with technology to reduce their operational costs. They should set up workflows for triaging failures and for properly optimizing the use of equipment.

Zito has advice for three areas of remote operations to start with:

- Support services like remote monitoring of alarms and faults in building automation systems.
- Proactive analytics strategies on failure prediction to better prepare for critical problems.
- Remotely controlling buildings—including the ability to turn things off and on in a controlled way without tripping up systems



Phil Zito - Chief Executive Officer, Smart Buildings Academy

Key Takeaways

- Invest in better control of systems to perform meaningful analytics to optimize building operations, energy use, indoor air quality, and occupant comfort.
- Invest in remote monitoring of building operations, adopt a proactive analytics strategy around failure prediction to prepare for critical problems, and seek out the ability to remotely shut down and restart operations in a controlled way without tripping building systems.
- Lower your operational costs by automating processes. Setup workflows for triaging failures and for properly optimizing the use of your equipment.

Invest in learning and tools for operations teams

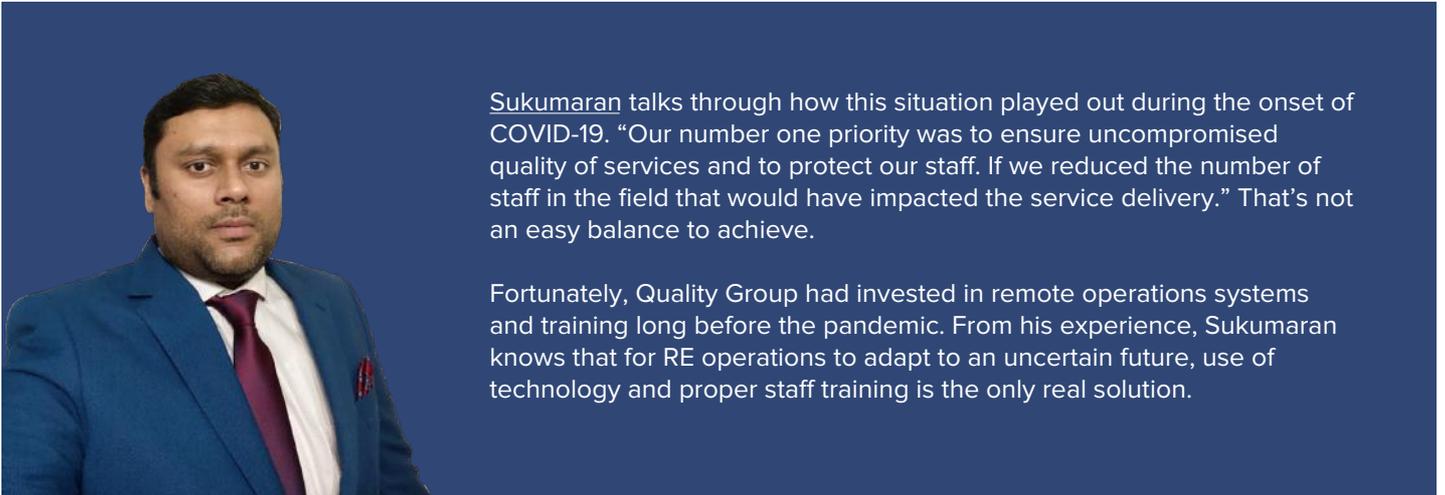
New systems and technology demand more progressive forms of training. RE leaders must invest in future-ready learning programs for their operations teams to run and efficiently manage these platforms. This is further complicated by COVID-19 as companies look to retool their systems while upskilling their teams on a new way of managing operations. With an infectious disease around us, the way RE leaders help their teams learn is changing.

Ramachandran explains, “Property operations teams must relearn their jobs to reinvent access control, occupancy sensing, and ventilation around an infectious disease.”

He affirms the changes that need to be made to building operations workflows are further complicated by quickly changing guidelines and new information about how to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Faced with the high performance and efficient operations requirements this crisis demands, operations teams must balance these requirements with the less staff on-site. Leaders are realizing that the only way to achieve this balance without impacting operations is to use remote operations extensively within their portfolios.

“Property operations teams must relearn their jobs to reinvent access control, occupancy sensing, and ventilation around an infectious disease.”



Sukumaran talks through how this situation played out during the onset of COVID-19. “Our number one priority was to ensure uncompromised quality of services and to protect our staff. If we reduced the number of staff in the field that would have impacted the service delivery.” That’s not an easy balance to achieve.

Fortunately, Quality Group had invested in remote operations systems and training long before the pandemic. From his experience, Sukumaran knows that for RE operations to adapt to an uncertain future, use of technology and proper staff training is the only real solution.

Key Takeaways

- New systems and technology need newer forms of training. Invest in tools that allow quick learning and fast adoption for teams to operate effectively.
- As buildings reopen, property and operations managers must relearn their jobs. Things like access control, occupancy sensing, indoor air quality and ventilation must be reevaluated to new standards around an infectious disease.
- Operations teams must balance high-performance with fewer staff onsite to reduce their exposure to the virus and equip them with tools to be more productive.

