THE RESILIENT WORKPLACE

THE RISE OF WELLBEING

CONTENT
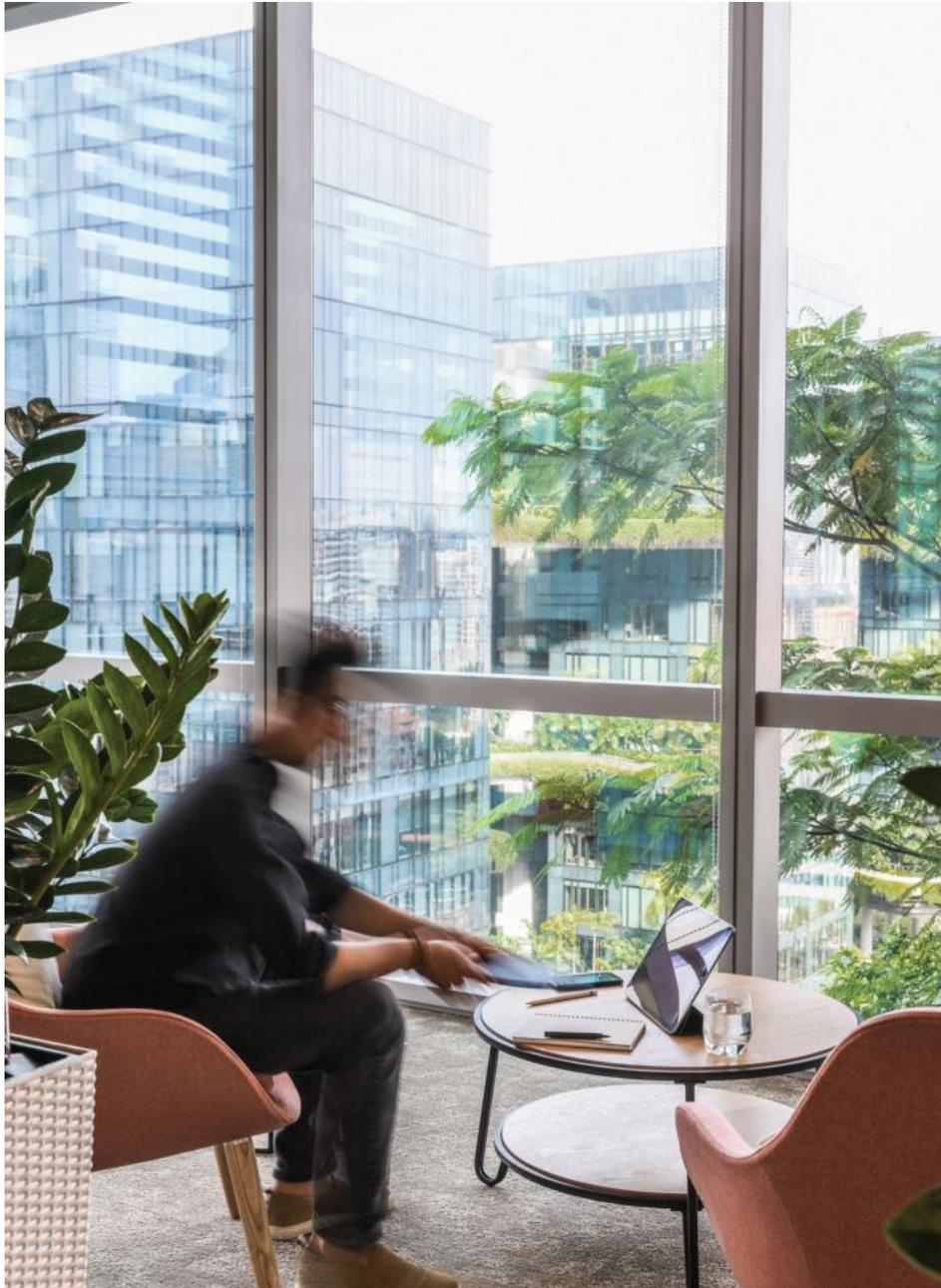
The Resilient Office – The Rise of Wellbeing

Written by Rodi McLean, Managing Director, Form Design Consultants

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

It is not an exaggeration to say that things will never be the same again. The COVID-19 global pandemic is the challenge of our time and the design of our workplaces and how we work will play a crucial role in our recovery from this devastating disease.

The economic and social ramifications of the virus will run deep and wide through people's thinking, actions and emotions for a long time to come. Everything we do for at least the next year will need to be contextualised and considered with the virus sitting square and centre. There will need to be changes in how we occupy and design our offices.

Will the changes be temporary or will we take this opportunity to design better workplaces that support the health and wellbeing of our people for the challenging years ahead? Of course, humans are psychologically attached to habits that give us acceptable outcomes, especially the ones that have worked well for us in the past. So, adopting change can be difficult. Therefore, will we see a gradual return to how we used to commute, work and socialise? Or has the virus affected our thinking so much that there will be a cultural shift in how we work? Will we see an explosion of new technologies? Will we return to more traditional ways? There are many perspectives to consider.

My experience of the lockdown is a common one. Self-isolated, working from home, communicating via my laptop with friends, colleagues and clients, and only going outside to exercise or buy food and drink. If I had been told in February that this would be my modus operandi I would not have been able to imagine it. Without a point of reference, we find it difficult to imagine scenarios before they have happened. And so, it is also true that it is difficult to imagine how the design of our workplaces will adapt given the effect this virus has had on what we do and how we do it.

