HATCH

THE
NEW ABNORMAL
The pandemic and its impact on our working lives

Editor's Note

When COVID-19 initially hit we, like most, were first and foremost concerned for the health of our family and friends. As clients began reaching out for support, HATCH wanted to provide guidance, but of course, like with all advice in the early days, our input wasn't much more than just a best guess. With the triage phase behind us, we felt now was finally the time to share some of our thinking about this very strange time. We've consciously avoided the phrase "the new normal", as there is nothing normal about a pandemic, and equally, we aren't calling it "return to work", because many people have been working very hard indeed, despite – or perhaps because of – offices being closed.

We've taken this time to do what we do best – research – and brought together our thoughts on what the transition period back into the office might look like. Tips on hygiene, air quality and the like aren't really the sorts of things HATCH tend to focus on, but we would be remiss to not mention them. The elements that we believe are most important to explore, however, are the longer-term behavioural and cultural shifts brought on by this period. And so we'll examine the pandemic's impact on areas like mental health, organisational purpose and privacy, giving our perspective on what the future may hold, as well as some thoughts on how these unique challenges might be met.

What is the office for?

We ask this question of our clients whenever we engage in a new project. At its heart, the traditional office has been good for three primary reasons: safety, effectiveness and familiarity. Of course, what made effective work in the seventies was probably different than effective work in the noughties, but those three elements were still the basis for a good working environment. They remain the same today, but the lens through which we view them has again changed.

Safety: Now there is a genuine risk people take on when going to the office. This can obviously be minimised, but it should never be normalised. How do we make that risk minimal and worthwhile?

Effectiveness: With remote working so broadly implemented, the office's purpose will have to change for maximum effectiveness. What activities can't be done virtually? The office must serve those primarily. Largely, these activities will be collaborative and social.

Familiarity: The familiarity of an office is derived from the human interaction that occurs there, not the fixtures and furnishings. When people return, the office must facilitate those human interactions, sustaining the community and culture that live and grow there.

So recognising that people *can* work from home, and may *prefer* to work from home, how do we create a workplace that is safe enough and serves a high enough behavioural purpose to compel people to work from there? And how do we adjust our operating rhythms to this "new abnormal", being ever mindful that most managers have never actually been trained to manage in this remote way. These are really the core questions, and ones we begin to answer here. But, of course, as our understanding of the virus and its impacts grow, so will our ability to paint a fuller picture.

What do we hope the future holds?

We are not futurists or crystal ball gazers, but we do have hopes for what the world will be like when the pandemic is just a memory. It is our hope that the world soon returns to a place where social distancing is a thing of the past, and we can come back together as vibrant work communities. We also hope that remote working is here to stay, with physical presenteesim relegated to the dust-bin of history. We are ever mindful, however, of the growing spectre of digital presenteesim. We hope this is seen for what it is - an Orwellian substitute for outdated management practices – but we are not particularly optimistic. We hope leaders are provided the training they need to manage remotely, and in turn learn to better support their teams' mental health. And, lastly, we hope that businesses embrace this moment of existential disruption and harness it for the good of their people. We may never be presented with an opportunity like this again.

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Introduction

The global coronavirus pandemic has disrupted every facet of normal life. Measures to restrict the virus from spreading have confined people to their homes, stopped travel, eliminated social interaction, and closed businesses, shops, and schools. The next phase of the response to the pandemic is to figure out how to restore some normality without allowing the virus to spread exponentially through the population again.

In the delicate balancing act between the restoration of normality and protecting people from exposure to the virus, the workplace becomes a central focus. The longer businesses and offices remain closed, the greater the economic pain countries face, which in the long-term could cause more damage to society than the disease itself. Economic necessity ensures businesses will gradually re-open over the coming weeks and months, even though the virus has not been fully suppressed.

Amid a backdrop of continued uncertainty, the main question is: What does this return to the office look like? This research focuses on answering this question for employers and employees returning to work in traditional office settings. Most countries will continue to use social distancing as a tool to reduce the rate of infection, which will demand significant changes to the physical layout of offices and the ways that employees interact with each other. The physical changes may require some investment and planning by business leaders, facilities managers, and HR leaders. But changing people's behaviours, many of which are habitual or driven by unknown biases, is a harder endeavour.

The physical and behavioural changes needed to allow a return to the office are reliant on mutual success. If people's health and hygiene behaviours do not change, then the physical changes are rendered useless. Similarly, if the physical changes are not made, then there is less chance of creating an environment that encourages people to adapt their behaviours. This research therefore addresses both the physical and psychological domains of the return to the office.

In a business context, the term "disruption" is synonymous with long-term systemic change and innovation. The disruption caused by coronavirus is no different – it is not just

disruption in the sense of a major inconvenience, but it will also accelerate workplace trends that were already changing. Perhaps the biggest example of this is remote working. The sudden and enforced transformation of millions of employees into being remote workers is the single greatest change in ways of working that we have seen for generations.

The coronavirus crisis has opened the minds of employees and employers to the possibilities of remote working, helping them understand what really can and can't be done remotely. This experience has created a revolution in mindset, and therefore companies are unlikely to revert back to pre-pandemic levels of remote working. The heads of some of the largest companies in the world have already said they will keep greater flexibility for employees, partly for the safety of their employees but more so because their businesses have been able to perform without anyone onsite, providing proof of the concept. [1]

Therefore, for most companies, the first observable difference in the return to the office will be the number of employees that won't physically be there. Because remote working will be central to ensuring offices are less crowded, the challenge will be for companies to begin optimising their remote working practices. This research sets out the key remote working challenges and offers frameworks to help companies as they manage, collaborate, and socialise in the virtual sphere.

Many of the immediate priorities inside offices will be related to health and hygiene. Facilities managers will be under pressure like never before to monitor air quality, ventilation, and the capacity of lifts and thoroughfares, and to ensure communal areas are reconfigured to allow for social distancing.

Employers will need to be more aware about the health of their individual employees to keep their staff safe. They will need to tread a fine line between monitoring employee health and not breaching personal privacy. Some of this balancing act will be set out in data privacy and employment laws, but the novelty of this situation means it will also come down to values-based judgements, with plenty of potential for conflict, if deemed inappropriate.

This protection versus privacy balance is especially apparent in emerging technology designed to make it easier for employers and building managers to enforce new health measures. China has shown the extreme end of technology-driven surveillance inside workplaces. Similar technologies will be available in Western countries, but whether Western sensibilities will allow for surveillance in smartphone apps, movement tracking systems, and mandatory virus tests remains to be seen. Companies will need to adopt an open and consultative approach based on deep trust if they want to successfully use these tools. Privacy balance is also being challenged through the use of workplace surveillance technology. This same consultative approach based on deep trust will be requisite for supporting mental health in the future as well.
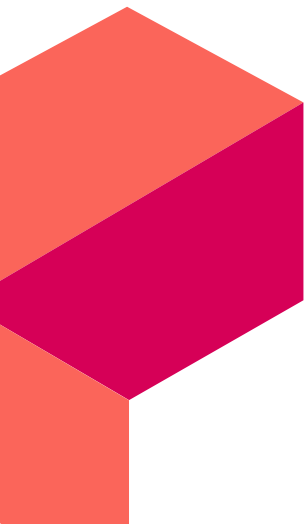
Remote working

With social distancing set to remain in place even after stay-at-home orders are lifted, remote working is going to be the most crucial tool in enabling employers to limit office occupancy levels and allow employees to maintain a safe distance. Over the past two decades, the growth of personal computing technology, fast internet, and cloud-based software has enabled a growing number of workers to work remotely. However, before the coronavirus crisis, the numbers were certainly not high enough to herald the imminent "death of the office." According to a 2018 study, just under 4% of US employees worked remotely at least half of the time.[2] In the UK, the proportion of workers that work "mainly from home" increased from 4.3% to 5.1% from 2015 to 2019 – a very modest increase.[3]

In short, the revolution in remote working was making slow progress. While we are certainly past the stage of early adoption of remote working, the pre-COVID-19 data suggests that regular remote working – until 2020 – was in fact far less common than often perceived. Because remote work typically requires the agreement of an organisation – managers, HR departments, etc. – adoption has a natural bottleneck created by individual and organisational resistance to change.

