

# life

ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN

## RETHINKING THE POST-PANDEMIC OFFICE

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**Adele Shevel**

Managers are getting twitchy about persuading staff to return to the office. A year since lockdown began and people started working from home en masse, the consensus is that in future we'll have a hybrid model — partly working at the office, partly at home. Employers need to be flexible.

Let's face it, working from home isn't for everyone. While some people have efficient home offices, and it's hard to argue against eliminating the commute, others hate the chaos, the fact that load-shedding can play Russian roulette with productivity and the Groundhog Day of soulless Zoom meetings.

For companies too, there are mixed feelings — sure, they have lower overheads for electricity, coffee, security and rental, but remote collaborations rarely yield fantastic results.

In this nuanced landscape, some companies are redesigning their space in anticipation of a new post-Covid work world.

Claire D'Adorante, an award-winning director at interior design specialists Paragon Interface, is working on several projects to rejig working environments to entice employees.

"Some businesses are really battling to get people back to the office, and they just can't," says D'Adorante. In some companies, she says, only about 10% of employees have returned to the office.

To lure those who revel in the fact that home offices are quieter, some businesses are setting up pods — where you can take a call, dock your laptop for a few hours and then head back to your desk. There's been a similar demand for collaborative "touch-down areas".

"Businesses are saying they don't believe people will come back 100%, ever. They think 60%-80% of people will be back at the office and they're asking what they can do to make it more attractive," says D'Adorante.

The guiding principle is flexibility. Gone are the days when an office would be separated into dedicated work areas and dedicated social spaces — now the two must merge. D'Adorante says the space can't be "limiting".

"The main reason people want to return is they miss collaborating with each other," says D'Adorante. Her clients — including legal firms, consultants, professional services, as well as banks and other financial institutions — want the office space to prioritise collaboration.

"We're also hearing younger people are battling to learn, and mentoring is an issue."

### No all-or-nothing approach

Paul Kollenberg, head of asset management at Growthpoint Properties, says a silver lining of Covid-19 is that the company has spent far more time speaking to its tenants and understands their needs far better.

Kollenberg says some companies were bringing back employees in November and December last year — and then the second wave hit. Now, companies are again eager to see staff



123RF Igor Samolentko



123RF/smaglov



return. "A lot of our companies are saying they want to use this time to get people back [since they believe staff] are not as effective and productive at home," he says.

But he reckons it's unlikely to be the all-or-nothing approach of the past.

"There is potential for one or two days' work at home per week. It might mean office space requirements will change, and there's the need for more collaboration and meeting rooms, the things you can't do at home," he says.

Still, much of this is guesswork. Most tenants are uncertain what their needs will be, how much space they will want or even what their offices should look like. In the short term, they want places without huge set-up costs, where IT and even furniture is provided. And they want easy access to retail hubs.

"I think that's why Rosebank is so successful," says Kollenberg. "You

can walk across the road and have everything there."

Businesses also want shorter lease terms and escape clauses. "We have tenants renewing [their leases now] who want to downsize, but they want the ability to upsize in a year's time if needed."

These are global trends.

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported recently that landlords in Manhattan are investing heavily in new amenities to woo workers back to offices. EB Kelly, who is in charge of managing the Rockefeller Center, says she is thinking deeply about how to get the 20,000 people who worked there back in the office.

"Pre-Covid, I used to say we were competing with other office buildings to lease office space," she told the newspaper. "Now we're competing with your couch. We need to give you a reason to get out of your home and come to the office."

As it is, the WSJ estimates that

only 15% of Manhattan office workers have returned to their desks. To shift this number, building owners are introducing perks — from child care onsite to a dry-cleaning collection service and discounts on parking.

Tishman Speyer, which owns the Rockefeller Center — with its 760,000m<sup>2</sup> of office space, 100 stores and 40 restaurants — is offering services such as groceries and meals delivered to your desk, and the ability to book manicures from the real estate company's app.

Coen van Oostrom, CEO of real estate developer Edge, told CNBC late last year that companies almost have to "seduce" staff back into the office. The ideal, he says, would be for office spaces to be seen as something of an exclusive club, and those who stay at home miss out.

Van Oostrom says companies will save money by renting less space, but the space they retain will be of a higher quality.

"We believe that the office will be the place that you get together, where the culture is being built, where new people are being brought in and can learn and understand the way things are done in a company," he says. "But to do so, you have to have a work environment that is amazing."

#### Permanent flexible working

Already, some of the world's largest companies have shifted towards a "permanent flexible working arrangement".