HOW TO REBUILD TO EMERGE AS A FUTURE LEADER

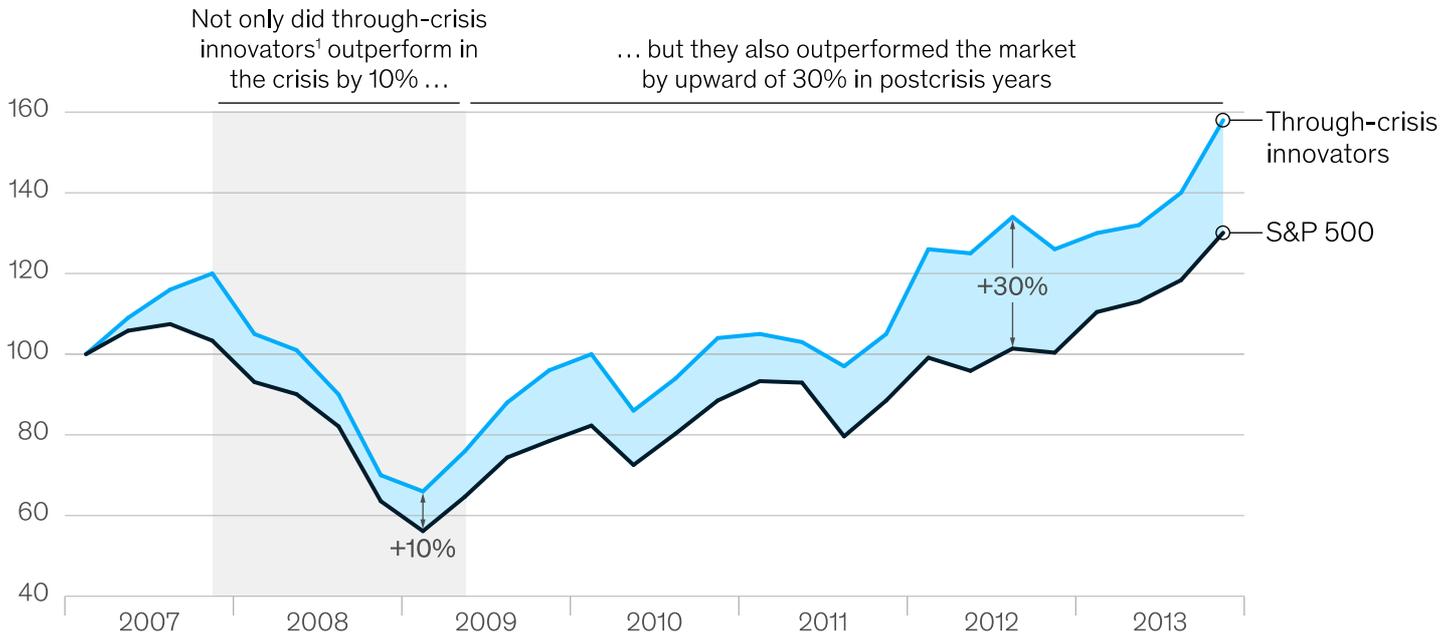
In a [recent article](#), McKinsey & Company explained:

“COVID-19 has accelerated the need for strategic changes—and highlighted that those that haven’t yet made such investments will need to catch up quickly. While relatively few real estate companies were actively developing or pursuing digital and advanced analytics strategies before the pandemic, such strategies can help with tenant attraction and churn, commercial lease negotiations, asset valuation, and improved tenant experience and operations.”



History suggests that companies that invest in innovation through a crisis outperform peers during the recovery.

Normalized market capitalization, index (Q1 2007 = 100)



¹Identified as companies on the *Fast Company* World's 50 Most Innovative Companies list for ≥2 years through a crisis, normalized to 2007.

McKinsey & Company

Innovation in the face of crisis is a key move to make for leapfrogging the competition. [The world learned this from the 2008 financial downturn](#). Consequently, real estate firms that invest in making bold and innovative moves

today will have an advantage in the future. How are real estate leaders accelerating the transformation of their portfolios beyond the immediate recovery?

Two key themes emerged in our conversations with real estate and property operations leaders.

Build a strategy with technology and automation at its core

A recent CRETech Talk titled "Landlords & Brokerages Thoughts on Tech Post Pandemic", revolved around how the real estate is operating in a new environment. Leaders discussed that "while the evolution of the built world is inevitable, the post-COVID world will be heavily influenced by innovation and technology."

Cooke (VP at Hines Real Estate), says for example that he is sifting through countless pitches from vendors on new technology aimed at protecting employees. "We're doing our due diligence...there will be a real opportunity for innovation and invention. As a real estate company, we want to be at the leading edge."

Beyond the early trends, there will be a long-term shift in strategy, process, and operations.



"There will be a real opportunity for innovation and invention. As a real estate company, we want to be at the leading edge."

Andrew Cooke
VP Property Management
Hines Real Estate



Ginny Miller, VP Technology and Innovation, Jamestown, is prioritizing what's urgent in response to COVID-19.

"One way we're looking at technology is where there were tailwinds in place pre-COVID that have been accelerated versus an idiosyncratic need that has popped up because of COVID."