Resistance decimated

The coronavirus crisis has decimated this organisational and individual resistance and forced companies across the world to adopt remote working at scale. By the first week of April 2020, around 34% of Americans who previously commuted to work were working from home.[4] Similarly, in the UK, 48% of workers were working from home instead of offices by April.[5] This marks one of the most drastic changes in our ways of working in generations. All companies, even those reluctant to embrace remote working, have gained vital insights into the practice. This includes how leaders can manage their teams remotely, which technologies and software are required for collaboration, task management or sharing documents, and which employees can perform their roles outside the office without hindrance.

There will be two important steps that all companies will need to take:

1. Optimise remote working by looking at technology, processes, behaviours, training, and company culture.
2. Carry out a detailed audit of which employees will work remotely and when, so there is an accurate idea of the headcount in the office.

The audit should be based on gathering two fields of information:
- Which job roles can be done remotely?
- Which employees are satisfied with their remote working experience and want to continue?

The cohort of remote employees should ideally meet both of these criteria – a role that can be done remotely without significant loss of productivity, and an employee in that role who wants to work in this way.

For both criteria, there should be an increasing crossover of suitable job roles and willing employees as companies continue to optimise and normalise remote working. Along with this, employees must adjust and optimise their individual remote working arrangements. This trajectory is important as there is a chance that further stay-at-home orders, either nationally or regionally, could be required to dampen outbreaks of COVID-19, until a vaccine is administered across the population.

Similarly, the plan for all countries looking to exit lockdown is to make testing, tracing, and rapid isolation of known contacts a pillar of the ongoing strategy to combat the disease and prevent another large-scale outbreak. If an employee is found to have contracted the disease, any colleagues that have interacted with the infected employee will also need to self-isolate. Large organisations could see a consistent cycle of groups of employees needing to self-isolate and stay at home, where they can continue to work if they do not develop symptoms. Therefore, the better the optimisation of remote working now and the greater the number of employees ready and able to work from home, the lower the level of disruption companies will face during further lockdowns.

Here to stay

In the long-term, returning to the pre-pandemic meagre percentage of remote workers is highly unlikely. The enforced period of remote working will have psychologically opened up companies and individuals to different experiential understandings of what is possible. According to a recent survey, 68% of workers in the UK feel they are more productive or equally productive working from home, and 31% said their work-life balance had become easier since social distancing began.[6] The change in attitude is also getting through at the top of organisations. Three-quarters of 317 business leaders surveyed said they expected at least 5% of their employees to become permanent remote employees.[7]

This does not mean all employees have deemed their remote work experience a success. Some have found it frustrating and hard to be productive; others have found the lack of social interaction mentally deflating. But it doesn't take a 100% approval rate for there to be a shift for companies.

To illustrate this point, take the example of a professional services company of 1000 employees that used to have 40 employees who regularly worked remotely (using the 4% average figure for US companies). Imagine all those employees are now working remotely, but only half currently feel working from home is a long-term viable solution. That is still a greater than ten-fold increase in the number of employees who are willing and ready to work remotely. This order of magnitude in such an increase means companies cannot revert back to the 4% level of remote working, even if they wanted to. That genie simply will not return to the bottle. The case for remote working has been made, and any attempt to push back against this shift is unrealistic from the perspective of readiness for future lockdowns, self-isolation, and organisational morale.

Who goes remote?

So, how should organisations begin to ascertain which employees should work remotely? In the past, if an employee asked a company that had a small proportion of remote workers if they could work remotely, the line manager or HR manager would approach the issue by asking themselves: "Can this person do their job properly outside the office?" And all too often, this question elicited resistance that often reflected a lack of trust and concern around a lack of direct oversight.

Because companies must now find a proportion of employees able and willing to work remotely, the question to be answered has become: "Is there a reason why this person *cannot* perform – or learn to perform – their job properly outside the office?" The emphasis has been reversed and the burden of proof increased on the part of the organisation in answering the question. The aspect of "learning to perform" is crucial because it assumes that, like any new work skill, there is a learning curve and that the employee - and manager - must be given the time and resources to improve. Therefore, the reasons for not allowing remote work should focus on practicalities. For example, someone whose physical presence is a necessity such as a lobby receptionist, or for employees who require technology or equipment that cannot be used at home.

Different employees have different preferences and psychological needs, which should also inform remote working decisions. Research has shown that employees feel flexibility increases their work effectiveness when they have a high need for autonomy at work.[8] For employees who prefer social relatedness or structure, working remotely can be counterproductive and therefore their personal working arrangements should

account for that. Employees will have their own input and perspectives on whether working remotely is a viable option for them, and these opinions should be factored into any decisions. Direct engagement through surveys or interviews will be crucial in ascertaining opinions. The aim is to reduce the headcount inside the office space to make distancing between employees easier. Therefore, starting with an audit of who really needs to be there is sensible.

Optimising technology and working environment

Companies will be at different stages of optimising their remote working practices, and a realistic self-appraisal of remote working sophistication is important. Fortunately, companies that are less accustomed to regular remote working can borrow principles and strategies from those that have developed expertise through experience. In the current context, it might be helpful to look at companies based in Asia, where widespread remote working has been in place since early 2020, as they were the first to begin adapting to the coronavirus.

Successful remote working is impossible without having the appropriate technologies that allow employees to be productive. This begins with the basic technological requirements of most office workers: a laptop, a reliable Wi-Fi connection, and software that enables remote access to an employee's email, documents, and files. But this should be the bare minimum, and companies should investigate how supplementary technology might improve productivity and satisfaction.

For instance, McKinsey's China offices have been working remotely since January and have shared their digital tools framework, which is a useful guide.[9] It covers six types of digital tools, many of which will be required across office-based industries: Companies must assess which tools different teams and individuals require and quickly plug any technology gaps.

Content creation – creating joint documents, live co-editing, joint white-boarding.

Channel-based communication – urgent questions and guidance, keeping up-to-date in real time, social team talk.

Video conferencing – team meetings, client meetings, problem-solving using shared screens, workshops and trainings.

Task management – keeping track of assigned tasks, backlog prioritisation, performance management, project management, checklists.

Document sharing – sharing files and documents, a repository for information, version control management, access across organisations.
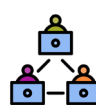
Polling – interactive presentations, retrospectives and team learnings, interactive Q&A, engagement, polls.

Employees will also need to optimise their home working environment. Microsoft's guide for remote working during the COVID-19 epidemic sections the employee's environment into physical and virtual.[10] Wherever possible, the physical workspace should consider factors such as good ventilation, natural light, comfortable furniture, and good ergonomics. And, of course, the rhythms and distractions of working from home should also be factored into the physical environment. The virtual environment is tied to the technological requirements mentioned previously, as well as other basic considerations such as home Wi-Fi speed (e.g. use of a wired connection rather than wireless to increase speed and connectivity) and remote desktops and VPNs to access company resources.

Taken together, the combination of companies and employees optimising physical, technological, and virtual conditions lays a foundation for remote working, without which the adaptation of team and individual behaviours and protocols cannot even begin.

Optimising protocols and behaviours

The technology and physical environment enable teams and individuals to begin the process of improving their remote work capabilities by creating new protocols and behaviours. This should not just encompass measures of employee productivity (i.e. tasks getting done on time), but should also factor in levels of collaboration, employee engagement, and social interaction.

Companies and team leaders should adjust expectations during this phase of optimisation and accept that employees will adapt at different speeds, depending on previous experience and psychological needs (autonomy versus personal interaction). Along with adjusted expectations, managers should be prepared to adopt an empathetic, transparent, and iterative approach in which employees are encouraged to share their feedback on protocols.

Companies must encourage employees to create regular routines at home. This includes making sure they factor in breaks, meals, or standing-up away from their desks, and setting boundaries around work as the natural boundary created by commuting from home to an office no longer exists. Others also suggest, where possible, that people use different parts of their living spaces for different tasks (a pared down version of activity-based working - a mode of working where different settings support different activties).

