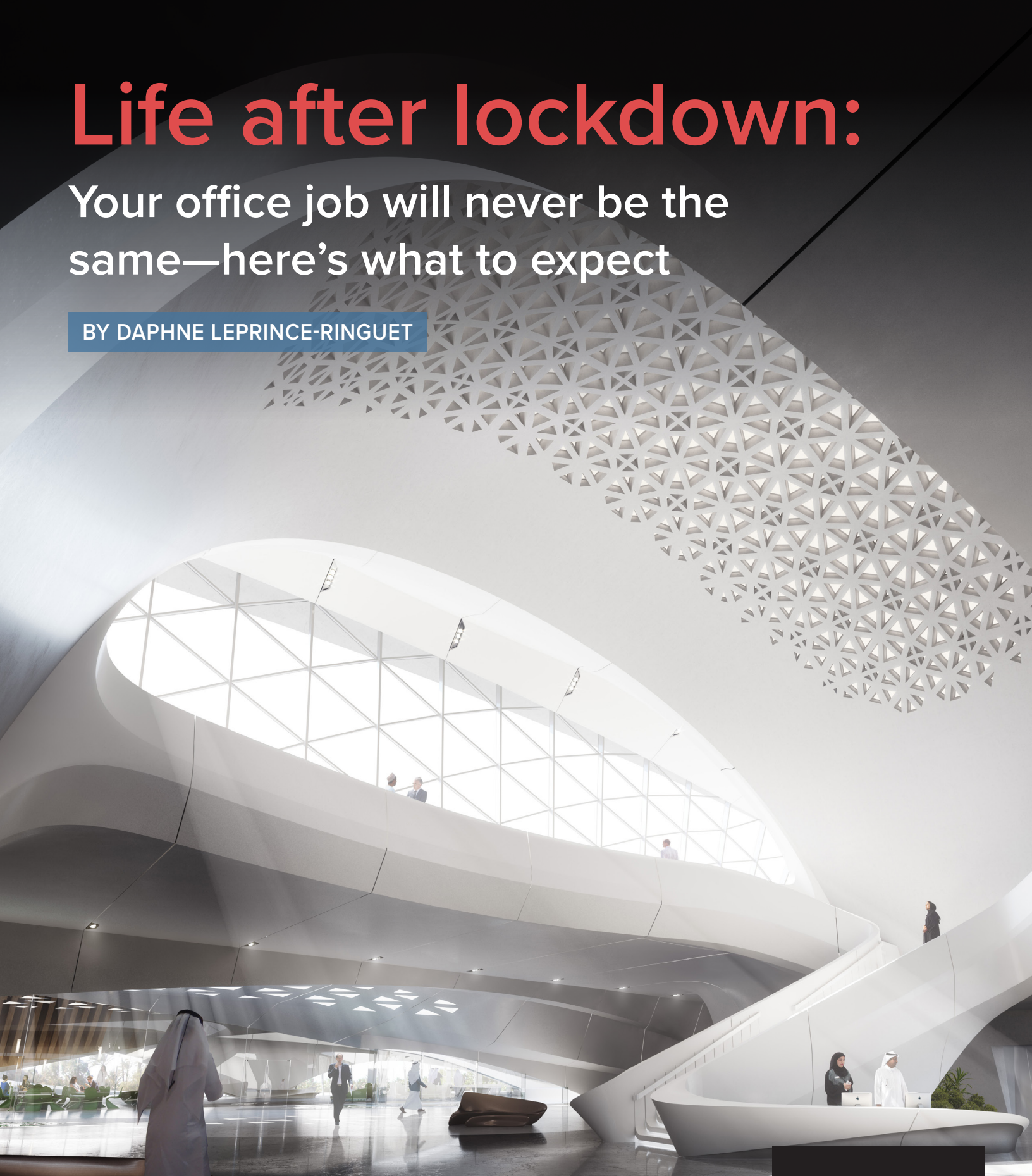# Life after lockdown:

## Your office job will never be the same—here's what to expect

BY DAPHNE LEPRINCE-RINGUET

Reworking work: When you return to the office everything will look very different, and that's just the beginning of a set of changes to how and why we work in offices.

ZDNet

TechRepublic

**P**eter van Woerkum has spent the past few weeks working in, and fine-tuning, what could turn out to be something very like the office of the future: the office of our coronavirus-altered future, that is.

He takes the lift (in which only two employees are allowed at a time) then walks clockwise to reception and grabs a recycled paper mat to cover his desk while he works. He makes his way through the now extra-roomy office--the firm has removed furniture to avoid clutter--to a workspace, which has, of course, been thoroughly cleaned overnight.

