



 An isometric illustration of a modern office building and its surroundings. The scene includes a multi-story office building with large windows, a parking lot with several cars, a 'WELCOME' sign on the road, and a sign that reads 'WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE'. People are shown walking and working in various office spaces, including a meeting room and a lounge area. The overall style is clean and futuristic.

THE VIRTUAL WATERCOOLER:

WORKFORCE HOLDS THE KEY TO WHAT THE FUTURE OFFICE WILL LOOK LIKE

The shift to flexible working, already underway pre-pandemic, has been accelerated and cemented by coronavirus. To get a handle on how this impacts workplace requirements, AECOM's **Todd Battley** and **Sandra Parét** took a watercooler moment, reaching out to their 50,000 colleagues and many clients to gauge where and how we should be working in future. The results were surprising.

For a long time (too long some might argue), the office has been seen as a place of routine and conformity. Coronavirus has changed that, perhaps forever. Sparked by the stay-at-home requirements of the pandemic, a wave of technological and social experimentation has transformed workplaces, blasting away many of the hurdles to flexible working such as company or IT policy.

How much of this will remain when we are all vaccinated? In countries where the virus is largely under control

such as China, Australia and New Zealand we've seen people return to the office — but not as frequently as before. This showed us that office space still matters, but its future and purpose are changing. Around the world, workers, companies, landlords and governments are arriving at wildly different conclusions about what this means.

To make sure our own workplaces remain fit for purpose, we turned to the people we know and trust — our workforce and our clients — and asked them how their expectations had

changed. Through a global internal competition, we invited input and ideas on how to prepare for these changes, calling for proposals that will improve the post-pandemic world of work. This intelligence informed our Fast Forward to the Future strategy that will guide future investments in our spaces, culture, working practices and digital tools, as well as our advice to clients planning the future of their own workplaces. In this article, we share some of the insights we've gained as we begin to implement this strategy. ➔



As the pandemic took hold, we moved quickly to flexible working. To ensure our employees and clients were happy with this shift, we kept a close eye on the process as it became clear that major and permanent shifts to workplace culture were occurring. This is something we will continuously monitor going forward because the changes we are seeing are directional: the end point is not fixed and may not be for some time.

Surveying our workforce: the findings

Spanning everything from client experience, project delivery and productivity, culture and HR, IT tools and infrastructure and the working from home experience, we asked our people and our clients about their current and future expectations, comparing our results with global peer organizations.

We began this process in April 2020, soon after the pandemic hit, surveying 14,000 AECOM employees and comparing the results with similar surveys of other Fortune 500 company employees around the world. This revealed clear challenges of working from home, particularly in those early days, but nonetheless there was a strong appetite to continue with this mode of working, with three-quarters of AECOM staff calling for expanded



LOOKING AT THE DETAIL OF THE SURVEYS, THE EXPERIENCE OF WORKING FROM HOME VARIED ACCORDING TO JOB TYPE, HOME SET-UP, AND CRUCIALLY SENIORITY.

options in future. What was surprising was how consistent the response was — across business lines and across regions, the average number of days people expected to work outside of the office in the future varied between 2.2 and 2.8 days per week.

Looking at the detail of the surveys, the experience of working from home varied according to job type, home set-up, and crucially seniority. Without in-person support, early career employees and those who'd only been with the company a short time were struggling to make the right connections. Knowing this, we were able to set up mentoring and collaboration guidelines, communication and quality checks, and new approaches to onboarding and training new team members.

The importance of getting the right home set up also came across strongly. The surveys showed us what support and advice was needed to ensure our people had secure and reliable bandwidth, digital tools for collaboration, and an ergonomic workspace.

We conducted another survey with our client-facing professionals in May 2020 to test the impact of these changes long-term. Among the 4,800 people surveyed, the vast majority expected to see more flexible working options in future. We registered real

excitement in the new digital tools we were investing in, and the possibilities they afforded for wider engagement with clients in the future.

Following up on this, in August 2020, we consulted outside the business to see how priorities had changed more generally during the pandemic. Over 200 working-age people were surveyed across 25 industries around the world, reflecting the diverse industries and countries we are active in. That showed that we are moving towards a more permanently dispersed ecosystem of work: although many said they miss the social connections and networking opportunities of the workplace, 20 percent said they don't miss the office at all. This is reflected in decisions about where to live, where proximity to work is no longer a top consideration among those surveyed. A quarter of people said they are considering relocating, and 6 percent have already done so since the pandemic began.

It was a priority for us to ensure the client experience was positive and throughout the pandemic we kept in close contact with them to ensure that it is. So far, we have spoken to over 100 client contacts from more than 50 organizations across all sectors, most of whom said flexible working had been surprisingly successful: so much so that it has changed their perspective on what is possible. ➔

They said they would expect face-to-face contact for some work such as site inspections, construction management or when sensitive or classified information is involved, but almost all — 98 per cent of clients we spoke to — said they are open to working flexibly in the future.

