

The Future of Work

Rethinking the workplace post
COVID-19



The world of work has shifted on its axis

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the world of work almost overnight. With the instruction to shelter-in-place and work from home during the pandemic, organisations and employees alike have adapted their expectations, behaviours and patterns of work with unprecedented speed and urgency.

Dense open plan in retreat

As the post-pandemic landscape of work starts to emerge and companies get to grips with a 'new normal', it is becoming clear that the crisis has accelerated some pre-existing trends



It is important to understand these dynamics in order to create the right workplace strategies to keep your people feeling safe, valued and productive. For example, a long-time drive to create densely populated open plan spaces in order to reduce costs and maximise efficiency has been forced into reverse by safety considerations and the need for social

'Companies that won't offer remote working after the pandemic may find that they are turning away talent...' - Workplace Designer, UK

in the workplace that were already gathering pace while stopping others in their tracks.

distancing. Companies will now have to reimagine how their office environments will operate in the future, balancing business demands with a heightened awareness of employee wellbeing.

Rapid advance of remote working

On the other hand, the pandemic's giant involuntary experiment with working from home has accelerated an existing trend towards having distributed workforces operate at arm's length away from the office building.

More employee autonomy not only challenges traditional models of performance management, but it also

places unprecedented reliance on technology to facilitate remote working. We're now seeing rapid deployment of video conferencing and remote collaboration tools combined with automation of some work processes.

The big challenge for organisations is how to get the balance right between the changing expectations of employees, the environments they will need to work most effectively, and the technologies required to enable new ways of working. It is important to look at people, place and technology in the round, to take a holistic view of how behavioural, physical and digital factors inter-relate.



People face up to an uncertain future



The effects of the pandemic on people in the workplace cannot be under-estimated. These will range from relief at escaping from the daily pressures of commuting and always needing to be in the office to concerns over mental health, as COVID-19 exacerbates feelings of social isolation and job insecurity. Adjusting to new work patterns is never easy and companies will need to be alert to changes in employee mood and motivation.

Mental health on the decline

A study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies found that mental health has worsened by eight per cent in the UK as a result of the pandemic.¹ Lockdown measures have left many feeling socially isolated. Social isolation is an objective measure that may or may not lead to the subjective feeling of loneliness. However, almost one quarter of adults in the UK have experienced loneliness because of the pandemic, according to a survey of more than 2,000 people by the Mental Health Foundation. The same survey found that the most affected group were millennials aged 25-34 which make up a growing

1. Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020)
2. Office for National Statistics (2020)

proportion of the global workforce – more than a third claimed the pandemic had left them feeling lonely.

Fears over job insecurity

Some groups have been disproportionately affected by loneliness such as working-age adults living alone, those in poor health, and people living in rented accommodation.² In addition to feeling lonely, there are also economic impacts which affect people's mental health. The Mental Health Foundation reported that over a third of people in full-time work surveyed were concerned about losing their job, and a quarter reported not coping well with the stress of coronavirus. Employee wellbeing is now a hot topic in the boardroom. Before the pandemic, wellbeing benefits were a nice-to-have; now they are an absolute requirement for your people to feel safe and valued in the workforce.

'In the long-term, the pandemic will encourage an increased trust-balance in ways that employers never thought possible...' – Workplace Design Consultant, UK and Australia

A foundation of mutual trust

This shift will require a different style of leadership which is more empathic and demands a solid foundation of mutual trust between employer and employee. Office-based leadership has traditionally leaned on managers being able to physically see their employees working in the office. This led to being present at work becoming more important than being productive at work.



Place under pressure to prove its worth

What is the purpose of the office in the post-pandemic era? What is the role of place in the new world of work? These are the questions on everyone's lips as companies around the world rethink their real estate strategies.

In summer 2020, 50 of the UK's biggest employers said they had no plans to return all staff to the office full-time in the near future, whilst Japanese giant Fujitsu introduced a new flexible work programme for its 80,000 workers, and social media pioneer Pinterest terminated its lease on a US\$89.5 million San Francisco office development yet to be built.³

Balanced view of the office

However, an initial swing in corporate sentiment away from investing in office-based work is now being balanced out by research which suggests the purpose of the office has never been more significant. According to a study by Gensler, people working from home miss scheduled meetings and impromptu socialising with colleagues face-to-face as well as being part of a community in the office.