He brings his own keyboard, mouse, and laptop. Near his desk, there are marks on the floor indicating how close his colleagues should stand if they fancy coming over for a chat. If he needs the bathroom, he has to follow a specific route designed to avoid bumping into other workers. And his keyring has a new addition: a copper token that he can use to press buttons and open doors without touching any surfaces.

**SEE: IT pro's roadmap to working remotely (free PDF) (TechRepublic)**

Since mid-March, Cushman and Wakefield, the real estate company where van Woerkum is chief operating officer, has been thinking about the transformation that the office will need to go through as employees start returning to work. Dubbed the "six-feet office", the project vizualises a workspace that respects the social distancing required to stop the spread of coronavirus.
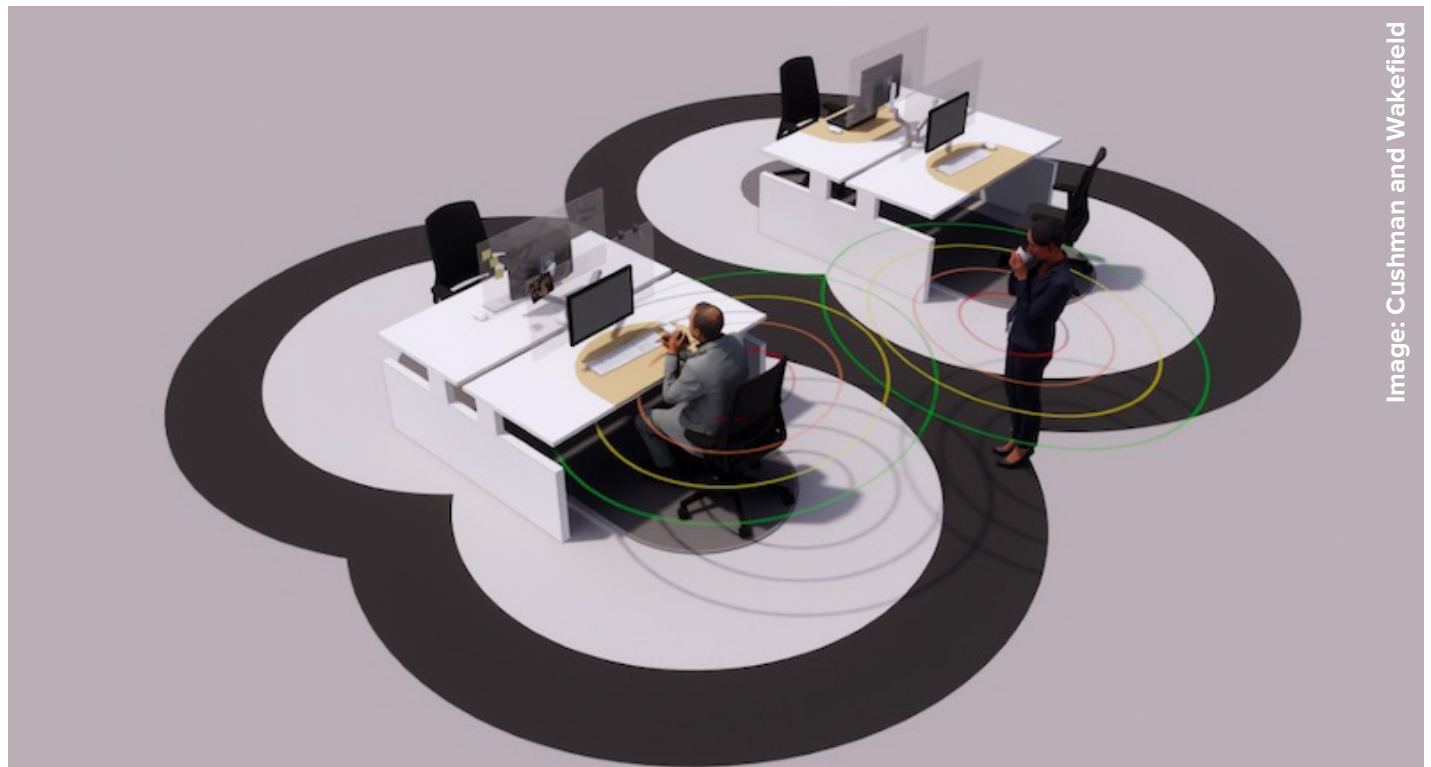


Image: Cushman and Wakefield

*In the "six-feet" office, desks are surrounded with floor marks indicating how close colleagues should stand.*

Initially, van Woerkum trialled the idea with a group of five, but the workplace has now been opened to up to 20 employees.

