



The post-pandemic workplace will hardly look like the one we left behind

Contact-tracing apps for co-workers, elevator ‘safe zones,’ infrared body temperature scanners — businesses are beginning to reimagine office spaces after the coronavirus.

By **Jena Mcgregor**

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“Sneeze guard” partitions. “Safe zones” demarcating spots to stand in elevators. Contact tracing apps to detect interactions between co-workers and infrared temperature readings.

As Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and other states took steps to reopen their economies this week, and Boeing workers came back to their jobs after a three-week furlough, businesses, design firms, real estate developers and corporate advisers are starting to envision how a return to the office will work.

The transition is likely to be slow, uneven and cautious as employers navigate workers' continued fears, government and public health restrictions, school and child-care closures, and — most of all — the prospects of a second, and possibly even more deadly, wave of the coronavirus.

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Much depends on the availability — and accuracy — of virus and antibody testing kits. Antibody, or serological, tests might show who has developed an immune response to the disease and can safely return to work, but there are concerns about the tests' accuracy.

Even so, companies are actively starting to prepare for the eventual return of at least some office workers who have been working remotely — rethinking floor layouts, staggering work schedules and making changes that could fundamentally shift relationships with employees, such as scanning temperatures. Other firms have borrowed from their experiences in Asia or from managing essential workers during the shutdown, relying more on adapting social distancing to the workplace.

At their most transformative, some tools could help businesses quickly identify the co-workers whom an infected employee has encountered at the office. PricewaterhouseCoopers has had conversations with more than 50 clients about a new contact tracing tool for businesses it plans to launch in early May.

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The tool adds a new app or line of code to business apps that workers already have on their phones, then runs in the background, using Bluetooth or WiFi signals to catalogue other co-workers' phones that come near.

When a worker reports a positive covid-19 test, authorized managers can quickly identify and notify any colleagues the employee has come into contact with to help avoid a wider outbreak, bypassing the lengthy process of interviewing workers and asking them to recall their interactions. The tracing works only on corporate properties, doesn't collect location data and can only be accessed by certain managers, PwC said.

Companies are also talking about mandating thermal scanners, said Tom Puthiyamadam, who leads PwC's U.S. Digital practice. "Not every enterprise is going to command and control mode, but I think right now some of these practices are warranted," he said. "I don't think many employees are going to say no, because a lot of [them] are actually scared to come back in."

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Some companies are exploring their own testing initiatives. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, who also owns The Washington Post, wrote in an April 16 letter to investors that the e-commerce giant had moved a team of specialists from their day jobs to work on a testing initiative, assembling equipment to build its first lab and hoping to start testing "small numbers of our frontline employees soon."

Goldman Sachs is considering adding infrared body temperature scanners to some offices, along with virus and antibody testing kits for employees once they become more available and front-line health care workers have their needed supplies.

Companies with offices in Asia that have begun reopening may be ahead of others with planning.

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IBM, which has begun adding back workers in several locations in China and South Korea, has developed global standards for returning to the office. They include bringing back those who need access to on-site equipment or labs first, staggering arrival times so elevators don't become too crowded, eliminating buffets and shared serving tools in cafeterias, and taking out furniture in other spaces to ease social distancing concerns in conference rooms.

“The more constraints you have in your office layouts, the less people will be able to adjust,” said Joanna Daly, a human resources vice president at IBM.

At Intel, where manufacturing and some lab employees have remained on site in multiple global locations, the chipmaker is planning a three-phase return for employees who have been working from home. It may include distributing masks, screening for symptoms, closing on-site gyms, limiting seating in cafes and offering disposable plastic covers for shared keyboards. The company has already learned that adding more frequent and visible cleaning during the day, rather than the traditional night or weekend service, has helped the employees who have been on-site feel more comfortable.

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“I don’t see that going away anytime soon, even as we get back to normal,” said Darcy Ortiz, Intel’s vice president of corporate services, referring to the enhanced cleaning. Nor will the idea of more people working from home, even at a place that has long been a “work-from-work kind of company,” Ortiz said. “This has been a huge social experiment, and I think this will open that up.”

President Trump has unveiled broad guidelines for states to reopen after previously suggesting he had “total authority” to reopen the country, and some manufacturers have said they will soon restart production. But business leaders are expected to be circumspect about moving too quickly to bring back office workers who have been successfully working from home.

“We are going to be more conservative than the countries we are in,” said Intel’s Ortiz. “As they lift restrictions, we will lag behind them to make sure there is no second wave.”

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In its Amsterdam offices, commercial real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield said it has developed a prototype where carpet tiles can delineate a six-foot radius around a desk. It offers disposable paper mats that employees can place on shared desks before laying down their laptops or keyboards. A circular “safe zone” sign on the floor of an elevator shows where to stand.

Through its joint venture with Chinese real estate developer Vanke, the company has already advised thousands of companies in Asia about returning to work. Architecture and design firm Gensler has launched a tool called ReRun to help employers run occupancy scenarios so they can apply social distancing conditions to their current seating arrangements.