Ginny Miller
VP Technology & Innovation
Jamestown Properties

[Zito](#) believes that real-estate companies must reconfigure the process and develop better technology stacks for the future. He explains, "while everything is shut, it's a perfect time to rethink how to operate buildings, set up data standards and organize data. Use the time today to establish relationships and remote services that provide predictable revenue." He also believes companies that fail to act on these mandates now will struggle to compete in the future.

The role property operations and management plays in portfolio value is shifting. "Property management is now a proactive necessity, not just a support function," says [Sukumaran of Quality Group](#). "It will become a pillar in the growth of property value," he adds.

Sukumaran also advises real estate firms to modernize operations delivery and management. He recommends that this is the right time to equip teams with better tools

and technology so they can support processes in the future. "Our collective goal should be the healthy upkeep of facilities, building trust with occupants, and transparency with clients," he says.

[McKinsey Research](#) affirms that RE leaders must do more than adapt to COVID-19. "As more users adopt digital-first products and services, expectations will be raised," the analysts explain.

"Real estate players that provide a differentiated post-crisis experience will stay ahead of the curve. These digital offerings will pay dividends with superior loyalty. They will create brand new revenue streams while better meeting the needs of tenants and end-users."

Key Takeaways

- The post-COVID world will be heavily influenced by innovation and technology. There will be a long-term, fundamental shift in strategy, process, and operations.
- While everything is shut, rethink how to operate buildings, set up data standards, and organize data. Use the time today to establish remote services for predictable revenue.
- Players with a differentiated post-crisis experience will stay ahead of the curve. Digital offerings will drive superior loyalty and create new revenue streams.

Innovate today to create an advantage in the future

What does the future look like for real estate and property operations? Going beyond the reactive response to COVID-19, some of the leading experts are asking:

What's the bigger change this pandemic is pushing us towards?

How can we reimagine the way workplaces function and how buildings are developed and operated in uncertain times?

Wislow of Parkside Realty Chicago recognizes the shift. He says we must design and construct new buildings with “the latest, safest, and most sustainable technology available for the health, welfare, livability and productivity of its occupants,” even if that means “reevaluating every element of the building...to make it safer, cleaner, and healthier.”

Bob Wislow
Chairman & Chief Executive Officer
Parkside Realty, Inc.



“The future of real estate is no longer about delivering four walls to tenants,” says RXR CEO Rechler. “It’s about creating a unique, personalized customer experience that fosters meaningful interactions, collaboration, productivity. With a combination of capabilities that seamlessly work across the physical and digital realms.”

Barnwell of DLR Group says that performance and smart features will become integral to building design. “COVID-19 won’t change our approach to fundamentals, but it will amplify the need to apply these on every project, to ensure high-performance design and smart building operations,” he explains.

“The future of real estate is about creating a unique, personalized customer experience that fosters meaningful interactions, collaboration, productivity.”

This has become a recurring theme in our conversations with RE leaders. In a recent podcast, [Abdulla Al-Wahedi, CEO, Khidmah](#), said that post pandemic, real estate operations companies will chase both cost cuts and quality of service—and that will require investment in technology. He says, “predictive maintenance in operations with AI and IoT is quickly becoming the new standard.”

Al-Wahedi goes on to describe how—even with COVID-19—Khidmah's operations projects were not impacted because of the technology they already had in place.

Abdulla Al-Wahedi
Chief Executive Officer
Khidmah



As real estate firms imagine what commercial spaces will look like after COVID-19, visionary portfolio leaders and operations experts are thinking about the future and evaluating adoption of enhanced digital strategies across their portfolios.

New capabilities have positioned companies like RXR Realty to move faster. RXR is implementing technologies to help monitor energy efficiency and environmental conditions. “Helping to ensure an environment that prioritizes safety and wellness is particularly important in light of the coronavirus,” [Rechler adds](#).

[Miller](#) says she wants to make sure the investments are creating a tangible benefit that will last beyond the near-term. “We want to be thoughtful that wherever we spend money will distinctly change the tenant experience and have long-lasting changes moving forward.”

[Barnwell](#) is looking at the upside of this tough recovery period as companies and leadership reevaluate their priorities. He explains, “I believe this will have positive long-term implications. We will see increased client expectations for building systems and more emphasis on outcome-based compliance. Continuous analytics for validating building performance rather than a static plaque on the wall.”

Key Takeaways

- The future of real estate is about creating a unique, personalized customer experience for meaningful interactions, collaboration, and productivity.
- Real estate operations companies can achieve both cost reductions and high quality service with investment in technology. Predictive maintenance in operations with AI and IoT is becoming the new standard.
- Look at the upside of this recovery period and re-evaluate priorities. Continuous analytics for validating building performance will become necessary in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been extremely disruptive to the real estate and property management industries—but leaders in the space also see opportunities in the challenges. These leaders are using this uncertain time to prepare for a confident tomorrow.

We're at a fork in the road. To prepare for your own future, it's time to shift from response and recovery to retooling, upskilling, and preparing for your new reality.

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