This paper sets out what I believe are the most likely evolutions in good Workplace Design, now and for the decade ahead, and the changes businesses and organisations will make, operationally and culturally, to remain competitive and, importantly, supportive to their people's health and wellbeing.

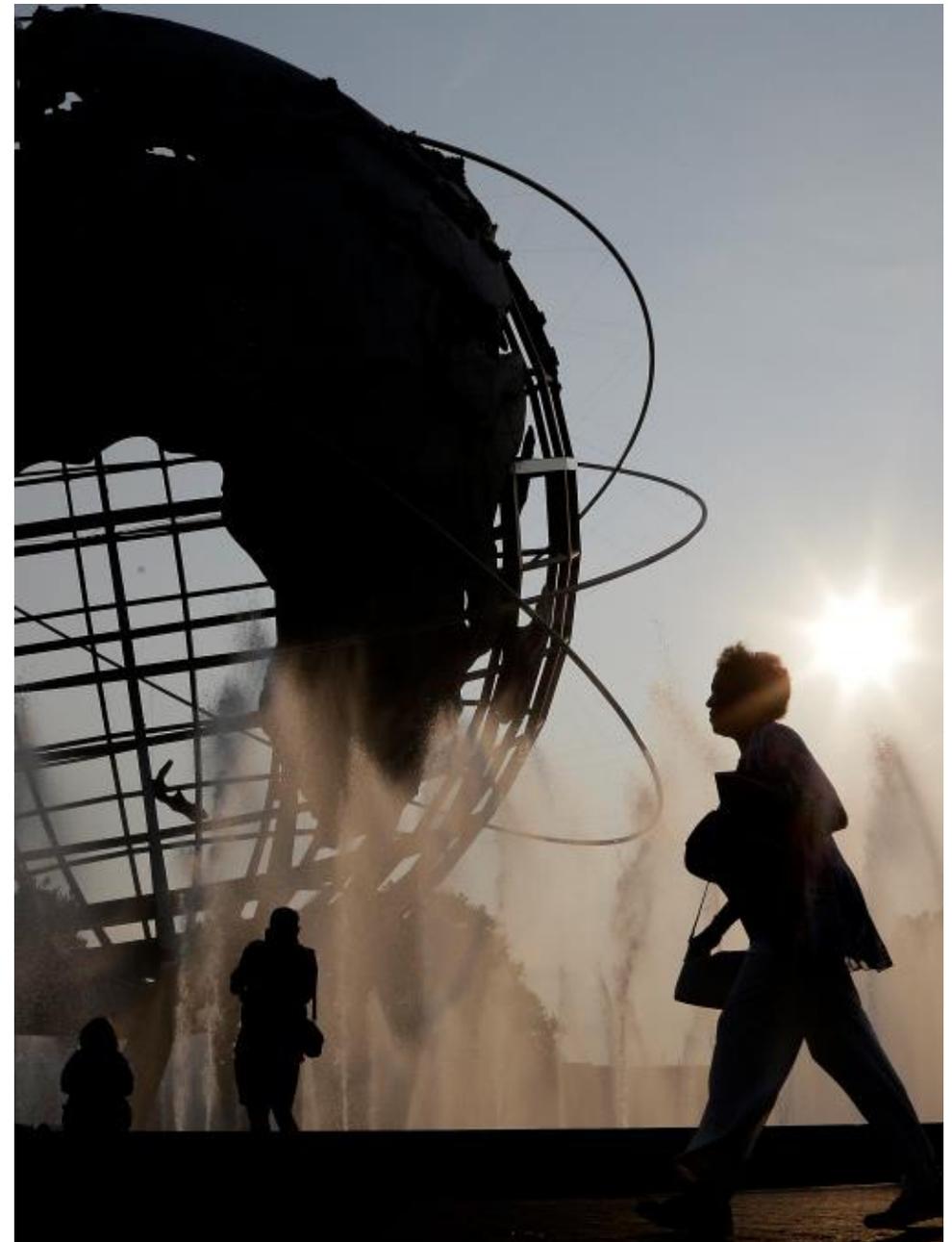# THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

UNCERTAINTY

Many medical experts predict that COVID-19 will probably make a resurgent come back in late autumn or winter this year and, potentially, it will be with us for the years to come until we have reduced susceptibility (whether through complete or partial immunity), or we have designed a vaccine. Without a vaccine, we may well see similar restrictive measures being implemented once again to save lives and reduce the burden on essential services.

Furthermore, virologists and epidemiologists from the World Health Organisation (WHO) predict that is it likely we will see new infectious diseases evolving and spreading globally during the next decade.

It would therefore be short-sighted to design our workplaces to respond to this immediate situation, without considering the longer-term impact that COVID-19 (and the other potential diseases) will have on our physical and mental health and how we operate effectively.

Of course there will be some immediate measures we will need in place as we emerge from this period and return to a more familiar workstyle but the disruption brings with it the opportunity to reassess how we can make our workplaces and our lives more healthy.

The future is never certain. However, given the perspective of the COVID-19 pandemic, we should be preparing for future disruption of a similar or even more acute nature. And this begins with considering the design of our built environment, our homes, our places of work and how we get there. As President Obama succinctly put it in a speech to the National Institute of Health in 2014, "think of this as an insurance policy against our way of life".

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

TRAVEL AND COMMUTING

One of the key considerations that will affect the design of our workplace does not come from an immediately obvious source – commuting. It is important because it impacts everyone, not just people who work in buildings. There are many points to consider, not least: how do we get to and from our place of work, when do we travel, and do we need to travel in the first place?