"When we launched, everybody immediately got extremely excited about the fact that there was a prospect of going back to the office at some point, and in a safe way," van Woerkum says. "The feedback we've had so far has been that employees are really happy to be back in the office, and that there is some assurance that the company is taking care of their safety."

Of course, staff needed some time to adapt. It might be a bit awkward at first to maintain a two-metre distance with your colleagues while catching up on a Monday morning, and van Woerkum stresses that the six-feet office is by no means a finished product, and that he is testing new technology daily to further improve the new office layout.

His latest experiment, for instance, has consisted of setting up beacons that can track the flow of people in the building. But one thing he is sure of is that the type of set-up being developed by Cushman and Wakefield is about to become the norm, for lots of companies.

Over the past two months, with national lockdowns becoming the new normal, companies have focused their efforts on making a rapid transition to remote working, while still keeping their companies afloat in the midst of an epidemic.

But now, governments are trying to restart their nations' economies and return to some sort of normality. At some point in the next few months, a return to the physical office is looking more likely, at least for some. But how to manage that safely is a big challenge.

With a deadly virus still going around, how do we ensure employee safety at work? If this is the end of the close-collaboration, desk-to-desk working model, what will the office floor — and building — look like? And, if most employees are now effectively working from home and may be reluctant to return, what do we even need an office for?

For architects, interior designers or workplace consultants, these challenges are as exciting as they are unprecedented. For businesses, they are intimidatingly pressing. It is over the next few months, sometimes even weeks, that the office of the future is going to have to be built.

## Your return to the office

To assist the return to work in the very near term, the UK government **has issued guidance for offices and contact centers**, with advice on how to keep as many people as possible two metres apart from those they do not live with.

The recommendations are pretty straightforward: increase the frequency of handwashing, use screens or barriers to separate people from each other, reconfigure seating to work back-to-back rather than side-to-side, or regulate the flow of traffic in high-density areas, such as corridors and lifts.

The government's advice was quickly followed by suggestions from the British Council for Offices (BCO), which, based on input from architects, **called for even more specific changes**.

The BCO's briefing note includes the use of touchless devices ranging from automatic doors to programmable lifts through contactless toilet pods, as well as boosting natural ventilation, even

if employees get cold. Smart solutions were also put forward, for example to monitor office space or track movements, or to remind workers to periodically wash their hands and clean their desks.

"The immediate priority is to help businesses go back to work with things like the six-feet office," Stephanie Woodward, head of interior design at Cushman and Wakefield, tells ZDNet. "The point is to have an office designed purposefully to show that you can socially distance, and you can work, because the only thing that will make employees come back to the office in the short term is that they feel safe."

Without a vaccine on the immediate horizon, the return to work will inevitably require some short-term adjustments, **which analysts predict will last well into 2021**. The goal in the next few months will be to reduce office density, which means that business leaders shouldn't dream of bringing back all of their employees in one go; rather, staff will be coming back in shifts. In Cushman and Wakefield's office in Amsterdam, for example, the team of 20 employees currently coming in is down from the capacity of 250 people in normal times.

Business leaders need to think about which roles they absolutely need to have in the office, and plan accordingly. It is expected, for instance, that facilities teams will be returning to work first, followed closely by IT teams. And the workplace that those employees will be settling back into won't look the same as the one they left a couple of months ago.

**SEE: Inside UPS: The logistics company's never-ending digital transformation (free PDF)**



Image: Panelscreens Limited

*Office furniture company Panelscreens has already started producing special COVID-19 screens.*

Seating plans will have changed and desks will be removed to leave two metres between each worker. Floors will be fitted with masking tape indicating exactly how to move from point A to point B, and signs will remind staff to wash their hands and cough in their elbow. It might even be that new sanitation areas will pop up outside of the workplace, for IT teams to give every piece of incoming equipment a proper clean before it reaches employees.

A new version of the cubicle farms will emerge with the deployment of panel screens, colloquially known as "sneeze guards", between desks. Office furniture company Panelscreens has already started producing special COVID-19 screens, **with features ranging from antibacterial materials to bleach-cleanable surfaces**.

In the UK, for example, **a spike in demand is struggling to be met** by adequate supply in acrylic, polycarbonate or PETG, which are typically used to make clear screens. Some suppliers' websites **now come with a banner indicating that** "there is a global shortage of clear materials and we are unable to offer them at this time".