It's helpful for all employees to share their calendars with colleagues and signal their availability in the future and in real-time. This makes it easier for colleagues to make appropriate decisions on when and how to get in contact with each other. For instance, if someone indicates they are 'busy' or doing focused individual work, then a colleague

would know that communicating through an instant messaging or task management platform (e.g. Slack, Asana) is a better option than a quick call. Whereas in an office, a person might look across at a colleague and see visual cues that they are doing highly focused work, these cues do not exist in remote work and hence the onus is on employees to proactively signal their work status and availability to prevent unnecessary disruptions and optimise communication.

The ways in which colleagues choose to communicate with each other is vital. Therefore, producing flexible guidelines for communication as a team and as a company is sensible. As an example, McKinsey used the following communication channels and set out how they should be used[11]:

1:1 calls/video calls – individual catchups and building relationships, discussing sensitive and difficult topics

Video captures and voice notes – showcasing and explaining work, guidance to the team from managers with limited time, debriefs on meetings that some may have missed

Video conference – problem solving and co-creation using shared screens, weekly planning and review sessions, decision meetings, workshops and trainings, team talks and retrospectives

Email – updates and statuses for large groups, formal communication inside and outside the company

Chat – process syndication, urgent questions and seeking guidance, keeping up to date in real-time, social team talk

Clearly, this showcases the communication preferences of one company, and others may choose to use their communication tools differently as based on work needs, preferences, and culture. Importantly, those choices should be made while consciously incorporating some of the following considerations:
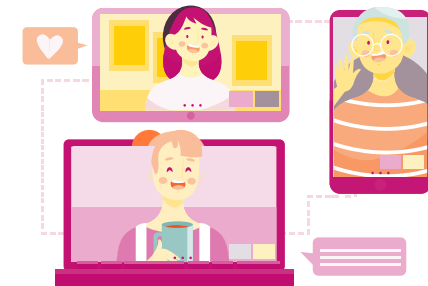
- Is the aim to create or process information?
- Does the communication need to be real-time or can it be consumed at the recipient's convenience?
- Is communication happening one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many?
- Is the communication style formal or chatty?
- Is it urgent, important, or neither of these?

Through collaboratively developed guidelines, employees should have an understanding of the best forms of communication for a given task.

Many remote working recommendations focus on using video to create a higher degree of involvement among call or meeting participants. It is better suited than email or voice calls for building rapport and empathy.[12] The rapid growth of Zoom, from around 10 million daily users in December 2019 to around 300 million in April 2020,[13] has demonstrated how important video has become to keeping employees connected and collaborating.

However, another stream of thought suggests that overuse of video calls and conferencing can be mentally draining for participants, because the video format demands conscious levels of focus on the screen that are a poor substitute for body language. Similarly, silence in a face-to-face meeting is normal, whereas silence during video conferencing can create anxiety and negativity. A 2014 study showed that delays on phone or conferencing systems created slightly more negative perceptions of fellow participants instead of just poorer opinions of the technology.[14] It is sensible for companies to leave some leeway for employees to choose whether video is the right option, particularly for one-to-one calls or more casual conversations, as it is likely this type of virtual video fatigue affects people differently. As an example, some firms have begun encouraging light video call periods for weekly or fortnightly durations, giving people respite from the relentless video conferencing pressure.

Many managers will be leading entirely virtual teams for the first time. The preceding principles around lowered expectations, taking a learning approach, and having a tone of care and empathy should be set out by the manager. It's important that managers actively model the protocols and behaviours that are agreed on by the team. By setting an example of best-practice communication and showing what a good virtual team player looks like, employees will be more inclined to follow.

It's generally agreed that rather than using long, formal check-ins with employees, regular and fairly casual contact is more effective in sustaining morale and engagement.[15] This is where the judicious use of communication is important. For instance, if it's a simple check-in question, then instant messaging might suffice. For a fuller debrief of work, then a call or video call with screensharing might be more apt.

To help employees who might be struggling with working remotely and the process of adaptation, managers can assign each team member a buddy or "peer coach" with whom they can share difficulties or problems. Team members should also continue to receive training through virtual channels to help with the transition to remote work. This can be as simple as asking team members to take turns sharing a short piece of microlearning that they feel would benefit their peers, targeting a tool, behaviour or skill.

Staggered start and rotation

There are other ways that workplaces will seek to reduce the number of employees in the office at any one time, making social distancing easier. Staggered start and finishing times are one option, as it will create a block of hours in the morning and afternoon with fewer employees in the office. This is particularity important in high-rise buildings to support reduced as lift capacity. This includes the added benefit of aligning with the aim of reducing transport congestion during the normal rush-hour. Another option is putting teams on a rotation to decide when they work in the office and when they work at home. This could be arranged on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis.

Remote loneliness

Two of the biggest challenges facing teams that are fully remote are social dislocation and collaboration. Teams can be given tools, be encouraged to communicate frequently with colleagues, and to virtually work on things together in pre-arranged meetings, but this is no guarantee that employees will feel socially connected in the way they would in an office setting. Research has shown that the type, number, and quality of relationships developed in the workplace are highly connected to the overall development of positive or negative work identity.[16] Therefore, the lack of familiar and habitual opportunities to network and build more relationships at work could be detrimental.

Technologically driven connectivity is inherently paradoxical in that it gives people the ability to be contacted at any time and in any place, but under certain conditions can also lead to a sense of social isolation that can affect levels of trust, performance, job satisfaction and engagement. Many studies have explored this paradoxical phenomenon, called "virtual distance", which comprises three types of distances: physical, operational and affinity.[17] It is the latter – affinity distance – that is the most important of the three in determining the level of when virtual distance is most detrimental to individual and organisational performance.[18] Affinity distance encompasses aspects that prevent the development of shared values, trust and other human interdependencies.

Similarly, the lack of daily face-to-face interactions (e.g. passing someone in a corridor, chatting while around a coffee machine) that are commonplace in an office can make spontaneous collaboration much harder in a virtual environment. Without these informal exchanges, individuals lose opportunities to learn and share ideas they would not have come across without those random interactions. From this, the company loses the innovation or idea creation that can happen as a result of these "bump moments".

To address these two problems – both of which are driven by changes in the way social interaction takes place – remote teams can try to create opportunities for virtual "watercooler" moments.[19] This could take the form of a chatroom or some sort of social network for people to interact and chat about things that are often unrelated to work. Of course, trust is paramount for these channels. Part of the benefit of a watercooler moment is the social connection and collaboration that is enhanced by "good gossip".[20]

If employees don't trust that they can be open with their comments, they will not willingly access the channel.[21] Alternatively, it could take the form of something more concretely outside the normal work sphere, such as virtual group lunches, book clubs and trivia competitions. The opportunity is there for teams to get creative and find ways of maintaining those random social interactions that collectively amount to a cornerstone of workplace identity and satisfaction.

When it comes to relationships, recent studies have shown that it is the quality of our relationships at work that help us feel connected and engaged.[22] These 'High Quality Connections' (HQCs) help foster a positive subjective and emotional experience for employees in the workplace, thereby improving individual functioning in cognitive, physiological and behavioural processes. In a remote working context, organisations should take time to consider how these types of HQCs can be nurtured.

Office social distancing

Maintaining physical distance between employees is central to the strategy for safely allowing employees to return to offices. This is now mandated within government guidance.[23] Under stay-at-home orders, people have quickly adapted to the government request to keep a safe distance from other people, whether queuing for supermarkets or doing exercise. A behaviour that was only weeks ago unfamiliar to people is now practised by much of the general public, without requiring draconian enforcement by officials. The understanding and broad willingness of people to comply with social distancing is evident. Now it's up to employers, facilities managers, and building managers to reshape the physical environment and deliver a set of behavioural guidelines that will allow people to apply the same principles of social distancing in the workplace.