Standard Chartered, for example, announced a deal with IWG, the world's largest flexible workspace provider, that will allow the London-based banking organisation's 95,000 employees access to 3,500 IWG offices around the world.

It's a trend we're likely to see in SA too.

Joanne Bushell, MD of IWG in SA, says appetite for long-term office rentals has shrunk; last year, top-grade rentals fell 3% in Johannesburg and 2% in Cape Town and Pretoria.

Bushell says as lockdowns ease, there's a clear demand for flexible workspaces. Much of this demand comes from companies looking to offer staff a more mobile way of working, either from home, from the company office or from satellite co-working hubs.

All evidence suggests this will become the new norm — irrespective of control freak bosses who insist you return and sit where they can see you. If Covid-19 has bust one myth, it's that working from a company office is inherently more productive. ✕



Rockefeller Center,  
New York City  
Gailo Iages/AFP/Angela Weiss



## A sanctuary from home (and office)

Clico Boutique Hotel, in Joburg's busy Rosebank district, has generally been considered a business hotel. Close to the Gautrain station, it's a tranquil setting for hosting small conferences, while maintaining its allure as a high-end boutique hotel.

GM Martin Louw says he can no longer predict the type of visitor he gets.

"The lockdown changed everything," he says. "Lead time for bookings decreased tremendously. We have found that most people make last-minute bookings — often less than four days ahead — and it's all domestic travel."

Whereas occupancy used to spike from Tuesday to Thursday with business visitors, Clico is now busier from Friday to Sunday.

"As a hotelier of 26 years, forecasting demand is a bit of a thumb-suck in this sensitive business climate," says Louw.

Its rates have dropped during the pandemic to appeal to local leisure travellers. An average night's stay cost R2,700 before Covid and about R1,800 now.

But Clico has also found a new life, as a

destination for people looking to work outside the home. This writer tried that out — and the experience couldn't be faulted: reliable Wi-Fi, quiet and private, it ticked all the boxes.

Clearly, business is picking up. The numberplates in the parking areas aren't from Gauteng — they're from the North West and the Western Cape.

Louw spent most of his working career in Europe, Asia and Australia. He says his peers overseas have highlighted a growing trend of "digital nomads" — people who rent an Airbnb or guesthouse for months and spend time working from somewhere different. Often they bring kids, who learn remotely.

"If you don't have to go into the office every day, and you can do your job from a beach town, why not?" he says.

People are looking for convenience, Wi-Fi, great food and areas of interest. The

hotspots, his colleagues say, include warmer climates like Tampa or Fort Lauderdale in Florida. One of Louw's colleagues, who runs 180 Airbnb properties in Florida, can't keep up with demand. The same is happening in Ibiza, where many Spaniards have decamped to from the larger cities, and in smaller Australian beach towns close to the cities.

Does this suggest a potential windfall for towns on the KwaZulu-Natal coast or outside Cape Town, as professionals from the bigger cities follow this trend? It seems that's what the smart money is saying. x

Adele Shevel



## Offices go anticorporate

Steelcase, which sells office furniture across the world, says that contrary to predictions, most workers need to be at an office because work "in its essence is a social endeavour".

Employees come to offices for two main reasons: to connect with other people and to have access to technology they don't carry in their backpacks. "The office didn't go away, but it's evolving into something fundamentally different."

You could argue that, as Steelcase makes its money selling to offices, it's predictable that the company would make such a statement. But Steelcase global head of design James Ludwig says: "People

are rebelling against offices that are focused on uniformity and standards."

It means, he says, that there's been a renaissance in office design. People are looking for offices that inspire creativity, and they want human-centred technology that makes life easier instead of more complicated. While designers saw this shift years ago, Covid has accelerated it. Those ideas "are being embraced and adopted at a rapid pace".

Steelcase says attitudes began changing in the 1990s, thanks to the pop culture influence of *Dilbert* cartoonist Scott Adams, who started lampooning the workplace. British TV series *The Office* made offices a symbol of "wasting one's life in bland, nondescript spaces".

Tech start-ups were the first to change. Their informal set-up "struck a chord with workers everywhere", Ludwig says, as game tables and coffee machines gave people a greater sense of "autonomy, self-expression and freedom".

Mobile technology sped things up further, allowing people to leave their office.

In the case of the office, "there's an 'anticorporate' backlash, because the term 'corporate' implies that a space has been created for the benefit of the organisation, not the person", Ludwig says.

Design principles that counter that, and make the office more about personal choice and privacy, are now, predictably, in vogue. x Adele Shevel