Panelscreens' COVID-19 range of sneeze guards could only launch because the company started using alternative materials. The firm was effectively informed by manufacturers that there was a 12-week wait for acrylic; to cope with the sudden surge in their client base, Panelscreens' designers decided to switch to toughened safety glass, which they actually found to be more durable, easy to clean and harder to break.

The company told ZDNet that demand has changed in the past two weeks, from primar-

ily government agencies and the NHS, to small businesses, such as hairdressers and construction sites. The government's announcement that workplaces would start reopening had a direct impact on Panelscreens' activity: compared to the previous month, May has seen orders increase by 390%, and revenue by 120%.

## How to design a safer place to work

But longer term there are likely to be bigger changes than the introduction of signs and perspex screens, as companies and employees rethink the role of the office.

WeWork, the coworking-space company, h**as published its plans for a safe and clean working environment**, with precise details of how users can expect layouts to have changed when they return. In addition to increased sanitation, particularly in high-touch spaces like pantries and printing areas, WeWork has changed its seating policy to maintain social distancing, limiting capacity in lounges, work nooks and meeting rooms.

Reception desks will come with floor stickers indicating safe distances, touch-free hand sanitizer dispensers will be located at the entrance and exits of lifts, and ventilation, promised WeWork, will be adapted to deliver clean, fresh air. Not to forget the inevitable stickers and signs dotted around to remind workers to act responsibly.

As a company that relies on workers coming into their physical workspace, WeWork had little choice but to adapt responsively. Eilam Gazit, head of building operations for WeWork EMEA, tells ZDNet that designers have been work-

ing on the necessary changes for a few months now, closely monitoring the situation to adjust the company's spaces to new guidelines. And with 660,000 members globally coming in to work together, the ongoing challenge has been to design for collaboration--while keeping everyone two metres apart.

"Design has played a large part in reconfiguring our spaces, and whilst distancing might be part of our new normal, companies want a flexible office which fosters a sense of collaboration and connection," says Gazit. "However, there is now an added layer of enhanced health and safety measures that we've incorporated into our standard design approach, and we believe these changes will be here to stay."

In making the change into a pandemic-friendly office, Gazit has benefited from WeWork's presence in 140 cities and 37 countries; but not every company is a global corporation with a swarm of advisors behind the steering wheel. Businesses can, however, benefit from the forward-looking ideas that are already being put to the test. Cushman and Wakefield's concept of a "six-feet" office in Amsterdam, for instance, has been shared with the firms' clients, as part of a recovery readiness handbook designed to assist companies' return to work.

Companies are faced with the need to reopen their offices, but they don't know where to start when it comes to ensuring employee safety. That's understandable considering some of the issues that need to be taken into account: Cushman and Wakefield's Woodward mentions how one colleague calculated that even for their own office building, maintaining a two-metre distance rule in lifts at peak times would generate a two-mile long queue outside of the building.

"We've helped them with basic things, like which tea points should stay open and how to queue for the toilet," says Woodward, "but ultimately it's not just about putting arrows on the floor, or green and red dots on desks to show which ones are free. You also have to show your employees you've thought about things like how to get fresh air into the building, not just re-circulated air, or how to make the journey into the building a safe one."

## Creating the office of the future

Other designers are finding a different and unexpected inspiration for their designs – the science lab. When Rob Partridge, the director of structural engineering firm AKT II, started working on planning for the Francis Crick Institute, a biomedical research centre in London, back in 2016, they never imagined that four years later some of the lab's key features might be relevant to the design of future workplaces.

"The Francis Crick was an example of science coming into central London, rather than being restricted to out-of-town business parks," Partridge tells ZDNet. "And now, some of the things we designed for that could apply to designs for offices following COVID-19. We are taking learnings from the lab sector and placing them in the office."

And it's not just about making sure that surfaces are deep-cleaned. The architect explains that a lot of thought was given to designing for better air quality in the Francis Crick Institute--something

that is likely to become a key consideration in the workplace. Similarly, materials that are found in labs, such as anti-viral coatings or composites that are easier to clean, could soon be found in traditional offices.

Already, the market is adapting, and what once sounded like futuristic technology could soon become an everyday gadget. Lighting company Vital Vio, for example, which offers "antimicrobial lights", is pitching the relevance of its product in the current context. The firm says that its lights, when they are on, make exposed areas inhospitable for bacteria and microbes to grow, and that the product is even more efficient than deep-cleaning.