Desks – space, direction, barriers

What do airplane seats, restaurant tables, and office desks all have in common? People sitting in close proximity to each other, usually for an extended period of time. As health officials have said, it is the combination of closeness to an infected person and the time spent near that person that leads to a higher chance of transmitting COVID-19, hence the World Health Organization (WHO) and Public Health England's figure of 15 minutes of close contact with a suspected case.[24] Employees tend to sit at desks for over 15 minutes at a time, so the focus must be on creating sufficient distance between them. Clearly this has serious implications for overall capacity, which is why continued remote working will play an important role.

In most countries, desks will need to meet some distancing guidelines. Many employers will need to change their layouts to make this physical distance between each employee possible. With the average space per workstation in the UK dropping from 11.8 square metres in 2008 to 9.6 square metres in 2018,[25] this will present a significant challenge.

Companies should also consider the direction that desks are facing. The widely shared example of how COVID-19 was transmitted by droplets across three large restaurant tables in Guangzhou, China, showed that the direction people face is another variable
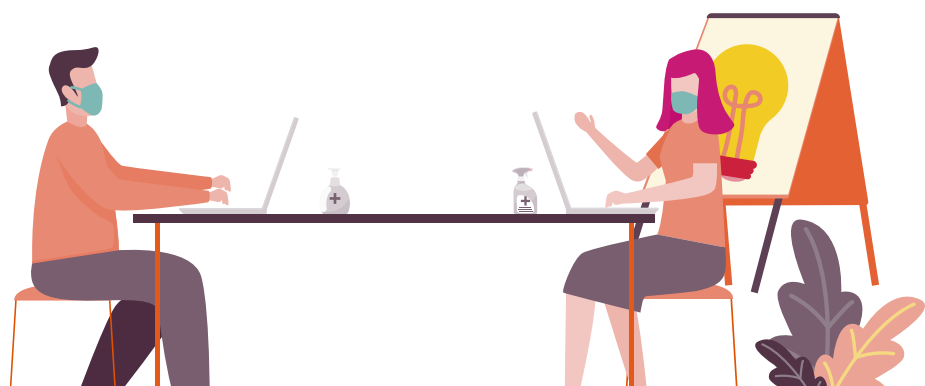
that influences transmission.[26] Leaving desks with employees facing each other so that droplets from sneezes or coughs can travel towards colleagues increases risk. Therefore, employees should sit back-to-back at their desks, or in a zig-zag layout.

If the layout or space means that employees have to sit face-to-face or even adjacent, then employers should install barriers to limit the movement of viral droplets and aerosols across the desks (for example, Perspex, clear plastic or another material that can be easily cleaned, or plants can even be used). The UK government has recommended the use of screens and barriers in workplaces as a final resort where social distancing is not possible and the job role is essential.[27] But for employers looking to maximise reassurance for employees, a change in desk layout that factors in distance, direction, and barriers is ideal.

Hot-desking on hiatus

Companies will also need to carry out a reappraisal of hot-desking/desk-sharing, potentially reversing the growing trend for unassigned desks. By mid-2019, around 30% of all multinational companies were using hot-desking, and a total of 45% of multinationals said they planned to implement hot-desking in 2020.[28] Instead of seeing a 50% growth in hot-desking, the coronavirus crisis could result in the proportion of companies sharing desks decline altogether in the short-term. From a health perspective, companies have two options: provide fastidious cleaning and hygiene protocols that are strictly adhered to by employees and cleaning staff or put desk-sharing on hold until further notice.

Two issues suggest that putting desk-sharing on hold is the more expedient option. First, the reliance on regular cleaning depends on the full participation of all employees. This strategy cannot afford a disinterested or lackadaisical minority, as it undermines the efforts of the majority that comply. Second, the UK government guidelines for re-opening workplaces recommends minimising desk-sharing.[29] While not beholden in law to these guidelines, employers should treat them as the minimum benchmark for earning the confidence of employees returning to work. Becoming an outlier that refuses to comply risks denting company morale and increasing employee stress. Many employers will probably choose to do both: increase the cleanliness of desk areas and put desk-sharing on hold for the time being.

Distancing in other office areas

Desks are just one location where employees will need to observe social distancing. The principle will apply throughout office buildings including entrances, lobbies, and reception areas, as well as lifts, corridors, communal kitchen/hangout areas, and meeting rooms. Each office location will require forethought and, in some cases, creativity to ensure employees understand what is required and how to comply.

Signs and physical markers will play an important role in guiding and nudging people towards maintaining distance. For instance, signs on the floor of lifts can be used to tell people where in the lift to stand, which direction to face, and can ensure a lower lift capacity is maintained. Of course, the significantly reduced capacity of lifts will mean longer wait times, and again simple signs asking for patience and recommending use of alternative routes (e.g. staircases) can create greater buy-in. It is advisable that these notices be temporary and simple to replace as guidelines are constantly changing, and business will want to easily remove these once distancing is no longer required.

Employers will also need to reduce the capacity of meeting rooms and provide signs that show the number of people permitted in a room, markings on the floor to show where chairs should be placed, and written notifications of when the room was last cleaned. Gaps should be left in meeting booking systems (e.g. 15 minutes) to allow surfaces to be cleaned, either by cleaning staff, the employees themselves, or ideally both. Before using meeting rooms, employees should consider whether a face-to-face meeting is truly necessary or whether a remote dial-in option would be just as effective. In the past, meeting rooms have tended to be a fall-back option for employees looking for a space to collaborate away from their desks, leading to overuse and lack of availability. Employees might need new guidelines on what constitutes the correct use of meeting room spaces, so that interactions in a closed room happen only when necessary.

Entrances and reception areas will also need to be changed to enable social distancing and reduce interaction. The British Council of Offices has suggested using clear markings for any queues, use of automatic doors wherever possible, and reducing reliance on lanyards or visitor badges that are returned to reception after use.[30] For more technologically advanced buildings, it may be possible to issue QR codes to visitors' smart phones before they arrive. As with other desks, the use of screens and markings on the floor can help maintain distance between receptionists and visitors. Any waiting areas that use furniture will also need to be redesigned to ensure appropriate social distance is kept.

A broader theme that may emerge in offices is the use of signs to create a one-way flow of people through the office, from communal areas into corridors and even around desks. Arrows on the floor, for instance, could indicate the direction people need to walk, therefore preventing people from brushing past each other in narrow corridors. In wider corridors, floor markings could be used to create two lanes that move in opposite directions that leave a sufficient gap in the middle for social distancing.

The use of tape and floor markings is inexpensive but will require forethought and planning. Other changes designed to reduce proximity to co-workers might require

expertise on health and safety regulations. For example, opening fire staircases for normal use would reduce demand for lifts, but there could create a safety consideration as the stairwells become more crowded. Removing doors with push/pull handles eliminates a major touchpoint where the virus could be transmitted, but there may be fire regulations that affect where this can legally and safely be carried out. These decisions will need input from those with relevant expertise to ensure employers are not negligent on these and other safety issues.

Office etiquette

Office and business etiquette will also need to be re-evaluated to assist with health and hygiene priorities. A custom as reflexive as the handshake – a gesture for extending greeting and building trust – cannot be initiated given the need for continued social distancing. But a mandated order to end handshakes is unlikely, as is a sudden consensus that handshakes should end as of now. Therefore, there will invariably be an uncomfortable period during which handshakes are gradually phased out, while people are torn between reverting to a familiar custom and trying to find an acceptable alternative. The workplace will be at the centre of this awkward period, and as such companies can help ease the situation by creating recommended guidelines on handshaking for their employees.

Due to a lack of consensus, the use of masks is another type of hygiene etiquette that could be contentious in the workplace. From a purely health perspective, the case for wearing masks in closed spaces is compelling because of the following formula[31]:

<p style="color:magenta; text-align:center;">Successful infection = Exposure to virus x Time</p>

In an office, the closed air allows the accumulation of viral airborne droplets through talking, breathing, coughs, and sneezes. On its own, this might not be problematic, but people spend hours in that environment. It is the combination of the two factors – possible exposure and time spent in the area – that increases the risk. Non-medical masks do not offer full protection, but they could contribute to companies' multiple layers of protection. In addition, there is overwhelming evidence of asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic spread of the virus, which makes it difficult to rationalise relying solely on self-isolation when someone experiences symptoms.[32]

Cultural norms will make it difficult to enforce the use of masks in workplaces, especially in the UK where even the government has been reluctant to recommend them. Nevertheless, the use of masks is likely to grow as people become accustomed to wearing them on public transport, in shops, and other closed environments. As such, the issue will need consideration when offices re-open.

