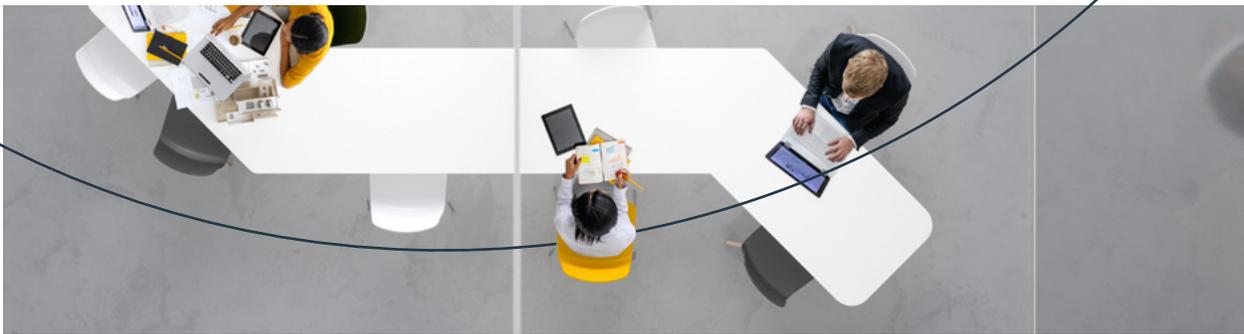


Get Flexible: A Look at What Offices Will Be Like After COVID



Right before the COVID-19 pandemic, commercial offices were in what [the Northern Trust Corporation reported](#) as “reasonably balanced condition, with steady vacancy rates and solid rental rates.” But we all know what happened next. A mass exodus began as many companies pivoted to remote work, leaving many of their commercial office spaces empty.

While the pandemic continues, many workers are still remote. According to [the Willis Towers Watson survey](#), 53% of full-time employees are reported as working remotely. Post-pandemic estimates from the same survey peg that percentage to take a 22% hit, which would still leave remote work up from pre-pandemic numbers. Many big tech companies have already announced a permanent WFH or flexible arrangement. However, most workers are ready to return. [Nearly 75%](#), in fact.

But what will the new office look like? No doubt, it will be different. [74% of employers surveyed in May](#) plan to “modify workplaces, practices and policies” due to the pandemic. Employees are expecting these changes, as “45% expect their employer to space out workstations at least six feet from other co-workers” (according to a [survey conducted by Glassdoor](#)). Temperature checks, masks and hand sanitizer were also on the list of expected changes for office employees.

[Commercial leases typically last 3-5 years](#), so despite the great changes over 2020—many companies are still locked into a building lease. Even if they are still paying rent ([96% of rent](#) was collected in April and May), things are likely to have changed financially. [More than 42%](#) of the 8,500 tenants managed by property management company JLL asked about rent relief. By the end of the year, [vacancies will increase 2.6%](#).

No one is quite sure what the post-pandemic office space will be like. [Some think](#) that employers will look for new leases on smaller buildings or split offices throughout or across regions. But [according to a survey by Colliers](#), it’s really going to be about flexibility. Some offices will split, some will stay and some will never come back. What every commercial office space will need, however, is flexibility all around.

For this reason, it’s important to look more closely at what offices will look like after COVID. *What does office flexibility really mean in a pandemic? The three biggest areas that will need flexibility are the lease terms, work policies and office floor design.*

Flexible lease terms

Because of the impact of COVID, many employers will not be looking to lock themselves into long-term lease. When it comes to remote work, 73% of execs say it was a success. Staggered schedules and hybrid work arrangements will likely pick up in popularity. That means that an employer is no longer shopping for one large building to house 100% of its employees, 100% of the time.

Employers now realize that it's in their benefit to seek out flexible leases with properties and technology. In a mirroring of the way consumers crave "Stop Anytime," zero commitment subscriptions, so will the employers of tomorrow. As COVID has shown us, anything can happen. Many employers could be hesitant to lock themselves into long leases on big buildings, opting instead for hybrid solutions with negotiable terms.

Flexible work policies

Another trend that may emerge out of the pandemic is flexibility for the workers themselves. A rise in more open work policies is coming. It's estimated that 25-30% of the workforce will be working from home several days a week by the end of 2022.

Many workers want WFH or remote work at least part of the time. 83% want to continue working remotely at least once per week. According to another source, over 1/3 would take a pay cut for this perk. Additionally, they may want to set their own hours, coming and going as they need to accommodate child care, healthcare and other personal matters that make up a large part of the work-life balance.



Flexible office floor design

The [CDC recommends](#) a number of precautionary measures for design of the office floor. Notably, the first recommendation for hazard control involves reconfiguration of the space. To maintain social distancing guidelines of six feet in between people, it's suggested that employers "modify or adjust seats, furniture and workstations."

Many facility teams are working with buildings designed for 100% capacity spread across workstations that aren't very distant. A rise in the open floor plan encouraged off-the-cuff inspiration and collaboration, but the pandemic will likely change the way we sit together. Desks will need to be spread apart. [Some suggest](#) the installation of glass or plastic "sneeze guards" between desks. There have even been some rumors about [cubicles making their way back](#), as the great intermingling of workers will need to be redesigned.

Because it's simply too difficult to redo an entire office space quickly, many will lean on flexible reconfigurations rather than full redesigns. With the existing furniture, new layouts can be quickly set up. Workstations can sit alone or with dividers, and disinfecting supplies should be nearby. Additionally, a separate power source helps eliminate the risk of transmission by keeping employees from sharing outlets.

Here is one example office layout for workstations, showing partitions and a new arrangement for desks:



THE POWER TO CHANGE

Flexible designs also lend themselves well to flexibility in the lease terms and work policies. The less complex the setup, the easier it will be for facility teams to change quickly. This makes a space ready for whatever may come, ranging from lockdown orders to come-and-go staggered in-person schedules.

For facility teams and companies that need help, there are projects like [The Six Feet Office](#) and recommendations from [BOMA](#) that can assist with any pandemic office space planning. Additionally, for those that need help figuring out their plan for the electrical infrastructure, Legrand has a wide variety of [power and charging options for the commercial office](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly shaken the commercial office sector, causing big changes to the way we work that impact the design of office buildings. While it remains uncertain just exactly what will happen as we look out to the coming years, we know that flexibility across the lease, work policies and space design is powerful for any adaptable employer.



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