In the shorter term, companies are likely to adopt quick changes that involve limited cost. Seating may be roped off or removed from conference rooms to cut occupancy in half. Doors may be taken off hinges or propped open so employees can avoid touching handles. Signs are likely to point people in one-way traffic flows through hallways to help employees avoid passing each other close by — even if that means taking the long way to the bathroom.

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One of the biggest changes office workers could see is the spacing of desks to maintain distance, “every other” seat arrangements (where employees are staggered diagonally rather than directly across from each other) or possible snap-on desk partitions to give employees more of a sense of protection.

“I don’t think the open office is dead, but I think we may have additional barriers for comfort,” said Brent Capron, design director of interiors for the architecture firm Perkins & Will. “I’ve been calling it the ‘sneeze guard effect.’ ”

At The Motley Fool, the Alexandria, Va.-based investing and personal finance site, director of operations Shannon McLendon said the nearly 400-employee company would be pushing its desks — which are already five feet wide and on wheels — a few feet further apart.

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She’s also looking into providing face masks and deeper office cleans, adding foot-pulls to the bottom of doors for hands-free access and developing hand signs or space markers for co-workers to remind others to keep their distance.

“We’re thinking through some sort of universal cue that says, ‘You’re too close to me, I need space,’ ” she said.

For offices where people have their own desks, designers expect to see more “clean desk” policies, requiring employees to put away picture frames, tchotchkes or other personal memorabilia. Traditionally, private desks haven’t been cleaned very often, says Kay Sargent, director of workplace at the architecture and design firm HOK, as housekeeping services are warned not to mess with precarious stacks of papers. “Most people’s desks are dirtier than a toilet.”

Sargent thinks more companies will turn to shared desks — a concept known as “hotelling” or “hot desking” — albeit with ramped-up cleaning and sensor technology she believes is “going to explode.”

Over the last four to five years, companies have increasingly used motion- or WiFi-detecting sensors installed on ceilings or desks to monitor whether spaces were being underutilized. “Now it’s going to be used for the opposite — whether it’s appropriately utilized. Do we have the right spacing? Are there pinch points where there’s overcrowding?” she said, noting that sensors will be able to tell when people vacate a seat and alert cleaners so it can be cleared to use again.

And it could take workers longer just to get in the door. As companies do temperature screenings at building entries and sharply cut down elevator occupancy limits, “you’re not going to be able to enter buildings very fast,” said Despina Katsikakis, head of occupier business performance at Cushman & Wakefield.

Over time, the coronavirus is expected to upend trends in office design that have been growing for more than a decade.

“Huddle spaces” with upholstered seating for impromptu meetings may get co-opted for workers’ desks in socially distant floor plans. Cozier finishes, such as wood surfaces, could get replaced as harsher cleaning solutions increase in use. Barista bars or beer taps that promote congregating may get temporarily shuttered while distancing guidelines remain.

“There’s been this great amenity war” in office design that encourage random meetups between workers, said Steve Smith, a principal with office design firm Cooper Carry. “Whereas before we were trying to script these collisions into happening, now we’re trying to do the exact opposite.”

One thing is certain: Many employees have proved they can effectively work from home, and companies are expected to continue letting many do so for a long time. “I think some people may never want to go back to an office setting,” said Travis Vance, who co-chairs the workplace safety group at the employment law firm Fisher Phillips.

He said even staggering lunch times could become a thing, as employers try to thin crowds in campus cafeterias. “It’s like in school, where you have lunch starting at 10:45 and going until 2 p.m. You’ll see a lot more of that.”

Many also expect upgrades to office HVAC systems and technology, such as installing automatic doors or changing out kiosks for touchless scheduling or payment tools.

Over the longer term, design and real estate experts say, coronavirus effects could creep into architectural designs. Restroom entrances without doors, like the ones in airports, would allow contactless entry, said Lenny Beaudoin, an executive managing director at CBRE. Five-foot wide corridors are likely to get wider, some office design experts say. And voice-activated elevators “shouldn’t be that big of a stretch,” said Cooper Carry’s Smith.

If more employees want to keep working from home, some employers could ultimately decrease the size of their office spaces. Washington D.C. law firm Sterne Kessler had been thinking about moving or reducing its current space and rethinking the layout, with new plans calling for more shared work spaces and common areas with “a couch and a Starbucks-style environment,” said Chief Operating Officer Robert Burger.

But after the coronavirus hit, and the entire firm of 400 has been successfully working from home, Burger is reconsidering. “I don’t think people are going to want to work sitting two inches away from each other,” he said, and is thinking about plans with fewer “flex” areas. He’s preparing for the staff’s eventual return by retrofitting the air circulation system, preparing people for more video meetings, and looking into procuring masks that can be worn in the office.

With many lawyers and staff finding that working from home works, Burger also sees a potential opportunity to shrink their square footage further, maintaining private offices but having employees use them on alternate days. Said Burger: “Everything is now on the table.”

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