This Office Rental Startup Held a Hackathon to Brainstorm Ways to Return to Work Safely



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As companies start considering how to safely transition employees back into the workplace, one startup is turning the brainstorming into a competition.

Commercial real estate startup SquareFoot is in the midst of a hackathon of sorts where employees are divided into groups to generate ideas addressing various challenges of phasing employees into the office once it is safe and legal to do so. In addition to implementing the ideas generated for the company’s own workforce, the startup plans to use them to advise client businesses.

Among the topics of focus were how to commute safely, what personal protective equipment (PPE) will be necessary, what the timing should look like and how to best enforce the

measures. While the competition is still in progress—the brainstorming happened last week and the presentations are divided up over the course of this week—SquareFoot co-founder and CEO Jonathan Wasserstrum said it's already yielded some intriguing ideas, such as the possibility of more carpooling from areas further from the New York City office, capacity caps on conference rooms and rotating schedules to keep people from passing one another on stairways.

"I'm a little biased but it's really remarkable to see the depth that people went into this stuff," Wasserstrum said. "Because it's a lot more than if I was just like, 'OK, let's spend 15 minutes thinking through stuff.' What we will we be able to come up with obviously is not nearly as good as when you have people spending five hours on it."

Wasserstrum said another goal of the exercise was to encourage more cross-departmental collaboration. The inspiration was another similar "hackathon" the company had run on a smaller scale prior to the coronavirus pandemic.

While SquareFoot will expand its employees' ability to work from home if they choose, Wasserstrum still sees it as less desirable than a physical workplace. He's planning to host another hackathon at some point in the future to brainstorm ideas for what the office of the future might look like in the longer term.

"We've seen that remote work works well enough; I don't think it's perfect by any stretch, and I don't think the world will go remote," Wasserstrum said, "but recognizing that there will be some changes over the next couple of years, what does the office of the future look like down the line?"

Founded in 2011, SquareFoot's goal is to apply more tech to the commercial real estate industry with more features like an app for virtual tours and more flexible non-conventional accommodations for growing companies. It most recently raised

$16 million in November.

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