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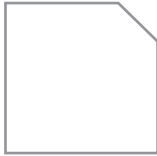


The Road Ahead

Chris Coleman designed the work spaces for newsrooms, search engine companies, and now a driverless car start-up. His diverse portfolio has given him traction to drive Zoox into a new normal.

By Cora Berg





Early 2020 saw the deep impact that COVID-19 had on the world, causing business leaders everywhere to reexamine their plans, especially in the way that employees interact with the workplace. Chris Coleman serves as

the director of places and build for Zoox Inc., a California-based tech company that develops hardware and software needed for self-driving cars, and his first priority is employee safety.

Coleman elaborates that the major focus in his purview is designing spaces within existing ones that meet the needs of social distancing: upgrading HVAC filtration and sanitation stations, reducing conference room occupancy, training employees on workplace safety, and ensuring that heavily trafficked areas like bathrooms and breakrooms are hygienic and sanitized.

Priorities may differ as he redesigns plans to ensure safe physical distancing through initiatives like these, Coleman explains, but essential strategies have not. “You must understand, from CEO down, what expectations are and then deliver on them,” he adds, recognizing that while everyone is busy, it’s on him to optimize new workplace standards—and to bring in diverse voices throughout the company so that everyone is comfortable and buys in to procedures and action plans that are new to all companies.

As part of a start-up, Coleman feels serious pressure to get the company on the road again. It’s a different kind of work than the previous commercial real estate (CRE) roles that fill his résumé. He cut his teeth at CNN, operating in collaborative, open spaces and was responsible for creating tools for a huge variety of people. His efforts facilitated the founding of CNN International; CNN Financial, a Spanish-language network; and Atlanta and DC hubs. Coleman looks back on what he attained at CNN and says, “They were superfocused 24/7 on the news product. . . . Our jobs evolved around the work environments that enabled productivity across a broad range of spaces, from newsrooms to control rooms to studios—they focused on the news, not on real estate.”

After helping boost CNN for 12 years, Coleman arrived at Google as one of the first CRE executives and managed strategic planning, real estate, design, and construction domestically and globally. He arrived when Google employed less than 1,000 people across the world (with the majority in its Mountain View head-

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quarters). During his career at Google, he managed the expansion of offices around the globe and built a first-class team as the company grew from 1,000 to 50,000 employees in dozens of cities in just a decade.

He collaborated and engaged with teams and end users all over the world. “I understood the importance of local culture and feeling,” Coleman says as he reflects on his time at Google and the building out of 20,000 square feet per week. “I had autonomy and created some of the most beautiful spaces in the world.”

Keeping an eye on broadcast schedules and growing TV studios and offices might not seem to align with the vehicle production goals at Zoox. However, Coleman’s experience brings a lot to bear at his new company. Though it’s a smaller office, he maneuvers in a capital-intensive industry and at a fast pace. Citing the words attributed to countless corporate and military leaders, “Lead, follow, or get out of the way,” Coleman makes it clear he intends to do the first.

With Zoox’s new CEO, he develops best practices for doing his job, a role Coleman describes as “a circle of responsibility.” This circle starts and ends with understanding corporate needs. In between he translates

these needs into implementation and communication. “My essential duties center around building teams and working with budgets, as well as getting leadership support for projects,” Coleman says, which has been true through this career.

Coleman celebrated his third anniversary with Zoox in May 2020. The company was launched on the vision of building an autonomous vehicle, and that vision has expanded to include the creation and management of an entire vehicle fleet. As the concept balloons, so does Coleman’s portfolio. Brought on after building out hardware facilities for Playground, Zoox initially tasked Coleman with revitalizing its headquarters in Silicon Valley’s Foster City.

The company has now blossomed from 250 to 1,000 employees (at press time) with a product prototype underway. Now Coleman oversees securing space, designing, and iterating for everything from a charging center to manufacturing facilities to test sites, no small feat in the crowded Bay Area market where real estate prices and lease lengths have exponentially increased over the past several years.

Though he has knowledge and experience in everything from food service to warehouse layout, Coleman says, “My passion is workplace.” That passion runs on all cylinders in his COVID-19 response—getting people back to work, safely.

Even with new and changing recommendations, facilitating collaboration remains central for Coleman. However, he says, “We are now looking at practicalities of social distancing.” With this in mind, he recognizes some elements of collaboration and spatial design are no longer viable.

“I need to put myself in their shoes,” he says, leaning on a key learning from his career. In this current moment, he explains, this means considering people’s feelings about safety. “I want them to look around and see that this new space takes into account new rules.” Coleman takes a cautious approach with a great deal of education for people at all levels. While considering economic constraints, he lets people grasp possible solutions.

Over his career, Coleman has seen technology and company culture change dramatically. “When I came out of college AutoCAD was basically like *Pong*,” he remembers, laughing. Current tech offers far more than the design equivalent of two paddles and a ball, and Coleman values evolving with the tech. Similarly, he

says, “Workplaces have changed dramatically over the years. In the beginning it was very hierarchical. That has shifted.”

While Coleman now finds himself in the midst of another transformation, this time as an effective CRE executive leading in a time of crisis recovery, he acknowledges, “Everything starts with a strategic plan and understanding soft and hard costs. My job is to deliver best value back to the company.” This best value comes from a cohesive team. Mistakes, he has learned, happen when he does not partner with or have the right people.

But when he does find the right team members, it’s seamless. “We have had the pleasure of working with Mr. Coleman on multiple projects,” says Pat Lemucchi, senior account manager of Cal Coast Telecom. “His ability to make decisions quickly streamlines the construction process. This project’s highlight was the ‘All Hands,’ with its peerless audio and massive video wall, a demonstration of Zoox’s value and vision of technology come to life.”

In Coleman’s toolbox of critical skills, adaptability runs neck and neck with team building. Zoox offers a new challenge. New personalities and expectations fuel Coleman’s innovations as he learns to gain the trust of the end user. Looking towards new roads in workplace and transportation, he says, “We will continue this journey that we are on and I am confident we will get there.” ■

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

ZOOX NEW HEADQUARTERS

In 2017, autonomous mobility company Zoox needed to expand. Cal Coast Telecom provided turnkey design, project management, and installation services for audiovisual, security, and structured cabling. The goal was to provide 4K video in all of Zoox’s connected spaces, combined with high fidelity audio and flawless conferencing, a cloud-based security system that is easy to manage and expand, and structured cabling that is both attractive and functional in the open environment. Cal Coast Telecom was honored to participate in this exciting project that showed what can be achieved when technology is pushed to its limits.



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Colin Corbett, Director of Global Datacenter Infrastructure, Twitch