In mega-cities, such as London, commuter numbers are staggering, and they can only be facilitated through a highly complex and integrated public transport system. Transport for London advise that on average the London Underground system carries 3.7 million people every day. In regional centres, commuter numbers are still significant and regional train and bus networks are clearly essential if we want to return to our usual ways. It is hard to see how cities and businesses can return to normal without these transport links being fully functional.

In the short-term, social distancing measures will render these modes of transport inefficient. The average train carriage is 60m², and will only be allowed to carry about 14 people as opposed to 60. The reduced ability for transport networks to enable commuting will mean that a full return to the workplace will not, in fact cannot, happen immediately. In some cases, people will never return to the office. This is already being done at both the individual and corporate level. Many organisations are re-evaluating if they need a work place at all.

Of those that recognise the need to return to the office, which will be the vast majority, they will need to consider how and when they travel. Public and private transportation networks will still need to carry large numbers but I anticipate many people will now opt to walk, run or cycle to their place of work if at all possible. For years cities have been planned to discourage car travel into their centres, with zoning, high parking charges and reduced parking space within buildings deterring drivers. Conversely, bicycle usage and other green transport, such as electric cars, are now being encouraged. New and existing office buildings are responding to this by providing secure bike storage, changing facilities, showers and prioritising bays with charge

points for electric cars. Workplace design recognises this and in the short and long term we will see these becoming essential amenities for the modern office. It is likely the British Council for Offices (BCO) guidance for 1 shower per 100 building occupiers will need to be revised to cater for the increased number of users.

I anticipate commuter numbers on public transport systems will never return to the pre-COVID-19 figures, as organisations recognise how effective their people are at working remotely, and how they now choose to travel to the office. Furthermore, transport systems may finally begin to see a blurring of peak travel times as organisations accept that the typical working day is less relevant.

I believe we will see a huge increase in home working but also more flexibility around when people come and go to their workplace. The 9am to 5pm day will probably still hold the middle ground but we will see more work activities outside this core time. This will be driven by a need to avoid rush hours and reduce pressure on transport systems, an increase in flexible working and a change in management thinking where output is measured instead of presenteeism.

This is a positive change for society, the environment and for the economy. Less crowded, healthier public transport systems. A more active and healthy workforce. A better approach to our work and life balance, which will reduce sick-leave and increase our well-being. There is a real opportunity for positive change.

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

FLEXIBLE WORKING

Flexible Working, or Agile, Smarter and New Ways of Working, is a complex concept to define in just a few paragraphs as its implementation varies across different organisations. Its methodology was originally championed in the mid-1990s and early adopters included large technology companies in the UK, such as BT. It is now more commonplace in both the private and public sectors and there have been numerous papers written on its benefits. A succinct description would perhaps state that Flexible Working is a concept that provides the individual and the company with the choices of how, where and when to carry out work.

The enforced social distancing caused by COVID-19 has led many people to question the survival of Flexible Working practices. For example, one of the key benefits of Flexible Working is a more efficient use of the office through shared workplace settings and improved collaboration space. The words "shared" and "collaborative" are now more emotive given the context of the virus and improved hygiene. However, it needs to be recognised that one of the fundamentals of Flexible Working, "homeworking", has enabled many of us to operate so quickly and effectively from outwith our offices. Furthermore, Flexible Working practices are the most adaptable of methodologies and are best placed to absorb the changes we must now make in our workplaces.

Many organisations focus on the space utilisation and associated cost savings Flexible Working can bring. However, there are many benefits to implementing Flexible Working that in these difficult times make it now more important than ever, and consequently, I believe we will see a dramatic rise, perhaps even a normalisation that will lead to any naming conventions being dropped.

The hesitance of many organisations to fully embrace Flexible Working has often been a cultural one where being seen to be doing work in the office was the measurement of productivity rather than output. The enforced lockdown has required organisations to set up as many of their people as possible to work from home, and there have been notable successes, for example Customer Services Teams recording better response rates and improved customer satisfaction, when previously it was a felt that this type of work needed physical management. The success of many organisations to thrive during this time will add further impetus for more companies to adopt Flexible Working practices as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are so many positives to be gained from this working methodology. It is hard to see, given the upheaval of COVID-19, how organisations that work in a more traditional way cannot make the cultural shift towards this way of working.

Workplace Consultants Nigel Oseland and Chris Webber wrote in their 2012 paper "Flexible Working Benefits" that the key benefits were;

- Productivity – reduced absenteeism, extended business hours, improved personal performance, enhanced team-working
- Personal – reduced travel time and cost, improved work–life balance, better office environment
- Sustainability – reduced organisational and personal carbon footprint
- Business continuity – reduced business disruption due to weather, security issues, travel problems
- Enticement – reduced staff attrition and increased staff attraction, more enticing to next generation of workers, reduced training costs
- Efficiency – space savings, reduced property costs and churn

If we analyse each of these key benefits, it is clear to me that they are now more relevant and important than ever.

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

WORKING FROM HOME

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the Office for National Statistics calculated that, in January to March 2020, a record 33.14 million people aged 16 years and over were in employment in the UK. Of these it is estimated that about 15% worked from home on a regular basis. During the height of the lockdown this percentage was around 44%, equating to approximately 14.5 million people. Should we be so surprised that the enforced working from home in March to May 2020 was such a success? Perhaps not in retrospect, but these numbers would have been unimaginable at the beginning of March.

