
The workplace after COVID-19 – the same but not the same?

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Thoughts from my lonely home office....

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Most of us have probably wondered what consequences COVID-19 will have for us. The effects on our economy and public health will likely be the most significant, but how our workplace will look post COVID-19, such as the distance to our colleagues, can likewise also be cause for reflection. What changes will the pandemic crises bring to our work life?

The past weeks have seen a digital transformation of the workplace which otherwise could have taken executive managements and IT departments years of behavioural management to get us to accept. Virtual meetings are now a staple for everyone, and it was a moment that we could convert large parts or our work tasks onto a digital platform, where we despite virus and social distancing can collaborate and meet. After only a few days, we found ourselves in wall-to-wall conference calls throughout the day, with bio brakes being something to rush through before dialling into the next meeting.

Perhaps, we are currently in the middle of the biggest eco- experiment ever seen and the question is if we will ever go back to normal. However, there is also a potential for some of these learnings to leave us stronger, more flexible and more resilient after COVID-19.

An immediate and positive feeling of being on top of everything and completing work tasks was replaced by a yearning for the workplace we knew before the virus. The pandemic crises have taught us how an otherwise robust society can change and become fragile in a matter of weeks – teaching us a lesson that we should cherish and care for what we have.

Despite countless posts and articles on both social and established media, debating whether we need the physical workplace moving forward, I am certain that many have rediscovered the value and significance of the physical workplace and community.

Therefore, now more than ever, it is important that we bring the digital learnings from our home-office exile back into the office and integrate these with the necessary adjustments our workplace must undergo. If we do this, we can all return to a safe and welcoming workplace prepared for both digital and physical collaboration with just the right combination of people and spaces.

Our everyday life will not return to what we knew before the COVID-19 pandemic any time soon. Governments are talking about a controlled and gradual reopening of our society, since the virus will continue to spread over the coming months. Perhaps, this gradual reopening of society will be harder to handle than the hard stop that confined us all to working from home – removed from the community we once shared.



Redesign of the workplace & behaviour

Needless to say, the workspace we left before COVID-19 cannot be the same we all hope to return to soon. To avoid a second outbreak when autumn and the flu season hits, we need to redesign and reconsider the current layout of our office spaces – and perhaps for a longer time than we think, also re-evaluate the behaviour we mutually agree to follow to create a safe and trustworthy work environment. This is about redesigning both the workplace and our own behaviour.

Some may view this as another exhausting cost on top of the current financial challenges many companies are currently experiencing. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that doing nothing is not an option if companies want employees to return to a safe and happy work environment and in ensuring all has been done to avoid high sick leave rates in the future. We already know that the right workplace design and culture, with a focus on both physical and mental health, will dramatically lower sick leave and boost productivity and as such we should not shy away from solutions we know will work.

The workplace from a bigger Real Estate strategy perspective

Planning the return to the workplace, a minor thing like lift capacity needs to be reassessed; a lift that would fit 10 people before might only be suitable for four people now. Will this allow the necessary flow of people in peak periods as well as ensuring optimal logistics throughout the day – and what will the effects be on the maximum employee-building capacity?

Is the building that used to host 10,000 employees throughout the day now only suitable for half of that? Or can we get as close – without being too close physically – to the original building capacity by working in different slots? Both spreading out the arrival and as well as divide department, teams, and groups into; start week, mid-week, and end-week groups? Who needs to be there every day, can we spread out office hours throughout the day?

We need to design a toolbox where the home workstation remains an active part of the solution. However, if keeping a distance remains the overarching measure in the interim period coming back from COVID-19, the maximum building capacity will have to decrease. We should rethink the flow of people in office buildings, for example by looking to solutions seen in hospitals, laboratories, and food factories. In these places, there are areas and rooms one can only enter after disinfecting and employees working with raw food cannot mix with employees working with cooked food. There may be a need to redefine and come up with specific buildings flows for peak and non-peak hours, keeping a consideration for employees with immune system deficiencies and others with a higher risk of catching infectious diseases. An example of such could be staircases separated into ascending and descending and with markers for the suggested distance employees should keep to each other.

Have the learnings we have acquired while working from home, both working remotely as well as collaborating via digital platforms, given us reason to consider a more permanent and flexible offer for some employees to work from home? For examples all the contact centres many organisations have moved to homeworking ...? Maybe these new blended formats can also strengthen the ability to attract new employees from a larger regional geographic area, since the long commute to work would be eliminated.

These considerations lead to a new question; looking across our building portfolio – do we need all this space in the future? For some organisations, an unfortunate consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak has been to dramatically reduce the number of employees. Are there any proposals for new buildings in the planned pipeline that should be reconsidered?

This can also be a chance to both boost and reassess a new sustainable workplace strategy and become resilient against future pandemic outbreaks. Our global society will overcome this pandemic, with vaccines being developed and herd immunity working in our favour. However, it is a question of when and not if a new pandemic disease will appear in the future.

There already exist several sustainability certifications, such as LEED, BREEAM, and DGNB. Perhaps, such certifications should include another point for testing; can a building get 'vaccinated' and be certified resilient against future pandemics?