General office hygiene

Along with keeping employee numbers low and rethinking the layout and flow of people through the building to maintain distance, offices will need to introduce higher levels of cleanliness to earn employees' trust and reduce the chances of spreading the virus.

Surface-to-person transmission is well-established as a method of infection. A recent study showed that viable amounts of the virus remained on surfaces such as plastic and stainless steel for up to 72 hours.[33] On cardboard the virus remained alive for about 4.5 hours. This research shows that in an office context where many surfaces are frequently touched, an important line of defence is keeping surfaces decontaminated through regular cleaning.

In practice, this means increasing the frequency and thoroughness of deep cleans done by cleaning staff and ensuring employees themselves are taking responsibility for cleaning their own work areas (desks, meeting rooms, etc.) before and after use. Companies should mandate that clutter on desks be removed so that cleaning is more efficient (extra storage facilities for employees can make this easier).

All office areas – desks, meeting rooms, communal areas, thoroughfares – should be stocked with hand-sanitising dispensers or handwashing facilities to make it as easy as possible for employees to clean their hands at regular intervals. There should also be materials for cleaning (e.g. antibacterial wipes, cleaning spray, paper towels) readily placed throughout the office so employees can proactively wipe down surfaces as they are used.

This is a revolution of sorts in office hygiene that will require guidance from employers. Again, highly conspicuous signs can provide regular reminders of what employees need to do, and managers and leaders should, wherever and whenever possible, try to model these new behaviours, whether handwashing before meetings, cleaning work areas, or adopting alternatives to handshakes. Employers could also create digital aides, such as return-to-the-office video guides that demonstrate the new hygiene norms and their role in helping to keep the office healthy. All this collateral should be simple, well-designed, and where appropriate, fun, for ease of understanding and adoption.
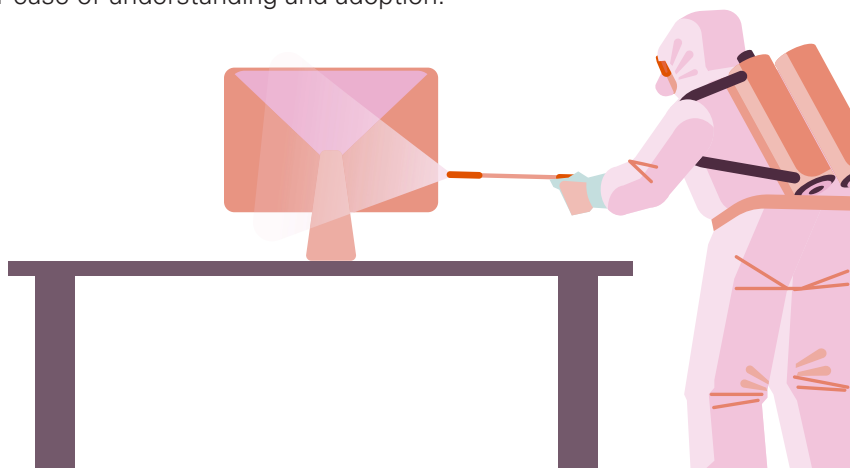
High touchpoint areas such as communal kitchens will be in particular need of hand sanitiser and cleaning materials. But where possible, touchpoints could be changed to reduce the need for physical touch. This might involve steps as simple as removing kitchen cupboard doors altogether, installing sensor-activated taps, or asking employees to bring their own cutlery and reusable coffee cups to reduce sharing. In lifts where buttons are frequently touched, there could be signs reminding people to wash hands after touching the buttons or providing suggestions such as using elbows or covering hands with a tissue before pressing the buttons.

Hygienic technology

In the longer-term, technology and innovation will play an enormous role in reducing the usage of common touchpoints and improving hygiene around those touchpoints. For example, there is a growing selection of touchless options for lifts, including systems that allow employees and visitors to use smartphones to operate lifts.[34] A more nascent touchless technology is a holographic button panel in which users press a 3D projected image of a button panel.[35] There are also a variety of voice-activated lift options available to building managers.

Another type of technology that is likely to become a more prominent feature in the longer term is the use of antimicrobial materials in the office. These materials are engineered to kill microbes (usually bacteria) by either using an antimicrobial agent or through micro-contours that create a hostile surface for microbes. The original use of these materials was in hospitals where equipment for procedures and even air-conditioning ducts require antimicrobial materials that reduce the spread of bacterial infection and superbugs.[36] These "smart surfaces" could now enter the domain of regular workplaces, with particular application for high-touch surfaces.

Alternatively, the office sector could choose to revert back to naturally antimicrobial materials, such as copper and alloys like brass or nickel, that are cheaper and proven to have a significant antimicrobial effect.[37] Research has shown that a cold spray coating of nanomaterial copper significantly reduces the ability of residual Influenza droplets to survive on a surface.[38]

Offices can look at the healthcare sector for other technological advances in cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces that present a risk. For instance, hospitals have increasingly used ultra-violet light-emitting devices as a no-touch disinfection method. Results have shown that these UV-C cleaning systems are most effective at reducing the presence of bacteria and microbes when used in conjunction with standard cleaning procedures.[39] More research is required to understand if also UV-C works on coronaviruses, but the market demand for such products in the commercial sector could move faster than the research, bringing products into the mainstream. Because the UV-C devices can be used without the need for manual operation, they are highly convenient. That said, they are unlikely, at this stage in their technological development, to be a substitute for normal cleaning procedures.

Air quality

The increased standards of cleanliness and hygiene will also need to incorporate air quality. The cost-benefit analysis of investing in the latest filters and ventilation systems in offices has fundamentally changed because of the coronavirus crisis. Poor indoor air quality contributes to cognitive impairment in the short-term,[40] and in the long-term is linked to multiple health risks, including Alzheimer's and lung disease.[41] Despite this, the air quality of offices has often been overlooked.

COVID-19 creates a stronger psychological imperative for change because it poses an immediate health threat. While research is still trying to quantify how the virus is transmitted in the air, the weight of evidence suggests that indoor environments with a relatively large number of people are likely to create the conditions for airborne transmission, due to the build-up of airborne droplets in the stagnant air. Therefore, removal of viral droplets through ventilation of indoor air is an important prevention tool.[42]

Offices will need to look at both natural and mechanical ventilation in buildings. The British Council of Offices has taken its guidance from the following recommendations made by the WHO[43]:
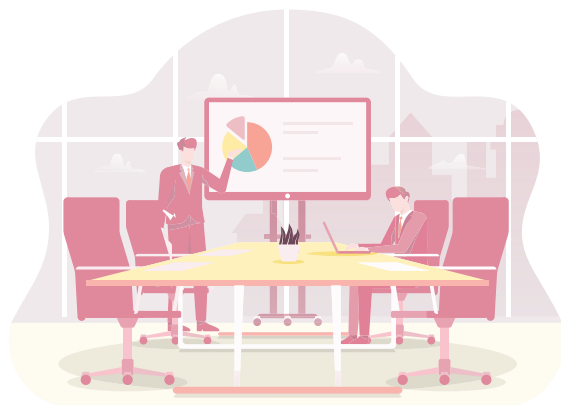
- Running ventilation 24/7, though at a lower rate outside normal hours, to dilute contaminants and purge the building when not in operation.
- Opening windows, wherever possible and allowed, to improve natural ventilation, even if it affects office temperatures.
- Where possible, raise humidity levels above at least 30%, particularly during colder temperatures when humidity in offices can fall due to heating systems.
- Check heat recovery systems and potentially suspend their use during virus outbreaks as they may allow for cross-contamination of exhaust air and fresh air.
- For systems that recirculate air, HEPA filters should be used to catch contaminants.
- Up-flow and displacement air systems can help remove contaminants from occupied spaces.
- All these components and systems will need to be checked and maintained more regularly.