We analyzed our project performance by looking at client feedback during the pandemic, comparing it to the same period in 2019. The feedback indicates that our delivery, quality and communication were not impacted — and even improved slightly while working flexibly. Of course, the flexible approach doesn't always work, and not all clients are comfortable with it. Many said that building trust is difficult remotely, particularly with people they don't know, and we tailor our approach accordingly. For project kick-offs, for example, we know in-person collaboration is key to building rapport and organizational structure, pandemic permitting.

When it comes to developing new client relationships, however, we learned that many people have defaulted to working with people they know. While understandable, this is not a sustainable approach going



AS A RESPONSE TO THESE POLLS, AND SMALLER REGIONALLY CONDUCTED PULSE SURVEYS TO TEST THE GLOBAL FINDINGS IN SPECIFIC LOCALES, WE HAVE UPGRADED TOOLS AND INFRASTRUCTURE TO IMPROVE THE FLEXIBLE WORKING EXPERIENCE. THE NEXT STEP WAS TO ASK OUR WORKFORCE WHAT MORE IS NEEDED. OUR FAST FORWARD TO THE FUTURE COMPETITION INVITED PROPOSALS IN THREE AREAS: TECHNOLOGY AND CONNECTIVITY; PEOPLE AND CULTURE; AND WORKSPACES AND OFFICE.

forward in a company that values growth and diversity. We are working closely with teams to identify ways of making new connections digitally — and where necessary in person — in order to increase our market presence.

Towards the workplace of the future

As a response to these polls, and smaller regionally conducted pulse surveys to test the global findings in specific locales, we have upgraded tools and infrastructure to improve the flexible working experience. The next step was to ask our workforce what more is needed. Our Fast Forward to the Future competition invited proposals in three areas: technology

and connectivity; people and culture; and workspaces and office. Among the 637 ideas submitted, we saw a relatively even split between the three themes, and across geographies. Once again, we turned to our workforce for insight, asking them to vote on the entries. In total, 8660 votes were cast.

The winning entry, selected by both the jury and popular vote, was The Purpose Driven Workplace, submitted by our Chicago Buildings + Places team. The idea is to transform how we think of office space from a place to work to something more purpose driven. In such a set-up, employees would only be expected to come into the workplace when it makes sense to do so: for collaboration, meetings and to access resources, for example. The days of commuting long distances to tap at a keyboard, however, are over. The follow-on from this is that we can rethink our capacity needs based on a percentage of the workforce never coming into the workplace, a percentage being partially flexible, and a percentage based full time in the workplace, as dictated by their purpose. This strategy is being implemented by a team headed by Sandra Parét, our Commercial and Corporate Real Estate Market Sector Lead, and Jeannette Peruchini, Chicago Managing Principal, Buildings + Places, who led the submission.

Another key theme that emerged was the need to embed sustainability in everything we do, with a raft of proposals that will help us achieve this. Some of these are already informing our Sustainable Legacies strategy, which includes a science-based target of reducing carbon emissions to net zero by 2030. ➔





In the workspaces category, other key themes concerned optimizing the home office, health and safety, and the organization and protocols required for a dispersed work ecosystem — as compared to the centralized system we have known. Proposals regarding culture covered flexible work options, investing in early-career employees and fostering social connections and the inspiration that comes from an-hoc encounters. When it came to technology and connectivity, many ideas focussed on digital delivery models to improve efficiency, with others looking at knowledge management and the requirements for connecting from anywhere.

Fast forward to the future: the AECOM of tomorrow

Thanks to the data we've gathered from these surveys and the ideas harvested, we're confident that we understand the complexity of the challenge and where workplace trends are going.

In the Americas, the purpose-driven workplace is already informing new office construction, with several pilot projects in the works. Flexible working is becoming embedded in our culture officially, through Freedom to Grow policies in Australia and Europe. In regions such as Asia where travel is possible, we are taking steps to reduce the amount we travel for business in line with our commitment to reduce emissions.

Going forward, our office environments will be enhanced to support employees' safety and well-being and to encourage a culture of collaboration, tailored to the specific needs of each space. As leases come up for renewal, we will make decisions on a case-by-case basis about what is needed to support convenience, functionality and well-being. As a result of this, we're looking to reduce our real estate portfolio by up to one-third over the next several years. For those who are working from home,

we'll be providing support where necessary to ensure that they can deliver efficiently and safely. A digital global delivery model will allow us to bring the best of AECOM talent to our projects wherever employees are based, supported by a strong IT infrastructure.

Put together, these workstreams are advancing our Fast Forward to the Future strategy, which itself is intended to evolve in step with the fast-moving changes we are witnessing. Many initiatives are already being implemented, with others in the works. To ensure our thinking remains agile and to continue to provide the best workplace environment for whatever lies ahead, we will continue to seek input through relevant ad-hoc surveys from those who know us best — our people and our clients. The changes we have seen may be just the start of the workplace revolution. [WU](#)