

Design evolves for the collaborative office

Simon Pole says he has seen inside more living rooms, dining rooms, studies and bedrooms during COVID-19 than ever before in his life.

The designer has been viewing these pop-up home offices virtually, of course, as part of his global research into how business will operate after the lockdown.

What he and colleagues at Unispace, a global design and workplace strategy company specialising in fit-outs in CBD towers, have found is that three months of remote working has accelerated a trend to technology they thought might take a decade.

Unispace is urging employers to build a different style of office to accommodate workers who will become more demanding about working from home. There will be fewer individual desks but more shared spaces for collaboration and networking.

Mr Pole, the company's global design director, says: "One of the main reasons why people did not work remotely before COVID-19 was generally because their managers had a lack of trust. So mainly it was a perk.

"Now employees will want more flexibility so while the office is not obsolete, it needs to change.

His research over eight years has found most work breaks into four elements — 60 per cent of our time is for focused tasks; 25 per cent is for collaborative work; 8 per cent is for learning and training; and 7 per cent is spent socialising.

"We have learnt now that 85 per cent of us can do focused work from home, so the majority of us could do the majority of our working week from home," he says.

"We are also seeing an increase in side-by-side, problem-solving work with a colleague. We have gone already from individual work stations to pairing up on benches because companies have realised that two heads are better than one. Digital natives and millennials have been trained this way at school and continue this in the workforce: they know peer-to-peer works, they know nothing else.

"Mr Pole says the office has to change from being a "stick" wielded by employers — you must go there if you want a job — to a "carrot" which is so attractive staff choose to go there for collaborative work.

Unispace used to start consultations on a floor plan for a client by asking how many people there were and how they worked, and then planned for individual or shared work spaces. "Now we say, everyone has a perfectly good desk at home, so why do we need a desk in the office and a desk at home if we can do most of our work at home," he says. "Let's think about the office as a space where we network, where we work side-by-side and co-create and innovate. So instead of starting with a desk we start with team spaces and collaboration space.

"We are working with five clients right now who have started projects, talking to them about adapting their layouts. One of them is in the middle of the project and we are working on site with them to change the space.

"Mr Pole says some clients see the shift to remote working as a way to reduce office space by 20 or 30 per cent but others are interested in exchanging some space to house better technology and better spaces for people to use. Some organisations would likely expand post COVID-19 but not take on extra floor space.

Unispace calls it the "propeller" workplace — an office hub with areas for activities such as problem solving, community and innovation and some focused work, with the home seen as an extension of the workplace and as a place for focused work and learning.

Mr Pole says office design will inevitably change: from occupancy levels in meeting rooms, to a reduction in the number of single desks. And the co-working spaces that have been launched in big cities in recent years will survive the lockdown, he says. But they will need to move from the CBDs to the fringes of cities where people live and along transport corridors, so some people can use these centres instead of their homes if they don't want to commute to headquarters.

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