Design firm Gansler has developed **a "physical distancing tool" called ReRun,** which, based on the existing layout of a workplace, can generate various seating scenarios that let employees work at a safe distance from each other. Robotics company Tharsus is releasing Bump, a technology that uses Low Energy Bluetooth to warn users that they are getting too close to another person. The system can be used by employers to track employees and better map out social distancing measures.
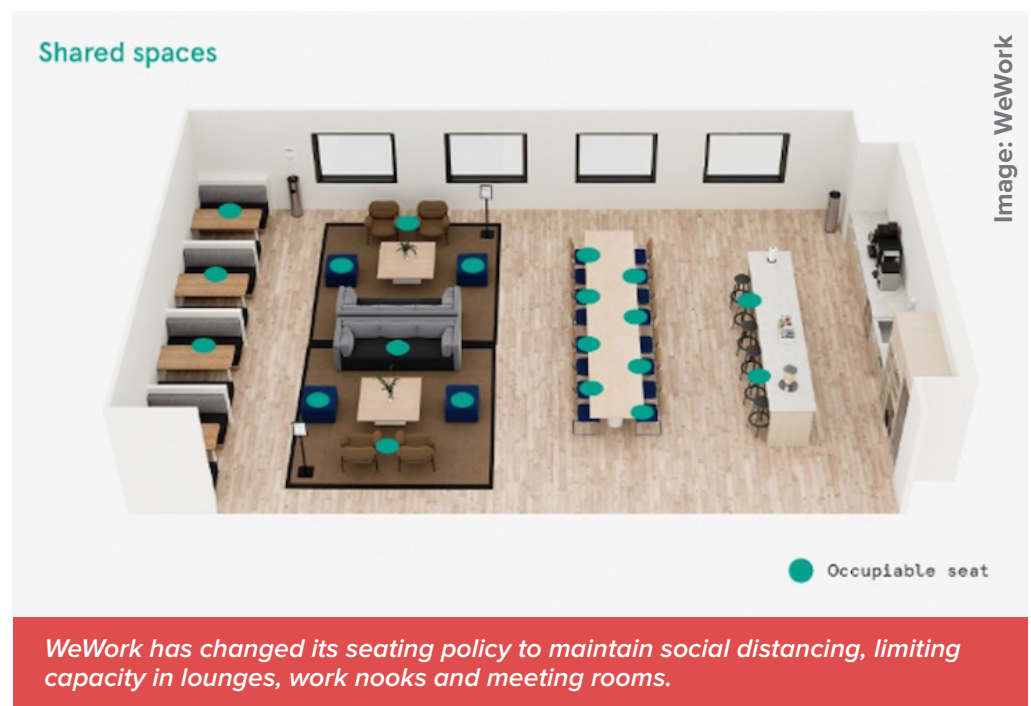
Similarly, the market for thermal camera services is set to boom. Temperature checks could be implemented for visitors coming into the workplace, and new technologies **are fast developing to**

**quickly screen the body temperature** of many people at a time via heat-detection cameras.

Anything that currently requires touching is also an opportunity to become contactless. Imaginative entrepreneurs won't stop at automatic doors: employees could also use an app to control lights and temperature in meeting rooms, or even to call the lift and work the coffee machine. You can forget about flushing the toilet--that's likely to become automated, or triggered by a hand signal.

In the Middle Eastern city of Sharjah, architecture firm Zaha Hadid **recently completed the building of new headquarters** for waste management company Bee'ah. Signed in for the designs in 2014, the building's architects could never have guessed that a pandemic was looming; but they packed the plans with automatic doors using motion sensors and facial recognition, or remote controls for kitchen services and lifts.

The idea that designers had in mind was to create contactless pathways throughout the space,



Shared spaces

Occupiable seat

Image: WeWork

*WeWork has changed its seating policy to maintain social distancing, limiting capacity in lounges, work nooks and meeting rooms.*

so that employees could move about with as little touching as possible. Whether they were coincidental or visionary, Bee'ah's plans now seem to provide a compelling insight into the future.

## Opening up and moving out

Designed to increase collaboration, open-plan layouts started gaining popularity at the turn of the century, and have increasingly replaced the cubical farms of the past, becoming synonymous with team meetings, shared spaces, community spirit and, inevitably, greater office density.

The number of people crammed into workspaces in the past 20 years has only increased: the latest study from the BCO shows that on average, workers now enjoy eight square metres of personal space, down from almost 12 square metres in 2008. Government advice to socially distance at work is a radical U-turn from the trend that has shaped office life for two decades.

In returning to work, employees will at least initially be abiding by a whole new set of norms around avoiding too much contact and protecting their own personal space. How long those norms will last, however, is a different question--and one that AKT II's Rob Partridge says he is far more interested in.

"The government has come up with certain policies, but eventually, those policies will come to an end," says Partridge. "And when the government says that we are free from the guidelines, what will employees want to do?"