Over the past decade we have seen a gradual rise in the number of people that work from home on a regular basis. Improved connectivity and technology have been the major factors of enablement but the most important change has been the cultural shift within traditional organisations to accept remote working practices, such as working from home. For homeworking to become an acceptable workstyle, organisations have had to be more trusting and open with their people. They have made the positive change towards managing their people by measuring what they are doing and not where they are.

Many organisations will revert to script over the next few months and we will see a gradual return to the office for most people, albeit to a different landscape. However, now is the time for organisations to re-assess their business models and take the initiative to build for the future. Working from home has given us data to inform new strategies for the workplace – the design of our offices and our home offices.

Many businesses will seize this opportunity to re-evaluate how they use their real estate and how they operate. This review will not automatically mean that less space is required. It may mean more space is required. It may mean they use it differently, and I will expand on this later. The main opportunity lies with how they choose to operate, how they do what they do, and how this can enable them to be the best at what they do. I believe that an important part of this assessment will be informed by the learnings we have gained from this period of enforced home working.

In May 2020, Form Design Consultants carried out a survey to understand how people were feeling and what their experiences of working from home were, with a view to using the findings to help us design better workplaces for our clients. The survey aimed to evaluate people's current physical environment and identify what could be introduced to make that environment more effective. It was also very important to evaluate the emotional impact of working from home during this time. It was implemented well over a month into the lockdown period when the novelty had worn off and the real issues, both positive and negative, had become apparent.

Of the 150 responses we obtained, the findings we made have since been echoed in other surveys by notable workplace organisations, such as the BCO and Leesman. Some of the key findings for me were as follows;

- 64% stated they did not work from home pre-lockdown
- 56% stated the greatest benefit from homeworking was no commuting time
- Just 2% stated there was no benefit from working from home
- 75% stated they would like to work from home either two or three days per week
- Only 3% stated that they miss nothing about working in the office
- 37% stated they felt more productive at home
- 78% stated that they are looking forward to returning to the office
- 50% stated they have concerns about returning to the office, with the main reasons being social distancing, hygiene and the commute

The vast majority of those surveyed miss being in the office – they miss the social, collaborative and learning experience it provides. Some even stated they missed the commute. The office is important to their effectiveness and their wellbeing, but broadly speaking, working from home has been a success. In the future there will be a significant rise in the numbers of people who do so on a regular basis, which will have an impact on how we use our offices. The way we used office space before the lockdown will for most organisations change significantly, and this will be partly driven by a rise in effective homeworking.

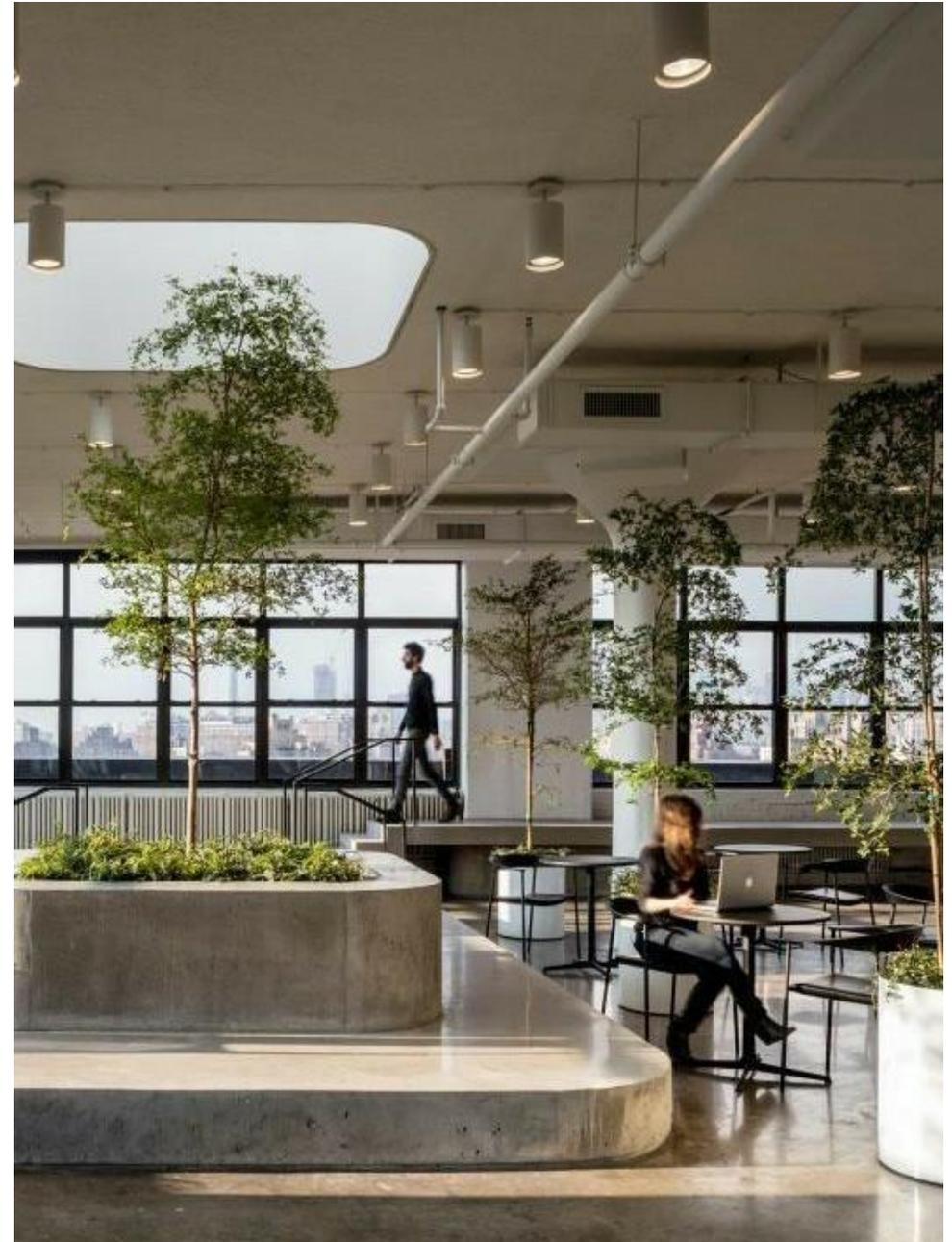# THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Not since the outbreak of Spanish Flu in the early 20th Century has the fabric of daily life been so fundamentally threatened by a disease. Thankfully our understanding of how we can minimise or contain disease is greatly improved. And we are acutely aware of the importance of hygiene and a healthy lifestyle to improve our physical wellbeing. Designing healthy workplaces that can help support this is the priority of our time.

