

Experts: Keep safety issues in mind when planning return to offices

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As companies weigh returning employees to offices after Covid-19 vaccines are distributed, safety experts are cautioning businesses and building owners to address any deferred maintenance or safety updates that may have been unaddressed when workers went remote a year ago.

“A lot of people, because they didn’t have tenants in the buildings and maybe didn’t have rent coming in, they might not have kept current with their life safety systems,” said James Tomes, president and CEO of Phoenix-based Telgian Holdings, a fire and life safety consulting and design firm.

Adaptations that have made workspaces more acceptable during the pandemic also could create unintended risks. For example, people might be more likely to leave doors open for free-flowing air, but some doors are meant to remain closed for fire containment. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer, which some companies are buying in bulk, is also highly flammable and can create a hazard if it is not stored properly, Tracey Bellamy, chief engineering officer for Telgian said.

Telgian works all over the country doing life safety consulting and inspections for many major clients, including Walmart, Costco and Home Depot, as well as high-profile projects like working with Luke Air Force Base and the U.S. Embassy in Yemen.

Tomes said other real estate trends that have been accelerated by the pandemic, like the adaptive reuse of large retail space, can also present some safety issues that need to be addressed in the conversion process.

“Buildings are built for a purpose,” Tomes said. “When the purpose changes, we have to look at the differences for the uses.”

Some common issues that come with those changes can include the density of the number of people inside the building and the change in the needs for exits and entrances.

“Life safety is always our number one priority,” he said.

“Preservation of a building is a business decision.”

Tomes said businesses that perform essential functions or are the only business producing an essential product might want to make sure their fire safety systems are going to preserve their building as well.



Phoenix-based Telgian specializes in fire and life safety consulting work.

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