Increasingly, research points to a very clear trend: the global work-from-home experiment that the pandemic has fast-tracked won't be reversed overnight. In fact, many employees, now fitted-out with a laptop and remote tools for collaboration, will be keen to keep telecommuting, even when lockdown rules have eased.

A recent report from research firm Gartner **showed that employers aren't reluctant to the idea**: up to three-quarters of finance leaders said that they would move some of their workforce to permanently remote positions after the crisis has passed. Leading companies are already setting an example, with Twitter's CEO Jack Dorsey **publicly committing to letting his entire staff stick with remote working if they want to**, even after offices reopen.

In a survey conducted by Cushman and Wakefield during the lockdown among employees now working remotely, an overwhelming 72% of respondents said that they now expect to work on a more flexible basis. An additional 90% reported that they now felt trusted by their managers to work remotely. So, even when stringent safety guidelines are lifted, will workers be keen to stay away from each other, and cosy up to the idea of permanent home working, or will they want to go back to the old ways?

For Partridge, answering that question is the real challenge, and not the least because it will feed into his design for new office building--those that will only start building in a couple of years.

"There is now evidence that every industry can positively work from home," says the architect. "No employer can say it doesn't work. That means that there will be far more flexibility in how we work, and we'll have to manage that."

Like many other leaders, Partridge is confident

that agile working is here to stay: his own team adapted to working from home in about a week, and lockdown has not stopped productivity. But without any real way of knowing in advance how the workforce will be engaging with the physical office in a post-coronavirus world, Partridge has been left to draw conclusions from his own experience.

"As a creative industry, a lot happens through human interaction and exchanging ideas," he says, "and you lose some of that when you stare at your screen and do video conferences all day."

Communication platform Slack recently surveyed 2,000 British workers about their experience of remote work; the results showed that 84% felt that communication with their colleagues has been impacted since the lockdown. Over two-thirds of the respondents said they were finding it difficult to communicate effectively with their teammates.

**SEE: Cheat sheet: Google Meet video-conferencing and chat app (free PDF) (TechRepublic)**

Technology will play a significant role here. In Partridge's vision of the future office, workers will be sitting at home, but still able to grab a pen and start sketching on the whiteboard for everybody to see, thanks to new technologies like VR. "You could simulate hand gestures, sketch in front of people or play with a 3D model, in a virtual meeting-room environment," says Partridge. "We'll be using tech to effectively replicate human interaction."

Of course, transferring the office space to the virtual world might not be the choice of every business. And Partridge himself is convinced that a physical office will still be necessary as a com-

plementary solution to virtual tools. But the idea behind his argument is relevant to every organization: in the long term, the coronavirus pandemic will cause a complete re-evaluation of what the office is for.

Business leaders, while resolving the technicalities of safely returning to work in the next few weeks, also need to start re-assessing how the built office environment should be used in the medium to long term. Some might argue that workspaces will switch to a similar model to that used by universities, for example, with employees only coming in to use the tools or equipment that they don't have at home. In other words, it's not only about reorganizing desk settings and germ-proofing tea points: there is a dramatic cultural shift looming that companies have to plan for, too.

Firms are already acknowledging that with a more agile workforce, workspaces could be empty for a number of days a week, and that office buildings will need some tweaking to adapt to the new needs of employees who are, at least, partly remote. And it would seem that rather than individual working space, what staff will be seeking in the office is a social hub, and a place of interaction for face-to-face meetings.

Caroline Pontifex, the director of workplace design studio KKS-Savills, says that she is already noting some appetite among clients to start thinking about their future office's role. "What is the reason you need to come together?" she asks. "What we need right now is face-to-face interaction. Millenniums-worth of social engineering got us to this point where we collaborate together as a species, and remote working can't switch that

overnight. That is what is missing at the moment."

The workplace, she argues, will be a place to meet, come together and interact with the physical world, before withdrawing from it to do individual work and creative thinking. Until now, offices have effectively provided workers with two different spaces--the desk or a meeting room. In the future, Pontifex believes, we will see a greater variety of settings. If the workplace is used specifically for teams to gather, facilities will have to provide sufficient capacity for meetings. Focus rooms, meeting booths and quiet spaces will take over the traditional desk set-up.

In a way, transforming the workplace into a hub for collaboration is only a continuation, to a greater degree, of a trend that had already started. Or at least, of a move that was already encouraged by interior designers. Pontifex points to studies that had been carried out by her team before lockdown, which showed that offices with a greater variety of settings were also those that showed better levels of satisfaction.