Most employees want to return to the

workplace, according to Gensler, but with critical changes. These adaptations include less density and more assigned workspace for social distancing – and measures to address noise and distraction that were already diminishing performance pre-coronavirus.

Companies must now put space planning protocols in place to integrate hygiene and safety regulations into the workplace – but they have the opportunity to go further and completely reimagine the landscape of the office.

'Nearly half of the **2,300 US workers surveyed** – **44%** – want no days at home per week. Only **12%** of US workers want to work from home full-time.' Gensler Work from Home Survey 2020

A more agile approach

Before the pandemic, organisations were using the open plan concept to densify office space; now many are seeking to take a more agile approach which enables employees to choose the right work setting for them. An activity-



based working approach allows the workplace to be flexible to meet the varying needs of workers.

There is a growing sense that the office will increasingly become a destination for face-to-face activities such as training, mentoring and collaborative innovation that rely on a high degree of social interaction. However, the post-pandemic office is likely to be part of a wider place-based work strategy blending central headquarters with remote working and flexible third spaces to give employees autonomy and choice in how they work.

'The office will become a community centre with enhanced amenities, multi-functional space, and less open plan. It will become a reflection of the culture of the business...' – Workplace Design Expert, UK

3. San Francisco Business Times (2020)

Technology set to play a bigger role

Technology was already playing a growing role in facilitating more flexible and remote ways of working before the pandemic. In lockdown, many individuals and organisations have found that they have the capacity to work virtually much more than they realised.

Stimulating innovation

This has stimulated adaptation and innovation in technology and processes in a way that many employers may have not thought themselves capable of; today, companies once reluctant to embrace digital transformation are taking positive steps to do so.

‘48% of business leaders think technology spending at their company will increase because of the pandemic. Only 14% think tech spending will decrease.’ Salesforce survey April-May 2020

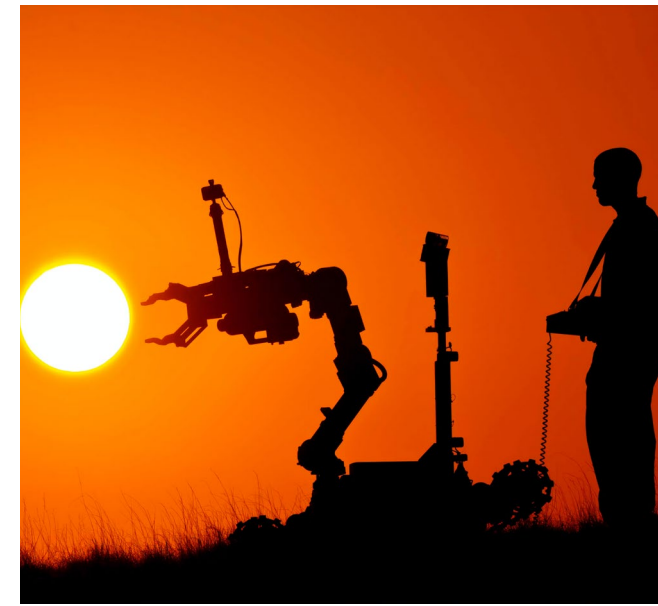
An EY survey of C-suite executives found that 71 per cent are planning to prioritise new technology investments as a result of the pandemic, and 38 per cent said that they need to take steps to re-evaluate their organisation’s digital transformation strategy.⁴ This research indicates the priority status given to technology in the post-pandemic workplace.

Video-first organisations

The most obvious impact has been on the shift to video-first collaboration. Business communication apps saw record levels of growth at the start of the pandemic, with app downloads reaching 62 million in March 2020 – the highest number ever seen. Video conferencing is expected to account for 50 per cent of the remote work market over the next five years (up from 10-15 per cent currently).

This huge shift towards distributed collaboration will drive the development of new ways to collaborate, including always-on video-conferencing, asynchronous working models, and collaboration spaces that enable seamless in-person and remote interactions.