Health monitoring

One of the challenges companies will face when employees return to the office is maintaining a balance between gathering information and data that will keep the company safe and functioning, and respecting employees' rights and sensibilities around privacy. Companies will need clear protocols that include details on how employees are informed about any infected individuals, who else could be at risk, what actions they might need to take (e.g. self-quarantine, testing), and which business leaders need to be informed. In effect, companies will need to run their own version of "test, trace, isolate" – the formula governments are using to keep the virus in check as countries come out of lockdown.

Companies will rely on employees coming forward and informing their bosses and employers when they are not well or suspect they have COVID-19 symptoms. This presents a problem in places where employees believe the personal cost of not coming into work, even with a cold or flu, is worse than taking time off work to recover. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, each week in the US, 1.5 million workers who did not have paid sick leave went to work despite feeling ill.[44] This aversion to staying at home when ill can also be driven by company cultures where reporting in sick is stigmatised. Shockingly, this culture of pushing through illness to work is highly prevalent in the restaurant and healthcare sectors, where over half of the employees in those industries go to work when they have a cold or flu.[45]

These cultural norms around absence through illness must change. Companies should make it clear that employees are encouraged to inform the company and stay home if symptoms arise. HR departments may need to re-evaluate sick leave and absence policies in employee contracts to ensure there is no penalty or discouragement from complying with policies and proactively sharing your health status.

The seriousness of the COVID-19 situation is widely accepted and the willingness to voluntarily self-isolate is high, as evidenced over the past few months. In the UK, at the end of April 2020, 91% of survey respondents said they would self-isolate if they

developed symptoms or felt unwell.[46] This fits in with the psychology of fear-based behavioural change. This research has shown that for humans to take action in the face of a threat, there needs to be a high enough level of perceived threat and a credible course of action individuals can take to reduce the threat level.[47] If individuals do not believe there is a corrective course of action available to them, they are likely to resort to trying to control their fears, rather than address the danger itself.[48] In the context of an infectious disease, this might result is someone telling themselves, "we're all going to get it anyway" to try to diminish the stress and anxiety caused by fear, rather than taking precautions to prevent the actual danger of the disease.

This is why employers need to explicitly outline the actions employees need to adopt to tackle the danger and not their fear. Communicating what is expected when they are not feeling well and how this will make everyone safer is therefore crucial.

Protection versus privacy

Amid greater health monitoring, the boundaries of employee privacy are likely to be challenged. Some public figures have warned of the beginnings of "under-the-skin surveillance," in which governments and corporations use the health threats of COVID-19 to gather data about our health and physiology.[49] This type of information gathering places enormous trust in those institutions not to misuse data for commercial gain or worse, a test many of the major tech companies have failed in recent years.[50] The same onus of trust will be placed on employers seeking to gather information for what is a morally salient purpose. The question is what level of data-gathering employees will tolerate before it's seen as intrusive.

Take the example of scanners that can read people's temperatures. In China, Singapore, and other East Asian countries, these devices have been used ubiquitously to check whether people have a fever when entering offices, shopping centres, and even apartment buildings. Heathrow airport in the UK is about to be begin trialling thermal cameras to carry out temperature checks,[51] and UK companies have begun to purchase and install similar technologies as a line of defence.[52] The cameras alert officials to anyone with a skin temperature above a certain level, but in most systems the data about the individual is not stored after the alert.

Testing the limits

But some companies might want to be even more proactive in their prevention strategies, testing the boundaries of safety and privacy even further. For instance, the lack of COVID-19 testing availability for the general population in countries such as the US and UK has led to ideas on how companies can develop their own testing regimes to monitor employee health. This approach is made plausible by two developments: first,
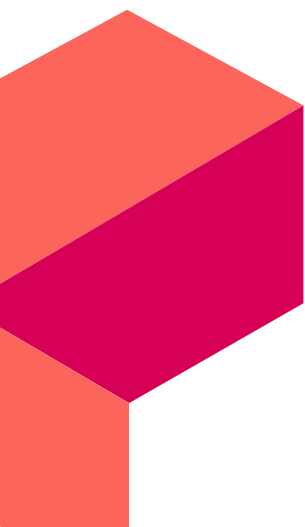
the possibility that saliva is a reliable alternative to nasal and upper respiratory swabs to test for the virus is still being studied; second, the use of pooled testing (grouping multiple samples into one test and then taking action on a group basis if a positive sample is found).[53] If these tests were regularly administered, it could enable companies to take pre-emptive action before the virus had a chance to spread.

However, there are two principal challenges to the viability of company-led testing. The first is whether employees would accept it as a legitimate safety precaution or deem it as an intrusion. Second, the reliability of the PCR test – the only test which confirms the presence of an active viral infection – is not as high as might be needed to justify the time and investment required.

False positive and false negative results both pose problems for companies, especially if pooled testing is used. A false positive result would mean that the entire pool of samples (e.g. 30 employees) would need to leave the office and work from home until further testing was done to establish if it was a test error or a valid result. More problematic – and more common in the PCR tests – is a false negative result, which would give the pool of employees the all-clear to carry on working with the erroneous confidence that no one has the caught the virus. This could lead to people becoming sloppy in more essential health and hygiene behaviours, such as hand washing, social distancing, and wiping down work areas. The estimated rate of false negatives in the UK was as high as 30% in March 2020.[54]

Another testing strategy that might be adopted (and easier to administer) is serological antibody tests that do not require lab work and can be self-administered. These tests are not designed to gauge whether someone is currently infected, but whether they had the disease in the past. Some have talked about the possibility of issuing "immunity passports" for those who have COVID-19 antibodies. But again, the reliability of testing is key, especially when it could affect employee behaviour based on the outcome of the result. If the general infection rate among a population is fairly low, then the accuracy of the tests needs to be very high. For instance, in a population with an assumed infection rate of 5% (i.e. the proportion of people who have had the disease), a serological test that is 95% accurate in testing positive results would lead to a 50% chance that a positive result is wrong. This could lead to the same problem of false confidence in behaviour generated by inaccurate results.[55]

Track and trace

The other area in which employers will need to balance employee safety with privacy concerns is technology designed to track and trace employee movements. This could be in the form of a smartphone app that employees are asked to download and that records who employees have been in contact with and which parts of the office they have visited. The difficulty is providing assurances around the accumulation of employee data. Europe's GDPR laws present a high regulatory barrier for quickly deploying these types of applications. Even the UK government was forced to change its bespoke NHS contact-tracing app after MPs and rights groups warned the lack of data privacy would make it illegal.[56]

Another way to track movement through an office is via the use of movement sensors. The sensors are installed around the office and employees are given security badges with a chip that syncs with the office sensors.[57] The data is crunched in real-time and an alert is sent when there are too many people in an area, or if social distancing is not being observed. It can also be used to trace where an infected person has been in an office building so that deep cleaning is targeted in specific areas, causing less disruption.

Whatever options companies adopt, the cultural and regulatory context will play a role in determining what is feasible. Many commentators have pointed to the successful strategies adopted by East Asian countries to avoid lockdowns, including the fast deployment of technology. But the extreme end of those technology-led strategies, such as China's government-led health surveillance delivered through AliPay and WeChat apps,[58] would not be legal or palatable in most Western countries. This is where input from and engagement with employees will become even more critical. Companies will need to strike the right balance in trying to keep their employees safe and their businesses running.
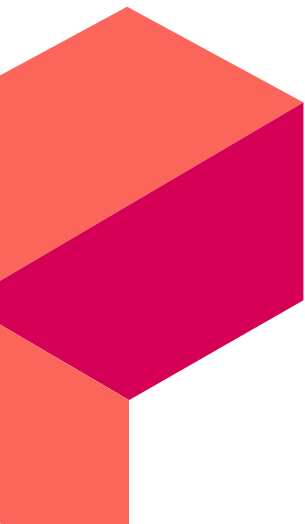
Long-term effects

Employees returning to the offcie in the next few weeks and months will encounter myriad changes to make workplaces feel safer during a global pandemic. Many of these changes will be immediate and visible, and they will require people to adapt quickly to new protocols, physical environments, and behaviours. But beyond the next few months, and beyond this crisis, the scale of disruption will have long-term ramifications for offices and the organisations that operate within them.