Buildings play a leading role in supporting our health and wellbeing, and our ability to prepare for and respond to global health challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. Designing environments that promote the health and wellbeing of their users is an imperative for Form Design Consultants. A workplace design that considers this will help to nurture an engaged, productive and loyal workforce, bringing enormous benefit to the user, the organisation and society as a whole.

In the 2017 BCO survey "Wellness Matters", the four main drivers for implementing health and wellbeing strategies for businesses were occupier wellbeing, staff retention, productivity and health. Staff salaries, benefits and equipment typically account for around 85% of an organisation's operating costs, so maintaining a healthy and happy staff is of obvious benefit. But now, given the context of COVID-19, a healthy working environment will be even more important for those four drivers.

In the first instance, we have to consider the immediate return to the office and how this is facilitated. The hygiene protocols implemented within buildings will play a large part in this re-occupation but we must take this opportunity to design workplaces that are more resilient to the challenges of cyclical and sporadic infections. For years we have invested in furniture and equipment that is ergonomically designed to reduce the impact of musculoskeletal problems such as neck and back pain. Surely now is the time for us to collectively invest in environments that address the other two most common reasons for absence: infections (coughs, colds and flu) and mental health conditions (stress, depression and anxiety).

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

In 2018, the UK economy lost 141.4 million working days through sickness and injury, which equates to 4.4 days per person. Designing an effective workplace strategy for delivering a healthy, happy and productive workplace is therefore likely to be the single most important contribution that property professionals can make to the effectiveness of an occupier's business.

Office occupiers should cultivate a culture of health and wellbeing. Having access to health services, mental health support and restorative programming are important before, during and after any health crisis. Many organisations provide their people with access to psychologists, doctors and other health specialists to cultivate healthy life choices enabling individuals to live to their fullest potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and contribute to society.

In addition to an organisational culture that promotes mental health, it is important to design the physical environment to support the health and wellbeing of people. There are several elements to this, some of which are noted below, but the three primary groups to consider are Design Strategy, Services Specification and Material Choice. Some of the elements within each group overlap and need careful coordination by the design team. The main considerations within each group are as follows;

- Design Strategy – general arrangement, circulation, community, nourishment
- Services Specification – thermal comfort, air quality, water, light quality
- Material Choice - biophilia, anti-microbial, recycled/sustainable, acoustics

The key element that needs to be considered and is relevant in every group is air quality. For example, natural ventilation can be designed into the strategy of a building's architecture; the services strategy can provide better flow rates for fresh air and better air filtration; and material choices can ensure low VOC products are specified throughout the building. Clearly, air quality is important to how people perform, their concentration levels and good health. Good air quality is now even more crucial in our workplaces given that the COVID-19 virus can spread through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.

Our workplace environments should be designed to support good health and help prevent the spread of disease in the future, reducing infections such as common colds, seasonal flu or any new outbreaks of airborne pathogens.

Stagnant air may concentrate airborne viruses, so it is critical to keep indoor air as refreshed as possible. Research has shown that increased ventilation in a building can reduce the chance of influenza and other airborne germs. A study published by The International WELL Building Institute (WELL) in 2019 found that ensuring even minimum levels of outdoor air ventilation reduced influenza transmission as much as having 50-60% of the people in a building vaccinated.

Without proper maintenance and filtration, heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems can build up mould and particulates that can cause respiratory diseases, especially after periods of inactivity. Air filtration in laboratory and medical environments have typically been much better to reduce contamination. Is this the time we need to upgrade our filtration systems in our offices?

There is also evidence that humidity can play a role in the survival of viruses such as COVID-19. As such, maintaining relative humidity between 40% and 60% may help to limit the spread and survival of COVID-19. Organisations should weigh the effectiveness and complexity of humidification systems against other air purification strategies, such as ultraviolet air treatment, which can be used to sterilise harmful micro-organisms in the air like bacteria and viruses.

Even when we are not emerging from a global pandemic, it makes sense to invest some time reviewing how the air quality in our offices can be improved and educating our people to its benefits to providing healthy indoor environments.

Another important factor that we will see more focus on now will be material specification. Product choice and their finish will become more important. We will see a rise in more sustainable or recycled products, and materials with higher resistance to pathogens, that are anti-microbial and easier to clean. Learnings from medical facilities will be adopted to help maintain as healthy an environment as possible.