⁴ EY (2020)
⁵ Pod Group (2020)



Automation on the rise

An escalation of automation technology adoption is another significant effect of the pandemic. The World Economic Forum estimated in 2018 that 75 million jobs could be displaced by a shift in the division of labour between humans and machines. However, it’s not all bad news – 133 million new roles may emerge, with robots and people increasingly working side by side.

In a survey by Internet of Things company Pod Group, 73 per cent of the 500 UK business leaders surveyed believe that COVID-19 will spark a new wave of automation. However, nearly 40 per cent are unsure about their strategy for using automation technology in a post-pandemic world.⁵

Smart building boom

Smart technology has the capability to transform the office experience, creating a safe space where employees

want to go. Smart buildings are set for a boost as they become one of the most important points of differentiation for developers and landlords.

Building owners can take advantage of emerging smart technologies such as mobile access control and Bluetooth beacons to make post-COVID operations safer and more efficient to run. Contactless technologies will address fears over touching contaminated surfaces; data analytics and tracking technology will manage occupancy levels to keep people safe.

‘Many people think robots and AI are set to take jobs from humans, but that’s far from the case. Instead, our success depends on how humans and machines can work together to accomplish more.’ Property developer, Australia

A combination of smart building technologies, automation and integrated digital transformation strategies will create a seamless experience for employees as they decide their own way of working.

Work from Home: getting it right

The pandemic forced organisations to start work-from-home policies overnight with no change management or prior planning. For some, this was an easy transition; for many others, this new working regime was completely alien.

Even before the pandemic, there was a growing appetite for remote work. In the UK, between 2008 and 2018 there was a 74 per cent leap in home working, with over 1.5 million people regularly working from their home offices.⁶

Making the experience better

The lockdown did not allow time for employers to source ergonomic workstations for employees in their home, define legal liability on safety or create guidelines for best practice when sheltering in place. Here are some tips to improve working from home for employees:

- **Set boundaries:** It is important to set spatial and temporal boundaries around work in the home. Keeping a structure and routine is important to stay productive even if the routine may look different to a typical 'day in the office'.
- **Take breaks:** Without the social cues in

the office to get up for a coffee break or take lunch, it can be easy to spend the entire day glued to a computer screen. This negatively affects our physical and mental health. It's important to make time for tech-free breaks throughout the day.

- **Create variety:** Just as most companies have introduced agile work settings into the workplace to create a choice for employees, try to keep active by moving around a variety of settings throughout the day. This will improve overall engagement with the work you are doing.
- **Stay connected, then disconnect:** There is a fine line when working from home between hyper-connectivity and complete isolation. Nobody is stopping for a quick chat at your desk, so the social connection can lead to a series of relentless video



chats that keep you online late at night. While it is imperative that you stay connected throughout the working day with colleagues, remember your boundaries and disconnect at the end of the day.

Leading from the top

There are also steps that company leaders can take to ensure staff are working most effectively from home:

- **Experiment:** While everyone is learning and adjusting to virtual ways of working, it is a good time to experiment with new collaborative tools. This can be an engaging way for everyone to learn how to use the tools as a team and help the less tech-savvy people in the team to keep up.
- **Manage expectations:** In the office, everyone shares the same environment. Working from home is completely different. Some employees will be looking after children or battling other residents for space and wi-fi. This calls for a new type of fluid leadership which can be adaptable to the varying situations of employees.
- **Trust:** Working at home requires a degree of trust between leader and employee. Allowing team members to have more autonomy over their

'It takes people about three months to settle into a new habit. Remote is now our new habit.' – Behavioural Scientist and Architect, USA

work requires relinquishing a certain amount of control. Not an easy step.

- **Encourage self-care:** It is important to encourage self-care among your employees. Create a safe environment in which people feel they can express their concerns with you and other team members. Mental and physical health are vital – so is digital health. Explicitly tell employees to step away from technology to avoid eye-strain and burnout; encourage your team to use monitors at eye level and in ergonomic set-ups where they can.
- **Invest in good technology:** In the absence of physical office equipment, make sure employees have access to high speed wi-fi and collaborative tools. Additional devices such as noise cancelling headphones, ergonomic keyboards and monitors where appropriate, can improve performance and make them feel valued.

