

Are you ready to re-open your office? Here's what London's top startups are saying

At the moment, teams across the UK wonder if it's really necessary to go back to the office, if not too risky amid the uncertainty of a potential second wave. So they mostly feel comfortable working from home. From a company's point of view, many employers are thinking about how and when they will bring employees back to the office.

As lockdown restrictions begin to ease, many employers are having to think about how they go about bringing back employees to the office, and what this might look like in the future. Anthony Rose, the founder of SeedLegals, discussed the issue with some of the UK's top startup leaders, such as Hamish Grierson (Thrive.co), Lu Li (Blooming Founders) and Dan Bibas (TransferWise) to name a few.

Here's his perspective...

I've always aspired to build a team that works and plays together, so I assumed that post-COVID we would simply return to the office as normal. We originally planned to return starting the 6th of July, giving our team the choice of working

from home or from the office.

But now I'm not so sure.

Since we moved to remote working, nothing's fallen apart, we haven't experienced any major issues, and things have been running smoothly. And most of the team really enjoy working from home.

I suspect that when COVID-19 started, we all sort of assumed that one day it would be over and then everything would be back to normal. But it's clear that won't be the case, for many months more people will still be socially distancing, you'll have to wear a mask, there'll be plastic partitions separating desks at the office. And every time you go into a stuffy meeting room, you'll be eyeing your colleagues thinking, I wonder if I'm going to catch anything from them.

So, since our team are all working from home, and that's going well, I'm wondering if there are two stable scenarios:

1. Everyone in the office, or
2. Everyone at home.

In my opinion, the in-between state, with some employees at home and some in the office, may be the worst of both worlds – you'll be trying to hold meetings with half the team sitting together, talking to a laptop on the desk with tinny sound and small videos of the rest.

I've just gone ahead and cancelled our office rent on the assumption that over the coming months, office rents will come down so much that we can get a new office – maybe a much smaller one, for the 'new normal', or maybe a bigger one, so we can all socially distance – at a greatly reduced cost.

Clearly this is an issue that's going to affect every company that has an option of working from home, so I asked some of London's startup leaders to get their thoughts, and what their plans are for returning to the office:

Dann Bibas, Head of expansion (Investments), TransferWise – *In my opinion, the half-and-half just doesn't work. I think many people will be put off by the idea of a long commute into the office with a face mask, revised TfL schedules and social distancing guidelines, to then arrive into the office for a meeting where some participants will be logging in on Zoom anyways. It all feels counterproductive. Also, this could create an awkward gap between people who can afford to take health risks and travel freely versus others who may be caring for ageing parents or have children staying at home because of reduced schooling or daycare.*

Hamish Grierson, CEO & Co-Founder at thriva.co – *We are wrestling with this*

exact issue. Our current plans are to allow people back to gauge what an interim reality looks and feels like, and make a plan based on this.

Lu Li, Founder & CEO at Blooming Founders – I had a startup looking at our space last week because they wanted a stop-gap until next year. They realised that around 10-15 people out of 50 can't work from home and wanted to provide a space for them in the interim. So, I definitely think there are cases where the in-between could make sense.

James Hirst, Co-Founder at Tyk – Tyk has reopened the London office at the request of our team. Many of our younger colleagues are based in the city centre, in small flats, sharing with partners who are also working from home in the height of summer, and they wanted the option of infrequently working from a desk. We have been very cautious and a range of physical and process changes have been made to minimise risk. Everyone also has to read and sign a document that explains how they need to distance and clean their desk, hands, etc. We have a centrally shared document which also records who is attending the office for future reference if anyone were to contract Coronavirus. We have very strongly requested no public transport into the office – cycle or walking only – so our semi-opening is really for the very local team, and we have had a positive response so far.

Mikhail Dubov, Co-Founder & CEO of Chattermill – From July, we are planning to allow people to come into the office, but only if they want to. We are only offering 10 spaces (our office is designed for 55) for now, and we will probably increase to 20 over time. It's not advisable to force people into the office anytime soon, as lots are feeling anxious and have different circumstances to think about.

Matthew Prior, CEO at TrustedHousesitters – I think it's a really fundamental question, and in order to find the solution, we need to look past the issue of COVID and explore what office and home working look like going forward. Most of our employees returned from furlough on the 6th July, and one of our tasks going forward is how to re-engineer our environment so that we can get the best out of working from home and office. Going back to five days, plus optional working from home is not going to be a good option since everyone has enjoyed being at home every day. Agile squads should, instead, agree on a rota between themselves so, for example, they might all work two days from home, then three days in the office.

Luke Fisher, Founder & CEO, Mo – The interesting bit is what the long-term plan will look like, rather than the next 3-9 months. Has remote work been good enough, productive enough, that you are willing to provide long term clarity for your team and enable them to move out of London/south-east?

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