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

Research suggests that the COVID-19 virus can remain airborne for up to three hours and can survive on some surfaces for up to 72 hours. Maintaining good cleaning protocols and designing environments that aid good cleaning will become more important. Building Managers and businesses will look to implement more rigorous cleaning regimes that focus more keenly on high-touch surfaces, reducing the use of hazardous or harmful ingredients in cleaning, disinfection and sanitization products. We will also see a trend to reduce high-touch surfaces and use technology to improve our office environments as noted below.

The importance of health and wellbeing in the workplace has led to the establishment of several international accredited organisations, such as WELL and FitWel in the USA, and RESET in China. These organisations provide academically informed approaches to creating workplaces that support health where we work. The processes and tools these organisations have developed have been designed to measure how healthy a working environment is. Their techniques and criteria tend to have some overlap in their assessment, which illustrates the importance of taking a holistic view when designing offices to support health and wellbeing.

The design of healthy workplaces needs to address both the physical and mental aspects of the users' health. Buildings and offices that do this, through a holistic approach to the designed environment, will provide the most effective environments, improving productivity and reducing illness.

How a space is designed has the power to have a positive effect on a person's wellbeing. It can be inspiring, it can provide joy, it can create calm, and it can promote health. We now have an opportunity to really look at how our workplaces can be designed to support the health and wellbeing of our people.

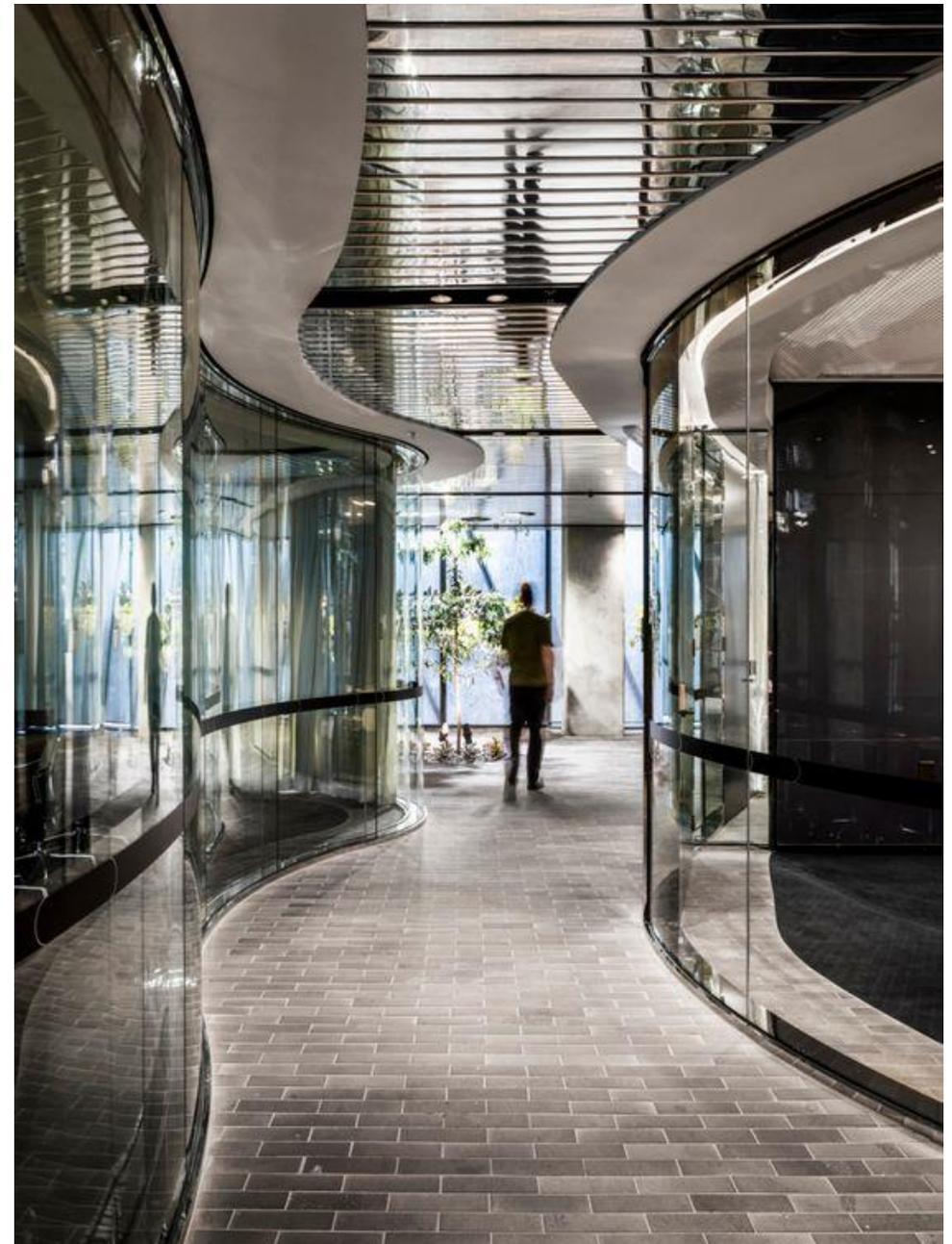# THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

Having arrived at your office, how do you ensure the building is a healthy place to work for you and your people? Weeks of enforced isolation will have an impact on how we think about infection and coming together in large numbers, which is a concern that has been identified within our homeworking survey. Buildings will need to be deep cleaned and once ready, protocols will need to be put in place to minimise the spread of pathogens, rigorous cleaning regimes agreed and implemented.