Managing the great return to the office

As office buildings begin to reopen, great attention will be given to the measures required to keep employees and visitors safe. Many of these measures are simple such as washing hands, performing temperature checks, wearing masks and observing social distance rules, but they need to become standard social behaviours for them to succeed. How do we make these protocols second nature? Here are some tips:

Hold people accountable

The only way to create and sustain change is to have 200 per cent accountability: employees must understand that they are not simply responsible to follow safe practices themselves (the first 100 per cent), they are also responsible to ensure everyone around them does as well (the second 100 per cent). Instruct employees that when anyone sees anyone violate safe practices, they are to remind them of proper protocol.

Hold post-pandemic boot camp

The idea of a 'boot camp' is to break down old patterns and introduce new

ones. The easiest time to reset norms is when no one knows what is normal. As employees re-enter the workplace, take advantage of their unformed expectations by holding a boot camp. Leaders must not simply instruct people on new safety behaviours, people must go through the actual motions so they begin to develop muscle memory and the practices feel comfortable, normal and compulsory.

Break down open plan

Break the space into smaller neighbourhoods/areas with a physical

'In a survey of **200** European office workers on measures for returning to the office, **87%** of respondents felt that increased boundaries between desks would make them feel safer.'

Assembly Buildings 2020

boundary such as screens or planters, instead of one huge open space, is helpful in controlling the travel of the

'The physical office is needed for creativity to occur. People aren't creative on their own, they need face to face interaction...' - Workplace and Design Director, Life Science Company, UK

virus from human respiratory droplets spreading in the air from coughing, sneezing and even talking. Incorporating physical boundaries reinforces not only a feeling of inclusion but also visual and acoustic privacy.

Create responsive environments

Smart technologies can work together in the building to allow touchless access into the office. This includes the implementation of temperature sensors and facial recognition to detect a symptomatic worker in the building, which could then trigger a series of physical changes. For example, the heating and cooling system could immediately change to create a negative pressure environment in the zone where the illness was detected, preventing air that may be contaminated from getting to another

area of the building.

A successful return to the workplace depends on creating new office protocols for behaviour, space and technology. A key ingredient to help embed these protocols is the use of signage. Digital signage throughout the office can provide prompts to remind people about the new cultural shifts, whilst plugging into the smart technology ecosystem to provide real-time updates on the occupancy and management of the building. These screens provide effective information and reassurance for everyone in the building.



The office as a curated experience

As people have become accustomed to working from home and setting their own work schedules, enticing them back to the office will require a strategic approach. The focus will shift from space to experience.

The workplace experience will no longer consist of daily commuting and sitting at a desk for eight hours. Instead it will be reimagined to not only reflect the type of experiences an individual can make for themselves at home but go beyond them in terms of ease and comfort.

Learning new skills

To tempt employees away from the comfort of their homes and back into the workplace, the new office must become a destination of choice offering an experience that is more social and service oriented.

But achieving a real step-change in experience, which sits at the intersection of people, place and technology, requires companies to learn some new tricks.

Who owns the workplace experience inside the organisation? HR, IT and facilities have traditionally worked in silos. Now they need to work much

'We found that people work more effectively at home for individual work, but they are missing the community aspect and the sense of belonging you get with the workplace...' - Design Director, Architects, London

closer together to create experiences. Over time, companies might consider replacing them with one unified service department.

The sudden need for experience in post-pandemic offices is in danger of catching companies off guard. Expertise and ideas from theatre, arts, hospitality, retail and behavioural science are needed in the workplace industry.

Open mind on technology

Organisations will also need to keep an open mind on what technologies they adopt. The era of the office-as-destination will introduce new lighting, AV, soundscaping and sensor technologies to the workplace. This might feel unfamiliar but should be embraced. Workplace experience apps are also set to become more influential in making the office desirable again for

employees restored to the workplace.

It will be important to offer a portfolio of experiences. In a world of flexible leases, adaptable spaces and portfolio careers in the gig economy, people will not sit in the same office each day – they will choose from a range of experiences and expect experiences to change constantly.

Curation is king

In the end, it all comes down to the skilful curation of experiences – and knowing the limits.

