



# HOW CORONAVIRUS MAY CHANGE THE FUTURE OF WORK

For many, work habits and rituals have changed beyond recognition since the crisis began. **June Koh**, EMEA Workplace Director explores how these collective experiences may shape the office of the future – for the better.

**U**p until very recently, the shift away from traditional office design towards more dynamic workplaces and work habits that promote wellbeing has felt relevant only to certain types of organisations, workers, demographics or personalities. The coronavirus pandemic has changed that overnight. As a consequence of self-isolation rules, many employees and organisations have been thrust into working in a completely different way. Remote working has become the norm and office buildings left empty.

Organisations and their employees are having to demonstrate agility, resilience, patience and understanding to make sure that work gets done among all the disruption.

Before the crisis struck, we published an article that discussed trends that we believe would shape the ‘future office’. Given that the discussion around the future of work is now entering uncharted territory, we thought it would be a good time to revisit and re-examine those trends – as much as this current crisis is going to show us what

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is unnecessary and obsolete, it also has the potential to create a cohesive human agreement on what it is that we value about work, which will go on to shape our future workplaces.

## **People and their wellbeing will matter most**

Workplaces have been upping their commitment to employee wellbeing over the last decade, evident from how many times ‘wellbeing’ pops up as a forum or conference topic. But what will we have learned from recent events about what we value most



about ‘going’ to work and ‘being’ at work? Will employees want a return to strict nine-to-five routines, or will they want more flexible working to incorporate personal wellbeing objectives? The mass stay-at-home exercise could also convince many that it’s not necessary to live in a city for employment opportunities and career advancement, which up until now, has been the traditional view. We know that choice and control are the two most significant factors on a person’s wellbeing – would a recalibrated option for when we work and where we live point us towards healthier living?

Workplaces will be increasingly centred on developing a community base — virtual and physical — that supports comfort, creativity, productivity and job satisfaction. But understanding and measuring the impact of workplace environmental factors on issues such as employee motivation, satisfaction, productivity and mental health is going to be even more complex moving forward. Furthermore, we are witnessing first-hand how digital technologies are rapidly reshaping what we do and how our workplaces need to be re-imagined, built and operated. Looking further ahead, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which will be driven by automation and artificial intelligence (AI), will mean that some jobs will cease to exist in the coming



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# 2050

Deadline for climate emergency and the industry’s commitment to net zero carbon

years while others will be created. We think that this will not change. However, added to this mix will be an unintended assessment of job functions, criticality of different roles and operating models to come up with an optimal model of working, both for people and organisations. As more and more organisations recognise that their people are their most expensive and valuable asset, there’s going to be a revaluation of the kind of work we truly value; and it may look drastically different from what we previously thought.

The prevailing logic is that as AI takes over the mundane, low-skilled tasks, people will be valued for the ‘human’ things we’re good at (e.g. empathy, creativity, etc.): in short, people will always matter most. This probably won’t be derailed by the current crisis but our perception of the spectrum of jobs that we think will require a human touch may alter. This prolonged period of non-contact may change minds about how we feel about the cashier versus the self-checkout machine conundrum.

## Leveraging building and workplace data to boost wellbeing

Data is largely focused these days on understanding occupancy, movement patterns, space utilisation and collaboration patterns. As we migrate

back into our office buildings, we may see a shift in priorities where organisations use building and workplace data to elevate employee wellbeing and mitigate health risks instead. Access to data may also become more democratic. As organisations deploy sensors and monitors to help reassure users that their buildings are keeping them healthy, users will also demand access to data and insights to self-regulate their own behaviours and hold their employers accountable for providing up-to-scratch workplaces.

## Addressing climate challenge is still important

The climate emergency and the industry’s commitment to net zero carbon by 2050 will remain a pressing issue – the ideas around design within a circular economy will continue to resonate, not just with architects and developers, but with companies and employees as well. Working within a building that is energy-efficient and built to net zero carbon will quickly become an expectation and the norm. To achieve this, modularity will play an important part in providing adaptability, decreasing waste and redundancy of resources. By designing buildings with more modular elements that can be deconstructed, adapted and reconstructed, we can extend their life and enable resources to be salvaged and reused.



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#### **Kinder, more inclusive workplaces**

When we return to the office after all these weeks of self-isolation, are we going to be kinder and more considerate to our co-workers, and focus more on connecting with each other? Will ‘community’ cease to be just a buzz word and become a fundamental reason and anchor for being in office buildings with fellow employees? The intricacies of existing in a multi-generational workplace has been a much-talked about topic – even more so now that there are, not four, but five generations in the workplace. In the light of our recent experiences, we think that the conversation must shift from highlighting differences to truly living out diversity and inclusion policies which will underpin how entire organisations behave, interact and collaborate.

We need to start building strong communities at work that share values but also celebrate differences: our future offices will play a critical part. 