Purpose and culture to the fore

The sudden acceleration of remote working, and the continued need to use work flexibility as a tool to reduce office density, will raise fundamental questions around the purpose of an office. Office planners and designers argue the function of an office is to provide a space where organisations strategize and coordinate the various activities that enable information and knowledge processing.[59] But as the capabilities of remote work grow through technology and practice, the fundamental assumption that an office is required to act as the central hub for these activities comes under greater scrutiny.

Offices may no longer be recognised as the place where employees go to get work done. The role offices play in enabling social connections among employees is undeniable (see previous section on remote working). But as remote working and the role of the office changes from "the place an employee goes to work" to "one place among many that an employee goes to work," offices may no longer be the organisational glue that holds a company's constituent parts together. This raises the question of what will fill that void. If the communal, shared experience provided by an office is disrupted, how can organisations create commitment and cohesion between individuals, teams, and departments? The answer may lie in company's purpose and values.

The relationship between a strong company culture (driven by purpose and values) and high company performance is well-established.[60], [61] Recently, understanding the relationship of company culture and employees has evolved to give employees greater agency in this dynamic. Employees are individuals with idiosyncratic interpretations
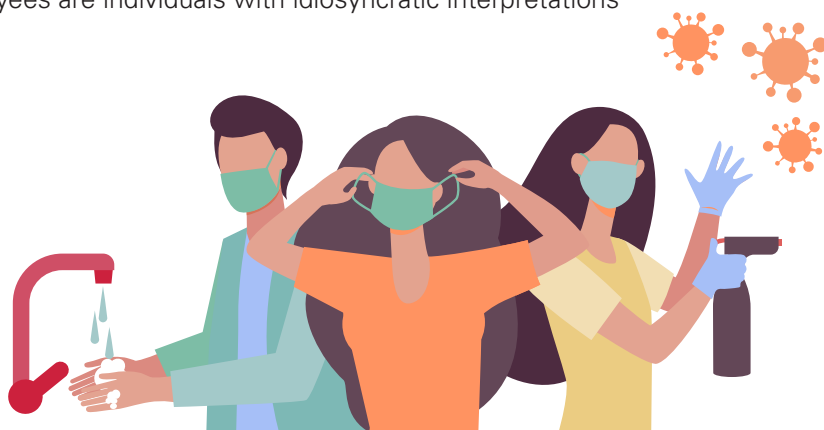
of the workplace and personal experiences that are formative in developing a work identity.[62] Because of this, a strong company culture can harmonise expectations and values, but employees will take individual and diverse interpretive approaches to reach a self-concept that "fits" with the environment around them.[63] This is particularly true for how employees see themselves progress and develop their careers within an organisation.

The drastic changes the pandemic has created will require employees to confront new realities and unfamiliar experiences, with as yet unknown psychological consequences. How employees react to the upheaval in routines and work rhythms will depend on the individual. According to Terror Management Theory, humans are highly motivated to stop existential anxiety in its tracks by all possible means and seek to create anxiety buffers through things that provide unique meaning, value and security.[64] But for others, the fear and disruption could catalyse a period of introspection and self-reflection. Research on posttraumatic personal growth has demonstrated that adversity can sometimes be a powerful impetus for reflection and positive transformations, including in the career and work area.[65]

Both of these psychological needs – a buffer to anxiety and posttraumatic self-reflection – will be better fulfilled by companies that can meet their employees' various psychological responses with a strong sense of purpose and values. These companies will be able to cut through the fear and uncertainty and help employees stay motivated and adaptable as their day-to-day experience of work changes around them. In turn, companies driven by coherent purpose and values could go on to develop greater competitive advantage in the long-term by attracting and retaining the best talent.

Healthy building movement

The coronavirus crisis is also likely to accelerate the rise of the healthy building movement. Already growing in importance before the crisis, the demand side of the market (the tenants looking for office space) is now more aligned with the movement's goals and is ready to prioritise the healthiness of a building in deciding on office premises. According to the healthy building movement, there are broadly nine Health Performance Indicators (HPI's) that inform the health of a building[66]:

- Ventilation
- Air quality
- Thermal health
- Moisture
- Dusts and pests
- Safety and security
- Water quality
- Noise
- Lighting and views

Along with factoring into decisions whether to take a lease, many of these nine areas are likely to provide a foundation for companies to carry out continuous monitoring. As the correlation between building health and business health becomes more evident, the founders of the healthy building movement expect these HPIs to be measured as just another metric that informs overall business performance. This could have significant financial implications for the office real estate market, as premium rents shift to buildings that can offer the levels of healthiness that companies are looking for.

Companies will inevitably be reappraising their real estate strategies. While strict social distancing requirements (e.g. 2 metres) will gradually be taken away, the de-densification of offices could be a more long-lasting outcome that is part of a bundle of attitudinal changes driven by greater concern for health and hygiene. To accommodate reduced density of people in office spaces, companies would see their square footage requirements increase at a time when many will want to cut costs to ride out the economic recession.

One solution to this problem is to commit to flexible working practices to reduce headcount on any given day. But keeping a large, centrally located office is cost inefficient for a company using widespread flexible working. This conundrum will leave space for other real estate strategy models to emerge.

For example, a hub-and-spoke model, in which there is a reduced central office that hosts the company's core functions (finance, IT, HR, etc.) and a selection of smaller (often serviced or shared) satellite offices in locations outside the city centre, could be a better fit for companies working flexibly. Another option is a "club-and-hub" model where one environment is just for collaboration and meeting, whereas another is for those who need primarily a traditional desk setting. Employees could choose to work from home or travel to their nearest satellite office (avoiding the longer commute to the central office), while the reduced central office is used sparingly by most employees. The hub-and-spoke model has been adopted by some companies in Auckland and Sydney, where large multinationals have reduced their square footage in central business districts in favour of taking leases on smaller satellite offices closer to residential neighbourhoods.[67, 68] Further, some businesses are looking at their existing portfolio of retail spaces and seeing how these might be also put into use as "spoke" spaces. This trend could be seen across the world as the need for and appeal of commuting into a large, crowded office dwindles.

Digital presenteeism

Spanning back to the days of Frederick Taylor's time and motion studies, there has been a long-held management belief that watching people work equates to better performance.[69] From the factory floor to the office floor, this notion evolved over the subsequent century to emerge in the 1980s as "Management by Walking Around" (MBWA). MBWA does provide certain benefits to staff – immediate observational feedback or constructive support through rapport – but it has to some degree reinforced cultures of presenteeism. Presenteeism, the practice of coming to work even when sick, and more broadly the social contractual understanding that one must be in the workplace to be perceived as working, can have significantly negative impacts on wellbeing and morale.[70] Although remote working has enabled businesses to successfully transition operations out of offices during the pandemic, the behaviours of physical presenteeism from management remain, and, due largely to management's inability to transition MBWA principles to remote workers, are quickly being replaced by their technological sibling, digital presenteeism.

Since the pandemic, there has been an almost a three-fold increase in the use of an emerging class of corporate surveillance tools that allow for management to observe their employees remotely.[71] While digital trackers have existed for some time, they are now finding a growing and hungry market, as managers, many of them thrust into managing a remote workforce for the first time without any training, turn to technology to be their eyes and ears. These digital tools employ all manner of techniques from tracking keystrokes, recording websites visited and even using facial recognition software to determine the length of bathroom breaks. Sold under the guise of "productivity trackers" or security measures, some of these tools will provide users (and their managers) with a productivity score, ranking them against their colleagues.[72] Absent this technology, some managers are simply watching their staff for the entirety of the day via video conference – a blunt instrument that broadly achieves the same as more sophisticated tools.