A study, conducted among 2,000 consumers in the UK, identified that in light of the pandemic 80% of people will change the way they engage with technology that requires to be touched. It is therefore likely we will see an increase in the use of touch-free technology within our built environment to help eradicate the spread of infectious pathogens. This will no doubt include touch-free hand sanitizer stations at building entrances, within lift lobbies and near catering areas. But the adoption of other technologies will become more normal for new and refurbished buildings, making our experience increasingly automated.

In the first instance, in addition to providing hygiene points for handwashing, many organisations will begin monitoring people's temperature upon entering buildings. It is important to note that this does not just apply to the COVID-19 infections. Typically, the flu virus and other infections will quickly increase body temperature to over 38°, and like COVID-19, they are spread by coughs and sneezes, and can survive on surfaces for 24 hours. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) recorded in 2018 the loss of 38 million working days in the UK to annual infections and colds. It therefore makes sense to stop allowing people to come into the office when they are unwell, and the COVID-19 has acted to accelerate the installation of these screening technologies.

As noted above, we will see an increase in touch-free technologies, with proximity readers, apps on mobile phones or electronic bracelets controlling most physical interfaces within the office becoming the norm. This is not new technology but it will become much more common place, allowing people to access their place of work through automated security barriers, automated lifts and doors.

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

In communal areas, such as washrooms and tea points, we will also see touch-free technology become the default specification for toilet seats, taps and soap dispensers. Furthermore, the development of other touchless technologies that use voice recognition and hand gestures will be readily available.

The increase in AI (Artificial Intelligence) and IOT (Internet of Things) will also become more prevalent in buildings and in the office. It is likely BMS (Building Management Systems) that use these technologies will also become standard, capturing the behaviours of occupiers through an array of sensors, adjusting light levels, air temperature, fresh air levels and other environmental criteria. These "Smart" buildings will provide us with healthier places to work but also, significantly, more energy efficient and cost effective. At this time, these technologies may still be cost prohibitive for some developments or refurbishments but the impact of this disease will, in my opinion, kick start more investment in Smart building technologies and we will see widespread proliferation over the next year.

Another more obvious change we will see in the workplace is a much greater use of video conferencing. This technology has been around for years and many organisations have utilised it successfully since its inception, but video conferencing has come into its own since the beginning of lockdown. It has proved to be an accessible, easy to use technology, low cost and a vital communication tool, keeping people connected, and facilitating new business. An interesting statistic I read noted that "Coronavirus has resulted in the demand for video conferencing being viewed as an essential business tool. The video conferencing industry has grown by 500% since the pandemic began". This staggering growth can only be explained by the fact that it is used as much for business as it is for socialising. And when technology is adopted within the home its acceptance within the work environment is more certain.

Video conferencing allows people to make quick decisions in a collaborative way. Not only can users view the person or group they are interacting with, they can share important documents that support the conversation leading to a successful outcome. There are clear environmental benefits to be recognised as more people select video conferencing over traveling hundreds of miles by plane to attend a meeting. Even

before the UK lockdown was imposed as a result of Coronavirus, the overriding opinion amongst users was that video conferencing significantly improves internal and external communication.

However, I would give this word of caution. In our homeworking survey several people noted that video conferencing favours the extrovert and most confident. Being vocal tends to take centre stage and in the work place it is often the introvert, the quietly spoken and the shy who have the most valuable input. Perhaps this is something we will overcome through common usage.

Another point of note, the subtle expressions of mood provided by body language, which our brains process in an instant when we are physically together, are often missed, meaning the results, finding and discussions we have are not always entirely lucid. For me this underpins the importance of the physical office as a place to meet and collaborate and learn – typically, we work better when we are physically together.

Nevertheless, we will see the workplace become more quickly connected, internally and externally, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. And this connectivity will also enable more remote working, influencing the culture of organisations and the design of their workplaces.

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

ADAPTABILITY – LANDSCAPING THE NEW OFFICE

For those who believe that the office is dead, think again. 78% of the people who completed our homeworking survey stated they are eager to return to the office. And the reasons for doing so varied from missing face to face contact to regaining improved productivity . However, 50% of the same people surveyed also noted some anxiety about returning to the office, so for me it is clear we need our offices but the landscape will need to change.

Many workplace strategists believe the reoccupation of our office will be done over two phases with the first partial return lasting about six months. The second phase will see organisations implementing their new business models within a workplace that will have physically changed from the pre-COVID era.

For traditional offices where workstations are "owned", i.e. not shared, the initial phase of returning to the office will need to see a move towards more flexible, shared workspaces to accommodate people and maintain social distancing. This will in turn mean that another Flexible Working mainstay, homeworking, will still be required as the primary workplace for at least 50% of their people at a given time.

Where organisations have already adopted Flexible Working practices and culture, there will also need to be an assessment of how the workspace is planned and used by their people, and like traditional offices, cleaning protocols will be required to reduce the spread of germs.

Another key consideration for this first phase is who best to do it. I have spoken to several organisations to understand their different approaches, and while some are planning to have senior management and team leaders back first, for me the better approach would be to assess who would benefit most from being back in the office.

Our homeworking survey confirmed an unexpected result – the people most content with homeworking were the oldest demographic of 45 and over, while the youngest two age groups, 18-24 and 25-34, were the most eager to return.

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

There are three main reasons for this; homeworking environment; the benefit of person to person learning and support; the social aspect. Organisations must carefully select the right people for this first phase selecting the correct blend of people to provide leadership, support and learning.