Over-curated office environments can be a turn-off, so don't force it. Let communities develop organically. Here are some tips:

- **Create a workplace playbook:** A playbook could be available for every workplace or work setting, outlining the tools needed to enable employees to work most effectively in that space. This playbook could be used like a script so that people can book a room, and then facilitators can go in before and set the space up so the experience is seamless.
- **Choreograph 'hackable' spaces:** This idea requires a facilitator in the space like a theatre director to inspire people and promote successful collaboration. The ability to adapt

and 'hack' space sends the message to people that the organisation values their time and recognises the importance of meaningful collaboration.

- **Seamless technology:** Make sure that spaces for heightened collaboration activities have embedded technology that people don't even have to think about it. The facilitator should set the room up beforehand so that there is 'digital equality' for all participants in the meeting whether they are physically in the room or joining by video link.

'Bad offices will die – if there isn't a pull to go to the office, no one will go.' - Academic and Writer, London

- **Ominipresent screens:** There should be omnipresent, integrated technology such as digital screens to show live entertainment, company branding and information to employees. This gives a sense of destination and purpose to a workplace, which may have been lost during the pandemic.

Longer-term horizons for work

As organisations absorb the shocks to the system induced by the pandemic, it is becoming increasingly clear that the workplace will not revert any time soon to what it once was. Underlying trends already taking shape are now accelerating fast to reinvent the purpose of the office.

An opportunity to rethink

In the short-term, companies will want to return to the office in a responsible and safe way. Longer-term, they have the opportunity to completely remodel how they work, using a combination of new technologies, space strategies and behavioural shifts to offer a more people-centric agenda. This will boost levels of loyalty, productivity and wellbeing among employees.

There is likely to be a hybrid or blended approach to work patterns in which the office reasserts its centrality to organisational culture and purpose while the home continues to play a role and flexible space providers offering local and satellite options become more prominent too.

Ecosystem for working

Companies will find themselves operating in a wider ecosystem of work. They will give employees the choice to work in a range of places and ways to suit their varying needs. And they will rely increasingly on digital technology to make this ecosystem work for the organisation.

The towns and cities in which companies operate will change too. There will be less daily commuting to a central business district leaving suburbs empty and devoid of life. There will be more varied patterns of work, more greening of the city, and more 'active travel' such as walking and cycling.

This is already happening with curbs on cars and more cycle lanes in cities all over the world. A report by the McKinsey Centre for Future Mobility found that consumers have already started to prioritise health over time-to-destination following the pandemic - resulting in

In the long term, there will be a radical shift in cities and how people work and commute within them.' - Design Director, Architectural Firm, London

a declining perception and usage for shared mobility services.

Compact cities planned

Planning policy will lead to more compact cities in which people live closer to work, reducing air pollution, traffic noise and commute times.

New mixed-use districts combining workspace with retail, residential and education will be built 'from the internet up' - these will be smart precincts using big data to create a better experience.

Correspondingly, advances in smart buildings and automation will reshape work. COVID-19 may not have started all this, but it has certainly pushed it forward.



Taking a holistic approach

The post-pandemic workplace requires organisations to respond and adapt in an agile way to fast-paced changes. This has often been a challenge for large legacy organisations, but those who cannot adapt will not be successful in the long term.

Despite anxiety about returning to the office, there are a number of ways in which organisations can create engaging and safe environments where collaboration and social interaction can continue to occur.

We have emphasised the need to take an integrated approach, placing people, place and technology at the heart of any new workplace strategy.

Evaluate new expectations

So, evaluate the new expectations and behaviours of the workforce by observing and talking to your employees. This will help gauge how people feel about returning to the workplace and explore options for design interventions to create a great experience.

Then take a close look at the physical work environment and understand how it can be reconfigured to meet the

new demands of the workforce. It may be that the office becomes a central hub for unifying the workplace with the company brand and values – an uplifting place where employees can collaborate and socialise, no longer routine but rich in amenities.

Finally, underpinning all of this work is the need to embed technology into the 'new normal'. As people have become more fluent in remote work and video-calling from home during lockdown, there is now a more open mindset towards integrating a technology layer into future work patterns. Use this as a platform to innovate.

'It's hardly fantasy to think that our future work environment is going to be very different as a result of these changes' Research academic, Germany



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