

How the Health Crisis Will Change Socializing in Business Settings

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As we gradually emerge from months of hibernation and start to reengage with old habits, there will undoubtedly be a period of adjustment, especially for the business community. A virus-shaken public will be doing more than social distancing and sanitizing surfaces: People will be concerned about the transfer of germs from many long-held customs. One of these is the handshake.

One thing that has become abundantly clear to most of us is the frequency with which we touch our faces, even when wearing a mask. It is hard enough to keep from spreading the virus whenever we touch a surface and accidentally touch our face, let alone dealing with all the germs on someone else's hands. But will the business community find an adequate replacement for the handshake? Will we really get used to fist bumps and shoe-taps, or will the handshake gradually slip back into vogue?

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The consensus seems to validate the handshake's demise. Dr. Anthony Fauci, of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, suggested on the *Wall Street Journal's* podcast that Americans should not shake hands again. "What are the things you could

still do and still approach normal?" Fauci asked. "One of them is absolute compulsive handwashing. The other is you don't ever shake anybody's hands."

Suddenly, an ancient ritual with enormous cultural significance is socially questionable.

Why do we shake hands in the first place?

Understanding the cultural significance of this change requires a look back at the history of the handshake, and why people are inclined to touch an acquaintance or stranger. Turns out these customs had an evolutionary purpose that, along with language, helped foster social ties, make allies, and maintain relationships.

"Touch also helps reduce aggression between people," according to Tiffany Field, director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami. "When you're socially touching someone, it's very hard to be aggressive towards them."

Shaking hands is thought to have originated many centuries ago as a way to ensure neither party was carrying a weapon. Neuroscientists have studied this further and found that areas of the brain involved with processing rewards are activated when people shake hands.

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Handshake alternatives

The handshake is not the only custom that has evaporated during the pandemic, even though it is the most obvious one for businesspeople. We can also say goodbye to fist bumps, shoulder squeezes, high fives, and hugs. None of these will be

possible when we stand at least six feet apart.

What are some potential alternatives that may replace the handshake? Some people seem to be partial to the elbow bump, the namaste gesture, a foot tap, a brief nod, or a bow. None of these involve skin on skin contact, and a few do not require standing closer than six feet apart. It is still unclear if any of these will prevail. A lot will depend on an individual's political views, values, and belief systems.

What the post-pandemic world will look like

Just as we get accustomed to a world without handshakes, there are a few other areas where the business community will need to adjust.

Public touchscreens where customers normally place orders are not much different than handshakes. In fact, they could be worse. Thousands of fingerprints are touching the same piece of glass or plastic throughout the day, making it impossible for business owners to disinfect between each use. While much of the bacteria found on these surfaces is not harmful to people, all it takes is one person with coronavirus who just sneezed, and you've got "community spread."

Long lines where people are crowded together may not be something people miss, but this will inevitably affect people's shopping habits. No more big crowds waiting for doors to open on Black Friday, and you can forget buying concert tickets in person, let alone attending concerts again. Of course, safe social distancing is possible in most instances, but that requires lots of indoor space to spread out.

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Open-floor offices may not be going away completely, but they

will certainly be changing. Employers are hyperaware of the health risks of maintaining an open office design, whether real or imagined, because of the potential for liability if people get the virus. Countless businesses across the country are using plexiglass dividers between desks and blocking off every other conference chair in meeting rooms.

A cashless society always sounded like something far off in the distant future but, thanks in part to COVID, it is coming sooner than you think. Before you can say, “put that on my credit card”, banks will be finding new ways to ensure you never have to hand over cards to anything other than a machine. And it will not be long before we start seeing “cash not accepted” signs at more retailers. Less tech-savvy shoppers and people without a bank card will suffer.

The business traveler may soon become a relic from the past as well, but that might take a bit longer. Already, so many conferences rescheduled for 2021 are registering more virtual attendees than ever. The rise of videoconferencing companies like Zoom and Microsoft Teams are making business travel seem like a fanciful indulgence. Some travelers, such as media reporters, lawyers, and professional athletes, will not be able to conduct business online, but the rest of us will be looking for ways to stay far away from airports and hotels.

As we move towards this new normal and get back to business, the most insightful entrepreneurs will look at these trends and find ways to capitalize on them. Now is the time to think about how your business can make the most of our reimagined future.

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