Returning to the office will mean lower occupation densities. A BCO study in 2018 found the average office density to be 9.6m^2 per person, and this may have been even lower pre-COVID. With social distancing in place this number will nearly double initially. In time this number will be challenged again as organisations look to have more people working from the office. However, this phased return gives organisations the opportunity to re-evaluate how they use their space effectively and also how they work.

The Flexible Working practices that have been imposed upon us have demonstrated we can adopt them successfully. And to continue working in this way will lead to healthier offices with less dense occupancy, better air quality and the right environments to do our work. This approach will lead to greater productivity, healthier workspace and a happier, more loyal workforce.

I believe Workplace Designers will see a marked increase in organisations requiring a more flexible office that can be adapted to support the tasks that people need to do in their offices. This will be determined by a phased return to the office and an acceptance of the benefits of Flexible Working practices, but importantly, it will also be shaped by the likelihood of COVID-19 or a similar air borne diseases returning in the future. Organisations will need to re-evaluate how they will react when this scenario reoccurs. A less dense office with adaptable and flexible workplace interiors, and a culture that supports this, will be essential.

And so, the second phase of reoccupying our offices will see space being used differently. Our offices will be designed to be more adaptable with a stronger focus on learning, collaboration and mobility. We will still require open plan and cellular space but the landscape will be more generously planned and populated with a greater choice of workplace and activity-based work settings. This in tandem with increased

Flexible Working and Homeworking will bring occupancy densities within our offices down, providing a healthier and more attractive place to work.

There will be other factors that make the landscape of our workplaces better post COVID-19. Health and wellbeing, as noted above, will have a more important roll in the reimagined office. Principal circulation routes will be wider and more carefully thought out. People will be encouraged to use stairs more often and we will see them become more interesting and appealing. Space to enable social interaction and collaboration will become more prevalent, and we will see more technology in place to keep us connected to our colleagues and clients.

Furthermore, the office will become even more essential, with organisations recognising that the environment enables healthy human interaction, collaboration and creativity. Organisations will continue to invest in their real estate to provide the best space for their people. In turn, buildings will see Landlords investing in amenities, wellbeing space and services design to attract the best tenants.

Perhaps the design element of most importance will be adaptability – we all need variety to remain focused and inspired. The workplace of the future will need to be one that can be changed to suit our rapidly changing future, and importantly, to allow us to adapt to the next emergency we have to face. A healthy and adaptable workplace with a supportive and enabled culture will be more resilient and ultimately, a better investment.

THE RESILIENT OFFICE – THE RISE OF WELLBEING

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives forever and our societies have to adapt to the "new normal". However, I believe the changes we need to make provide us with an opportunity for positive change, culturally, environmentally and economically.

The pandemic forced millions of people in the UK to work from home without any prior experience of homeworking. We adapted, rose to the challenge and, in the main, managed to operate effectively. Nevertheless, as we begin to win the battle against the virus, a return to our usual place of work is inevitable and likely to happen in the coming months. For the majority, there is an eagerness to return and re-engage with colleagues and friends, but for many this is a cause for anxiety.

The anxieties associated with this return are principally caused by the thought of coming together in large number, (either in our buildings or during our commute to and from the workplace), and sharing facilities where, unlike in our homes, we have little control of the environment.

A significant shift in our traditional workplace culture will help us address many of these anxieties. An adjustment to the core hours of work and a flattening of peak travel times will be key to reducing congestion. Increased numbers of people working from home on a regular basis and enforced social distancing within our buildings will reduce occupation densities. And the design of our workplaces will respond to the primary reasons for being there - to come together, collaborate and learn.

We must recognise the importance of creating healthy workplaces. A place of work that provides this will improve the effectiveness of its occupiers. Higher levels of fresh air will improving concentration levels and reduce the risk of infection by airborne pathogens. Workplaces that provide amenities to encourage greener travel and provide facilities with nutritious food and drink will help nurture a healthier workforce. By placing health and wellbeing at the centre of workplace design we will make the best investment in our future by reducing illnesses, improving effectiveness and maintaining a happy and loyal workforce.

A healthy environment created using sustainable, anti-microbial materials, should provide a variety of different, adaptable workspaces that encourage movement and collaboration. Technologies, such as heat screening and touch-free automation, incorporated into our buildings must play an important part and help to reduce the chance of infection within our workplaces.

Furthermore, homeworking and working outwith the office must be recognised as valid alternatives to working in the office. We must learn to measure output and not our visibility in the office. The reasons to refuse homeworking have largely been dispelled. Culturally, we must embrace the positives that enforced homeworking has shown us – less travel and commuting, a better work-life balance, and using technology to collaborate remotely.

Landlords and Property Funds know the importance of cyclical investment in their buildings to keep them attractive to the occupier market. Many have already begun to invest in greener, healthier buildings, in the knowledge that they will be able to attract the best tenants for the longer term. Surely, now is the time to embrace this move towards healthier workplaces collectively, and design our buildings and workplaces with the wellbeing of the users at the heart, with more sustainable services strategies, amenities and technologies that focus on health, and environmentally sound product specification.

Our health and wellbeing has never been so carefully considered. It sits at the forefront of our current thinking. Most of this focus is aimed at our initial return and making our workspaces habitable again. However, we must now seize this opportunity to design our workplaces to promote physical and mental health, to support our people to be more happy and productive, not just for this first phase, but for the years ahead.

Rodi McLean
Managing Director of Form Design Consultants