



ADAPTING TODAY
FOR A NEW TOMORROW

POST PANDEMIC WE WILL STILL NEED THE PHYSICAL OFFICE

The impact of the pandemic has transformed the way we work, our expectations of work, and the workplace. To create offices that are both wanted and needed in the future, we need to understand the fundamental value and mindset shifts that many of us have experienced over the last four to five months. This will help us create healthy, cohesive and human-centric spaces for productive, collaborative and creative work; spaces that will make it easy for us to build connections and relationships with our colleagues; and spaces for us to commune in our purpose and values, says AECOM's **June Koh**.

Organisations and their people have had to switch to remote working and our offices have become temporarily obsolete. And as many companies look to reoccupy real estate, what role will the office play?

Here at AECOM, our workplace designers and strategists have spent the last 40 years forecasting the future of work and we recognise that some predicted workplace trends — such as the rise of remote working and collaborative technology, an increased

focus on employee wellbeing, and the role of the office as a collaborative hub that nurtures company culture and values — have accelerated as a result of coronavirus. However, even with that knowledge, we can't predict exactly what the future now holds for our offices, work and employees. Overwhelmingly, we are hearing from organisations that they will not return to a pre-pandemic state of working. Not all tasks can be performed remotely, of course, but digital collaboration tools have helped companies stay in business while their

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employees work from home. Yet, our collective experiences over the last few months have also highlighted what we miss about coming together physically, what we value about work: we want to connect and collaborate, and feel like we belong.

In spite of the many uncertainties that the pandemic has thrown at us, it has also shown us what most of us clearly value. To create offices that are both wanted and needed, we must recognise those values and act on them, while also meeting the safety challenges posed by coronavirus. ➡

Like other multi-national companies, AECOM responded to the initial outbreak according to individual cultures and circumstances in each region. Evidently, there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach.

In this article, we look back on lessons learnt over the last three to six months, and consider the trends that were already shaping the future of work which will make our offices more resilient to similar shocks.

Lessons learnt from global colleagues: The last three to six months

The relationship between architecture and healthcare has a long history. From maximising levels of natural light to promote wellbeing¹ to modernist architecture — which The New Yorker says emerged in part as a response to the terrors of tuberculosis through “a desire to eradicate dark rooms and dusty corners where bacteria lurk,”² — design choices can help us live longer.

We are witnessing a similar trend in our offices. As coronavirus remains a threat, urban office design has to change and in the short-term, the primary emphasis has shifted to safety.

AECOM's offices in Hong Kong and Sydney adapted promptly to keep premises open. “The physical restrictions haven't been too intrusive,” says Nash Doyle, Regional Safety, Health, Environment and Quality Manager for Asia Pacific, of the changes made to the Sydney office. “There is clear marking about where we should stand while waiting for lifts, and where chairs and desks should go. Some furniture has been removed to discourage congregating. There's also a lot of signage at reception warning us to go home if we feel unwell and adequate hand sanitiser available in multiple locations.”

Most employees work remotely but have freedom to choose when they come into the office, as long as it is safe to do so. This could be for essential face-to-face meetings or to use larger monitors for more complex and collaborative tasks, while private work is done at home.



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In Hong Kong, temperature checks are currently taken upon entry to the building and we are working with our local digital team to automate and streamline the process by investing in a thermal scanner.

Commuter confidence regards the journey to the office is strong, thanks to the widespread cultural acceptance about the wearing of facial protection.

Both offices operate a shift policy where employees can go in on alternate days if and when regional transmission rates rise.

For those companies looking to reopen offices safely, these recommended actions can be made in the immediate and near-terms to create resilient workplaces, ready for similar shocks:

- / Operational – functional processes that have been developed, communicated and deployed to keep employees safe such as entry protocols, disinfecting routines and queuing for lifts.
- / Behavioural – shifts and modifications required by employees such as social distancing, wearing of masks and cleaning desks after use.
- / Spatial – design interventions that are necessary to keep employees safe such as screening, signage and low densities.

Our Return to Occupancy guide³ has further details about these immediate priorities.

The future of the workplace centres on people and their wellbeing

Our collective experiences over the last few months will shape the office of the future for the better.

