

Adapting office space for today and tomorrow

Sertan Djelal, the owner of a digital marketing consultancy, is currently running his business out of his home office. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, he used to share an office in a coworking space. “As someone who falls into the ‘vulnerable’ category in so far as COVID-19 is concerned, at this stage, I’m not sure when or even if I’ll be comfortable enough to go back to working from a coworking space.”

Djelal is not alone in his concerns about going back to the office, for people both in the vulnerable category and out of it. According to a poll from [TUC](#), 40% of employees are worried about returning to a normal place of work. A [HubbleHQ survey](#) looked specifically into the concerns of different coworking space members and asked them what will make them feel safer when coming back to the office. The top-ranking answers were detailed cleaning protocols, start/end times that avoid rush hour travel and COVID-19 testing for everyone entering the building. Some members even suggested they’d be afraid of using the shared bathrooms, and work in short shifts, to avoid those at all costs.

With lockdown already easing up, [both conventional offices and coworking spaces](#) around the nation rush to prepare their space for a safe return. The government has issued a list of regulations for workplaces, however, some have taken it a step further. HubbleHQ collected additional data from 55 office

providers, which showed that 50% of the spaces will make additional parking or bike facilities available, so their members can easily avoid public transport, while 81% plan on introducing daily antiviral cleaning, and 49% ask for compulsory hand-washing upon entry.

Creating a 6-feet bubble

With the current need for social distancing, some may view the open space as a threat. However, Melody Griffiths, a partner at [This Is Interiors](#) has a different point of view. "Open space has been for many years about breaking down barriers creating natural zoning and cellular spaces only where needed," she explains. "Now we will see a sidestep, but not necessarily back to the old ways of working (completely cellular/battery hen and in silos)."

Griffiths works alongside the Dutch agency Cushman and Wakefield, which is developing the idea of a [6-feet office](#). According to this concept "open-plan office circulation routes need to allow for free space to access desk spaces and other functions whilst desk clusters are screened. While won't freely be able to move between departments (for the time being), we will likely be driven to create neighbourhoods or bubbles where teams remain within their own zoned area."

Some of the practicalities of this method are already implemented in several coworking spaces, such as keeping a clean desk by placing a disposable paper sheet on top of it in the morning or creating a one-way flow in staircases and meeting rooms. The 6-feet office offers additional design features like painted circles around each desk, which help to create visual distancing and easier pathways around the distance bubbles. Griffiths adds that "many of the antimicrobial fabrics used only in health care settings are now finding their way into the office environment in the form of seating and screens," which will help to ensure a cleaner environment.

Creating a community, while keeping a safe distance

“Being around people, many of which were other entrepreneurs and startups (similar to my regular clientele) makes a substantial difference to my mood, productivity, leading to better results for my clients,” Djelal says. This is one of the reasons, while many have mastered the art of working from home, they still wish to come back to the office.

“There’s a lot of face-to-face collaboration between more established companies in the shared offices to the coworkers, which fostered innovation,” says Natasha Babar-Evans, COO of Wizu, which operates in Leeds, Sheffield and Bradford. During the lockdown, they tried to foster those collaborations and personal connections with the small things, such as weekly online quizzes, online fitness program and helping their members apply for local grants.

However, in a survey they did among their members, they found that people are craving social interaction. “I think people have got a little bit of fatigue with Zoom and having their kids join in,” Babar-Evans says. “I’m surprised mine hasn’t come in yet,” she jokes. “Knowing there are other people around you is quite important, and our members said they are really looking forward to coming back,” she concludes.

Coworking spaces were ahead of the curve

The need for social interaction may be why some are predicting a future for work that is not all remote, or all in-house, but somewhere in the middle. Kevin Parker, the Owner of office refurbishment company [Space-pod](#), speculates that office spaces will see two transition stages. The first is the one that others have discussed, which allows for a safe return for work. After that a second stage will begin, possibly in September-October, where he thinks “we’ll be looking at a fundamental change to the way offices are laid out.” As many companies will have seen the financial benefits of working from home, the workforce may become more transient.

“I think the offices of the future will be made out of some desk positions — hot desks or residents,” Parker explains. As departments like accounts need to work from a secure location, those may be in the building, while others may come and go to use the space as needed – for meetings, physical equipment or collaborating. This agile approach is something he’s been introducing to conventional companies long before COVID-19. “We treat the office as a hotel – you come in and out, doing different things, go to different places.” This approach encourages employees to be much more productive and creative.

In that respect, coworking spaces have already predicted where work culture is headed, and small companies have used that to their advantage for a while. “Co-working tends to be more cost-effective in comparison to renting office space,” Djelal of [Five Geckos Digital Marketing](#), explains. “It’s also good in terms of scalability, as my team grew, so did our desk and office space. Much easier than changing offices.”

Now large companies are starting to see these benefits as well. Babar-Evans can already provide anecdotal evidence to that. “We’re seeing a few of the larger SMEs and the large corporates becoming more interested in flexible workspace right now,” she agrees. “I think it’s because people have taken this opportunity to rethink their strategies. I think the world is going to change and it’s interesting to see how coworking spaces will play a part in that.”

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