Knowing how countries have dealt with the outbreak, should we also consider what regions and countries to expand to next be part of our global RE strategies? How exposed are we if we expand to countries without strong healthcare and financial benefits in place to help employees on furlough during a pandemic outbreak?

Redesign of the local workplace

To ensure employees return to a happy and safe work environment, both in terms of office layouts and workplace design, there are a few things to consider – things that are easy to implement, but nonetheless needs to be prepared for now. Just a few examples;

Meetings rooms: Should the meeting room that used to be designed for 10 people only host a maximum of four people? Are we comfortable using all our existing meeting spaces, such as the smaller enclosed meeting rooms without windows and access to fresh air? Perhaps moving smaller meetings out into the open workplace where access to space and fresh air allows employees to keep the recommended distance. Perhaps some meetings can even be outdoor "1-on-1" meetings – taking a 15- or 30-minute walk around the block with access to plenty of fresh air and blue skies.

Office plan layouts: If we need to keep a distance to our colleagues, we should then reinvent design to avoid the numerous close-proximity workstation settings. It will be essential to keep the correct distance between the six to eight-person desk settings many office plans see today, for example by using desk-dividers, while keeping and ensuring visual contact. There have been many inventive and clever examples of this at supermarket and grocery store checkouts, keeping both the cashier and the customer safe. Another way of accomplishing this could be to simply remove every other desk and rethink the office layout. A set of paper towels and disinfectant spray at all workstations may be the new normal. Hand sanitizer has become an essential part of my handbag.

The many shared workstations also call for new habits where we leave a clean workstation for the next user. Some may say this could be the end of free desking as a trend altogether, while others may say that it will only limit this for a period of time, since the sharing of space is already dominant in both our offices in general as well as throughout our society. It is the recognition that the good and productive solution lies in the combination of redesigning space, the individual and personal responsibility, and the service being delivered in the buildings – together we can create a safer environment.

We also need to ensure the many coffee and café areas, spread out across floors, will still be used for small pitstops and informal meetings throughout the day while keeping a safe distance. This could be done by posting infographics to communicate and inform of new behaviour in combination with physical interventions to make sure suggested distances are kept in these areas – especially during peak hours.

Toilets: Should there be disinfectant cleaning supplies readily available in toilets allowing employees to clean doorknobs when entering and leaving the toilets? In order to ensure a high level of hygiene

throughout the day, we need to take responsibility of a lot of habits and not leave everything on the cleaning personnel. It can be questioned whether hand dryers are the correct hygienic solution when it comes to the spread of virus and diseases or if reverting to paper towels is the right choice?

It is safe to say that many of the existing service touchpoints needs to be re-evaluated – new cleaning procedures, new F&B procedures, etc. That is an entire "post COVID-19" chapter, which my competent and professional colleagues at ISS already have many answers to.

Can technology help us to drive new habits at the workplace?

Besides the many collective online meeting experiences, we have used the past weeks, can technology also help us nudge new behaviour when we return to the workplace? Perhaps the many workplace applications we already have can help guide us to the nearest safe workstation in our home zone or give a notification if we are moving too close to a colleague in the café area or in a meeting. Collecting data on how many people are expected to enter the building at a given time and suggest check-in time slots can help to adjust and decrease the flow of people during peak hours. Notifying employees that the office gym is at maximum capacity can help deciding whether to postpone a scheduled training session or go ahead as planned. There are numerous ways technology can support an informed, safe, and trustworthy workplace where employees know they are being taken care of.

Meanwhile, it remains important to get employee feedback on the many new initiatives to welcome them back to the office. Survey results can give an instant indication to whether employees actually feel safer and happier after their return. This data should inform day-to-day adjustments and improvements, since the current situation sees all of us in uncharted territory.

Is there a generational safety thing we need to consider after Corona?

We are all aware that older generations, people aged 60 and over, and people with immune system deficiencies are at higher risk of being infected with and dying from COVID-19. What can we do to protect these colleagues and make sure they feel safe when they return to their jobs?

New behaviour in the workplace – We are in it together

One thing is certain – no employer has any interest in taking the risk of another society lock down in autumn, should another COVID-19 outbreak happen. New behaviour needs to be agreed upon and this will involve everyone. It will not only be the responsibility of the employer – it will take great collaboration between employers, service providers and individual employees in order to succeed. We need to be in it together.

We must ask ourselves why we do what we do and what importance it holds for the society we live in. I think the word 'trust' automatically pops up for many people. We need to rest the workplace so we can return with our trust intact, as well as maintaining the same high degree of trust embedded between us as we had before the COVID-19 outbreak. Trust is the foundation for our mutual coordination of work throughout the day.

Personally, I am really looking forward to returning to my workplace and to look my competent colleagues in their eyes, so we can continue working towards creating places for people that gives them the optimum conditions to collaborate, innovate and communicate. I believe the physical presence of our co-workers possess a much higher significance than we thought prior to the COVID-19 crises. Innovation and change thrive in the presence of people.

Once society opens back up and we need to kickstart the economy, it is imperative that the driving force is a healthy workforce who thrive in each other's company. We need to be vigilant, take care of ourselves and each other, and do what we can to avoid any conflicts that could drive us apart follow us back into the workplace so we can focus on all the things we need to catch up on, going forward and looking forward – together!