Remote working has largely been a success story, allowing business activity to continue during the pandemic. However, as lockdowns persist in some countries, we're starting to see the negative impact remote working has, and ways in which it's not working. A recent survey of 50,000 global employees (including those at AECOM) by real estate specialists Cushman & Wakefield found that, despite very positive results around personal productivity, people are struggling in various ways. Issues range from sub-par connectivity and a lack of dedicated workplace (particularly among younger people more likely to be living in co-share arrangements or in smaller spaces) to balancing care-giver duties. Revealingly, it found that, “overall wellbeing is suffering not because of a struggle to maintain work-life balance, but rather the lack of time away from work.”

For many of us, the pandemic has dismantled the boundaries between our private lives and work. We used to balance work and life as two separate components, now it seems as though we are living in a strange work/life continuum. The more time we spend working from home, the more our personal lives spill into our work. Elements of this continuum will remain and shape what we expect of our future workplaces, and workplace owners and occupiers will need to respond accordingly. ➔

Inevitably, there will be an increased emphasis on community. In the future both landlords and users will likely use data in sophisticated feedback loops to enhance performance and experience, but also maintain and support wellbeing. Data will no longer be just for corporations or building owners looking for insights to make decisions but will inform a constant conversation where users will both provide, and leverage on, data to tweak and modify their days.

Work (wherever it happens) and people (wherever they are) need to stay connected

What a company stands for and its values will become more and more critical to how it attracts talent and enables creativity and productivity.

At the same time people are demanding (and want) to be connected to companies that do good, and that are focusing on sustainability and inclusion. Before the pandemic, many companies, often large established ones, relied on their offices as a physical embodiment of their culture, a live stream of their leadership and employee behaviour, and a reflection of their values. So, what happens when most of us are now going to the office a lot less than we used to (or not at all)?

In the future, we continue to expect our offices to evolve into collaborative and social hubs, where more floorspace is given to communal areas designed for collaboration, connecting with colleagues and customers, coaching and mentoring, learning and training, and most importantly communing of values and purpose.

Flexibility of space will be key and we expect to see the tracking of space utilization tied to occupancy through the Internet of Things, and booking applications that visualise office usage.

Low touch strategies and disinfecting routines would be of high importance in these collaborative areas, and antimicrobial or self-cleaning materials that hinder virus transmission such as copper or organosilanes⁵ may become commonplace.


Collaborative technology is an imperative

Technologies that enable distance working have made things easier during lockdown, so investments made can continue to enhance productivity — and resilience — in the long term.

For example, the days of keeping important documentation in the office filing cabinet are numbered. Common data environments (CDE) — a single source of information used to collect, manage and disseminate documentation — will become even more important to the delivery of projects with a remote workforce as creating a single source of information helps collaboration between team members and helps avoid duplication or mistakes.

According to the Cushman & Wakefield report: “The ability to collaborate effectively is underpinned by the availability of collaborative technology. Quite simply, the enforced work from home means that using collaborative technology tools is no longer optional but an imperative, and employees are using them to their fullest.”

In addition to the laptops, screens, noise-cancelling headphones and even office chairs that employees will need to furnish their home offices, we may also see meeting rooms equipped with virtual reality tools so that remote-working members can be ‘present’ through holograms. As we file back into our offices one day, we need to remember not to exclude our remote colleagues when collaborating. This extends to how we connect informally with each other across platforms, realities and spaces.

To replicate the spontaneous chats that occur at the canteen, virtual coffee stations can be a place to ‘meet’ and chat away from conference calls. 

LONG LIVE THE OFFICE

The workplace is undergoing a radical change. Office form and function is going to have to work harder. As more employees work from home, it will be up to management to invest in collaborative technologies to facilitate people’s personal productivity but to also focus on ways to foster a sense of belonging and purpose. There will be a stronger emphasis on shared values and employees will look to organisations to give it to them.

The new-found acceptance of remote working for many organisations, combined with the difficult economic climate, could mean a temptation to scale-down on office space. Such decisions should be carefully considered. Perhaps start first with understanding what the role of the office is for your organisation, and what helps your people do their best work. How would an office that brings your people together to connect, commune and collaborate look like?

Listen to a team of workplace experts from AECOM discuss ‘the office of the future’⁶ in greater depth here.



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