Workplace surveillance is more likely to be applied to the younger members of the workforce, as well as those in the lower paid roles of an organisation, disproportionately impacting those segments of the population.[73] These are also the segments of the population most economically impacted by the coronavirus, thus making them less able to speak out against the adoption of these sorts of surveillance methods.[74] Such measures introduce a level of extreme intrusiveness that, while not illegal, tread a fine line of ethicality, and certainly deny the individual employee their personal autonomy. What this increased interest in these tools illustrates, is that while the belief that remote working is not feasible has been decimated, the impression by many managers that working from home equates to skiving persists.

The case has already been made that trust and autonomy are elemental to creating not only a high performing culture but an engaged and mentally healthy one as well.[75] There is huge opportunity in having a newly minted global remote workforce. Businesses

would be wise to not lose those gains through draconian surveillance measures that are more indicative of management's failure to grow the competencies associated with the new challenges of managing remotely rather than any real need for such monitoring.

Mental health

Prior to the pandemic, remote work was viewed as one measure to help support mental well-being.[76] The additional autonomy associated with working from home, as well as the benefits of less commuting and extra personal flexibility, equated to a healthier work-life. With forced remote work brought on by the coronavirus, many of these positive elements remain, but stress levels are increasing. There are several factors contributing to this additional stress.

First and foremost, we are still in the midst of a pandemic. While the peak has passed for many regions, there is still the low thrum of anxiety pulsing through society. Second, autonomy, arguably the most primary benefit of remote work, has been taken away for many. Being forced to work from home every day, rather than choosing when to do so, removes choice and in turn ramps up anxiety. Third, with children home from school, unable to take part in sports or clubs, and parents now responsible for home schooling, the "quiet work from home day" has vanished, replaced by a balancing act of time, space and energy. Fourth, for many, the workplace was the primary source of critical social connections. Loneliness prior to the pandemic was rife and has now reached a terrible peak.[77] Sadly, the headlines have been too full of people taking their own lives, brought on by the loneliness and isolation of lockdown.

The last factor is overwork, exacerbated by action bias. Also known as intervention bias, action bias is the tendency to act hastily, without considering all possible solutions, particularly when under pressure or to gain control of a situation. Further, with action bias people tend to overestimate past successes and underestimate the risks associated with action.[78] Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman observed in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow,* that our brains want to pattern match solutions to our past knowledge so we can more quickly spring into action, but advised against this, saying, "If there is time to reflect, slowing down is likely to be a good idea."[79] This bias finds fertile ground in a culture replete with what is colloquially known as "productivity porn", a social drive to be seen as highly productive and immune to even the most basic of needs like food and sleep, which has taken on an almost feverish quality in the last few months.[80]

How can action bias result in overwork, especially in the current organisational context? Action bias is especially acute during times of impatience or when the fight or flight response is triggered.[81] In turn, research shows we tend to honour leaders who take

action during crisis - even if that action is poorly considered.[82] These two faces of action bias create a perfect storm of manager, as human, wanting to engage in action to lessen their personal anxieties, and then manager, as leader, being encouraged by cultural norms to act, rather than pause. While this bias isn't always a negative trait - sometimes leaders need to act without having all the information - it can lead to a tendency towards action for action's sake. Well-meaning managers who may have sensed the impact of their behaviour when collocated in the office with their teams are more likely to miss the remote cues of stress bubbling up, and, in turn, not recognise the resultant declining mental health from an increase in workload.

While loneliness and lack of social interaction are currently one of the more acute mental health issues, they will likely lessen as the lockdown is lifted and small social interactions are made possible. Further, some businesses are already taking steps to support that population, such as the provision of "wellbeing desks", bookable for people who have an urgent need to get out of their home and interact. Large-scale remote working is expected to continue, however, and thus action bias, and its resultant overwork is set to be one of the more persistent and pervasive mental health issues in the future. The degree to which this bias is impacting mental health is one of the by-products of the rush to adopt remote working without properly training leaders in management of remote teams. Under remote work, teams need to be trained in communicating their needs vis a vis workloads, mental health and boundary setting in a much more direct manner.

Conclusion

The re-opening of the economy and the return to work does not signify a return to normality. While the virus is still present, there will continue to be disruption of what was once familiar. But familiarity is highly subjective, and the human brain – designed for survival – will adapt to new environments. In doing so, the unfamiliar will eventually become the familiar. Once the mind accepts change, there is little impetus to revert back to precisely what existed before. For this reason, there is every chance that some of the changes brought about by this pandemic will be lasting and permanent.

In the short-term, the re-opening of offices will focus on physical and behavioural changes that provide layers of protection from the spread of the virus. These measures also send a signal to employees that safety is being taken seriously. The actual effectiveness of measures and the perceived effectiveness work in tandem. Measures that seem small and trivial, such as reduced lift capacity, one-way corridors, and barriers between desks, can together rebuild the confidence of employees that have experienced several months of wholesale change to routines.

Many companies will want to go beyond guidelines to provide extra assurance. Technology opens up many possibilities, whether through the latest antimicrobial materials or monitoring apps that help with social distancing and contact tracing. When organisations take those extra steps, they will need to consider the consequences carefully. The right balance of measures can help build trust between employers and their workforces; but the wrong balance can have a detrimental effect on trust, not just between employer and employee, but among employees themselves. Recent research on the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic showed that the detrimental effect the virus had on social trust lasted for generations.[83] The precedent for disease to tear at the social fabric is clear – it would be foolish to ignore these warnings from history, even when considering protective measures.
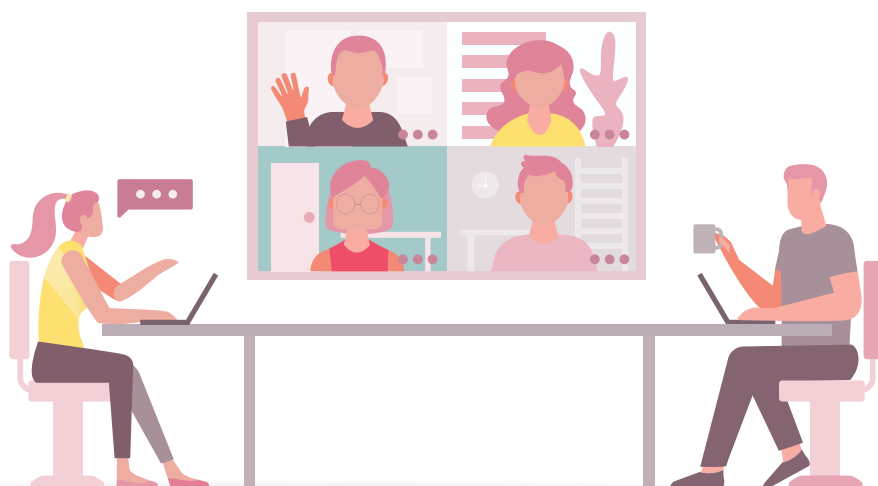
The return to the office will raise fundamental questions about the purpose of a physical office, and also drive questions about the role of the office in defining organisational culture. Despite its oft cited demise, as ever, it would be foolish to predict the death of the office. But, as the deepest recession since 2008 begins, companies will have the economic impetus to evaluate their real estate strategies and adjust their costs. The prevalence of remote working and the need for continued social distancing on public transport and in offices will only add to the case for offices that align with a flexible, agile workforce.

There is an enormous opportunity to deliberately craft lasting positive effects in this crisis as well. The mass experiment in remote working has opened minds to new possibilities. Now there is also a chance to bring the healthy building movement to the fore. For too long, companies have ignored the deleterious effects of unhealthy workplaces. A health crisis should elevate health and wellbeing to the top of business agendas. Buildings that create conditions for poor health lead to employees who are less high-performing, less motivated, and less happy. Whether refitting and upgrading existing buildings or incorporating pro-health designs into new buildings, the pandemic could spur greater interest and investment than ever before. Mental health and digital presenteeism will be growing challenges as the full impact of this crisis is felt disproportionately across different segments of the workforce. Within these challenges, however, lie opportunities that businesses and society would be wise to embrace. Companies that believed they had years to plan for these trends are confronted with the reality that the future is now. Whether that future will lead to healthier and more trusting organisations remains to be seen.

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