Workers will now be coming into work with different expectations. Of course, some might still be after a desk to carry out focused work: not everyone is happy with working from home. Deskwork, however, will be equally matched with more specific tasks--and staff will expect their workplace to be designed accordingly. And it won't be enough anymore to tick the "collaborative space" box by

throwing a few break-out zones in the middle of rows of desks.

## Get ready for hygiene ratings in the workplace

One thing is certain: while the global pandemic has made the workforce happier to work from home, that doesn't mean it's all over for the office. It is unlikely that teams will keep entirely relying on video-conferencing tools to collaborate; and office buildings, although less crowded, will still be a point of contact for managers and their staff.

But business leaders will be re-evaluating how much space they need--and it is still unclear
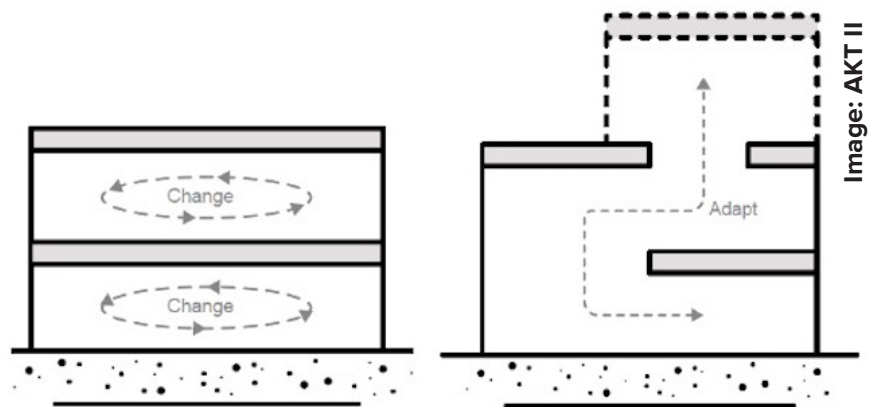


The agility of existing buildings will now need be put to the test
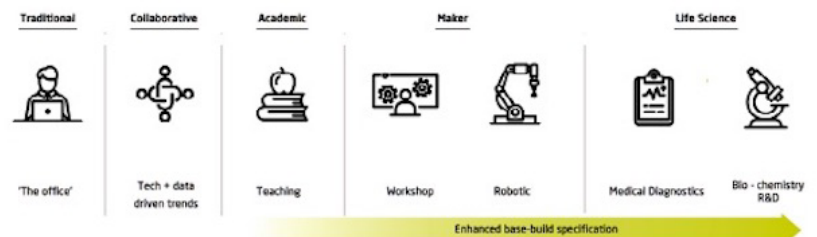


Some of the shifts to increased air movement and quality are akin to a trend towards life science conversions which may now gather even more traction...

Rob Partridge's "simple graphics" illustrate how life sciences might have short-term solutions for traditional offices.

whether they will be condensing or enlarging the workplace. If a company were to implement the six-feet strategy it would make sense to buy more space; but equally, if half of the workforce stays at home, it won't be necessary to keep building or renting big offices to host thousands of employees.

Cushman and Wakefield's Woodward acknowledges that it's still a learning process right now. "If employees work flexibly, can the client condense their real estate and save some money?" she asks. "Or does it mean we need to repurpose the work space and provide different types of facilities for those coming back to the office?"

These questions are on the mind of any architect who has future office building plans in the wraps. The internal layout of existing offices can only be adapted to new requirements, but in the case of offices that are yet to be constructed, designs can still be reappraised. And they probably should be: if the nature of office life is to change radically, so will the building accommodating the workplace transform, too.

Darren Comber, the CEO of architecture practice Scott Brownrigg, is convinced that stronger hygiene standards are here to stay, and will eventually permeate office culture. His job will be to make that architecturally possible.

It will be key, for example, to have greater access to external spaces. A rooftop terrace might be a "nice-to-have" feature at the moment, but it will quickly become a fundamental requirement. Similarly, air conditioning will have to be redesigned, so that instead of recirculated air, employees are constantly provided with a fresh environment.

Comber also anticipates that staircases will become a premium, as companies try to find ways around crammed lifts. But what has particularly piqued his interest are the potential developments he anticipates in the field of materials. "We could borrow innovations from other industries as well," says Comber. Just as buildings are now expected to be environment-friendly, it will become an imperative to design offices that are clean and demonstrate high levels of wellbeing. After all, he argues, if restaurants can get hygiene performance ratings, there is no reason that the workplace shouldn't.

"There could be some sort of evaluation method to reflect the air quality, how much you can socially distance, if you have access to clean air, and so on," says Comber. "And people will choose where they work based on this." Comber is already working on developing digital twins to work out how pathogens can move through space in an office setting.

## An ideal for living and working

The future office, with its wider staircases--and therefore, potentially, lower number of stories--its rooftop terraces, and myriad other features that are yet to be born in the minds of architects and designers, will have to find a place in the cityscape. Diseases, historically, have always shaped cities: cholera outbreaks in the 19th century led to cities organizing their roads in grids, so that long pipes could move waste safely and provide clean water to households.

This time around the changes that designers may make might not be enough: for many workers, there is serious appeal in the prospect of

leaving busy, over-crowded city centres, and to live further away from the office, only to come in a handful of times a month.

It's not only architects, therefore, that have been hard at work designing the physical embodiment of our future nine-to-five. City planners too, are anticipating a significant acceleration of their work. "A lot of the trends we have identified over the past few years have suddenly come into public view," says Tom Venables, urban planner at London-based company Prior + Partners. "It will require some large-scale master-planning. But a lot of the solutions lie outside of the city's borders, and this will take some pressure off urban centres."

Smaller towns will become much more attractive to people who are used to living in cities. Venables, who is currently working on planning for garden towns just outside of the UK capital, expects that he will be catering for the needs of employees working remotely from now on; and

that local facilities and communities will become far more popular than before.

Venables lives in South London, in a residential area, where the local library has been upgraded into, in the urban planner's words, "something that's more like a bar or a cinema". In reality, he says, before COVID-19 hit, the place was constantly buzzing with freelancers working away. Decentralization was already happening.

And so it might be that residential areas start being fitted with what Venables calls "local mini-offices"--a workspace away from work for employees to have a quiet space to focus, without having to travel all the way to the office.

Anyone who, on the occasional work-from-home day, has struggled with dodgy Wi-Fi in a cafe, or with the construction work going on outside the local library, would agree that a small, local touch-down working space would be handy.

In many ways, the transformations that we can



The Principles of the White Collar Factory were derived from building offices that were simple to use and inherently flexible. Now this research continues as we begin testing the response to the short and long term effects of the pandemic.

low cost/high value: One size does not fit all, but a generous shell should provide the best opportunity for the greatest market share.
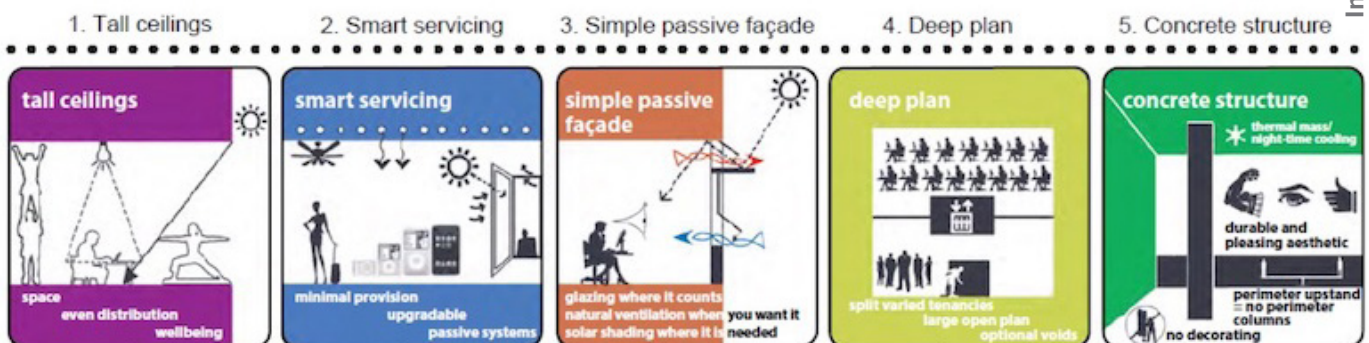
1. Tall ceilings   2. Smart servicing   3. Simple passive façade   4. Deep plan   5. Concrete structure

*Image: Architects AHMM*

**The future office, together with its set of brand-new features, will have to find a space in the city-scape.**

expect in the long-run are only the outcome of trends that started decades ago, as the nature of worked changed, and digital tools enabled different ways to collaborate. But the brutality of the pandemic has suddenly fast-tracked a slow-ly-evolving process.

Whether it is at home, in a physical office, or within in-between spaces that might emerge, workers will soon be carrying out their jobs in rad-ically different ways. The coronavirus pandemic has brought all sorts of change, and the employ-ees' relationship with their workplace is likely to be another one that never goes back to the way it was before.

## About Daphne Leprince-Ringuet

Daphne Leprince-Ringuet is a reporter based in London.

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