Adapting Offices in response to COVID-19 & hybrid working

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Our starting point....

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Luca D'Urbino

The
Economist

Getting back to work

What will be the new normal for offices?

Millions of workers are toiling at home because of the pandemic.
Many of them may never go back into the office

'Five-day office week will become the norm again'

By Elisabeth Mahy
Wake Up to Money, BBC Radio 5 Live

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Jessica Bowles said firms wanted more flexible spaces and shorter leases, but most still wanted a five-day office

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What's happened to where we work…….?

44.4% of people who worked last week worked from home

ONS data May 2020

12.3% pre-COVID-19

Approximately 75% of workers would like >1 day/week in their office (CBRE, 2020).

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How might homeworking be affecting people?

How might this be affecting people?

Are people more satisfied when they work away from the office?

e-working and WFH consistently linked to higher levels of job satisfaction. Partly explained by the greater autonomy workers experience (both work and home) and better work-life balance (e.g., Golden & Veiga, 2005; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Fonner & Roloff, 2010).

Do WFH people feel differently about their organization?

Evidence of higher organizational commitment amongst e-workers than office-based workers. May be due to a perception that their employer trusts them to work in this way and that this engenders loyalty (e.g., Harker Martin & MacDonnell, 2012; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Charalampous, Grant, Tramontano, & Michailidis, 2019).

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How does WFH fit with home life?

> Homeworkers report experiencing lower levels of work-family conflict, lower levels of stress and greater work-life balance than office based colleagues (e.g., Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

– Workers often describe the flexibility that WFH gives them allowing them to fit work around home demands and make use of the lack of commute.

– Some indication that women benefit more from homeworking as they are able to use this to structure work around other commitments (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

Post Covid- emerging evidence that Women less likely to be returning to offices….

Entrenching gendered roles?

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More balanced and productive?

Homeworkers more likely to extend work hours into the early morning or late evening or simply work longer hours…

Recent data….. Evidence of increased hours worked, offsetting changes in output and reducing overall productivity – Gibbs, Mengel & Siemorth (2021) calculated a 20% drop in productivity.

More time spent in planned interactions and meetings to maintain output?

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How much you WFH seems to be important

Evidence that job satisfaction increases as the proportion of time working away from the office increases, but that this does not appear to be linear, with a decrease and plateau at around 15hours…
(Charalampous, Grant, Tramontano, & Michailidis, 2019; Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015)

Suggests there may be a tipping point at which the flexibility and other benefits that homeworking provides may be off-set by difficulties in maintaining work relationships, loss of face-to-face interactions etc.

- What is the optimum amount of time home vs office…..?

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What does WFH do to work relationships?

Again, appears to be a tipping point for how WFH affects relationships and interactions with colleagues…

- Spending more than 2.5 days a week working remotely linked to worsening working relationships with colleagues
(Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

People who e-work or WFH extensively report greater professional isolation than office based colleagues – a sense of missing out on networking opportunities, informal learning and mentoring.
(Charalampous, Grant, Tramontano, & Michailidis, 2019).

How applicable is this to our current situation….?

Some big caveats on interpreting the existing research base….

Most research studies focus on "knowledge workers" and those who are typically more established/have higher tenure (likely having demonstrated that they "can be trusted")

➢ This is unlikely to be reflective of the broader workforce currently forced to homework (remember the 44.4% figure).

➢ Nor is it likely to reflect the groups of workers who may be expected to adopt much greater forms of e-working going forwards if we are to do away with offices.

The positive link between WFH and job satisfaction is moderated by factors such as task interdependence and discretion over the role i.e., independent, highly autonomous knowledge workers reap benefits from homeworking….

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However….. A significant proportion of workers in office-based sectors continued to work from adapted offices

For example: 28.5% of Professional, Scientific, Technical workforce, (ONS, October 2020)

Typical Office Adaptations

- **Ventilation**
  - Maximised the flow of fresh air in office spaces to minimize airborne viral transmission. This has often meant introducing procedures to manage keeping windows open and adapting mechanical ventilation systems and their operation, as well as evaluating occupancy levels.
  - Ensured that ventilation systems and natural ventilation facilities are maintained and operated following HSE and CIBSE guidelines.
  - Retrofit in some older buildings and those with complex air-conditioning systems difficult.

(Photo by Michal Matlon from Unsplash)

- **Desks and Workstations**
  - Implemented 'clear desk' policies to aid frequent cleaning, and clearly marked out desks out of use due to social distancing.
  - Hot desking has been reduced in general, however can be used with provision of cleaning supplies and leaving 15 minutes between occupants to reduce viral transmission.

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Typical Office Adaptations

- **Sanitisers and PPE**
  - Provided sanitiser points throughout the offices, specifically at key touch points (e.g., lifts, stairs, workstations, meeting rooms, printers and kitchens) and surface wipes for occupants to wipe equipment before and after use.
  - Mandated mask wearing when moving around the building or in busy areas, encouraged but not essential when at a desk.

(Photo by Anton from Unsplash)

- **Using equipment and office facilities**
  - Restricted use of some facilities (e.g., printers, communal kitchens) or removed touch points within these areas (e.g., cupboard doors, shared equipment).
  - Installation of full-height washroom dividers and other Perspex dividers if required.
  - Adapted travel patterns, including making parking available and accessible, increasing bike storage and personal equipment lockers to support employees choosing not to use public transport.

Typical Office Adaptations

- **Enabling technologies**
  - Implemented air quality sensors, UV air filtration and space monitoring to manage performance and occupancy flow.

  - Introduced room or space booking systems, touchless entry to buildings and encouraged contactless payments for in-house canteen/coffee.

  - Upgraded IT, including fitting out meeting rooms to allow for hybrid meetings, laptops for hybrid working employees, intranet/comms updates and investment in new software.

(Photo by Leon from Unsplash)

What new data do these systems to provide re: where, how and with whom we work?

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Coronavirus   Live updates   U.S. map   World map   Reopening tracker   Lives lost   Your life at home   Your money

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Business

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.

Why do we need an office?

➢ There will always be a need for a degree of office space for roles that cannot be performed "off-site" – security, confidentiality, technology, safeguarding requirements etc.

➢ For individuals who could WFH, there has to be a reason to be in an office, over and above just it "being where they work".

What we mean by "office" may change though…..

May become less of term to describe where you predominantly sit to work and more of a space we meet or come together.

It provides the social and technical functions that we can't achieve WFH.

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The office has to provide something that WFH doesn't

Likely to accelerate the trend that has seen the conversion of open-plan offices into more flexible workspaces (e.g., Activity Based Working, Flex Offices, Agile Offices) that offer a mix of task spaces, but much less individual space in favour of team or shared spaces (Leach & Clegg, 2019; Davis, 2019; Wohlers & Hertel, 2017).

For similar reasons as WFH (increased autonomy, adapt to personal needs), research has found that workers are more satisfied in a flex-office than in open-plan (Danielsson and Bodin (2008).

➢ Will need to balancing more variable demand - who wants to work from the office on a Friday?

➢ There is the risk that the flexibility and autonomy that is so prized in WFH may be eroded or that the opportunity to mix with and share ideas others outside of the immediate team are lost.

Future workplaces

Many large companies are trying out a workplace design that works better for hybrid working, which consists of a central headquarter and distributed flexible workspaces. This hub-and-spoke model is championed by the leading workspace solution providers like IWG and WeWork.
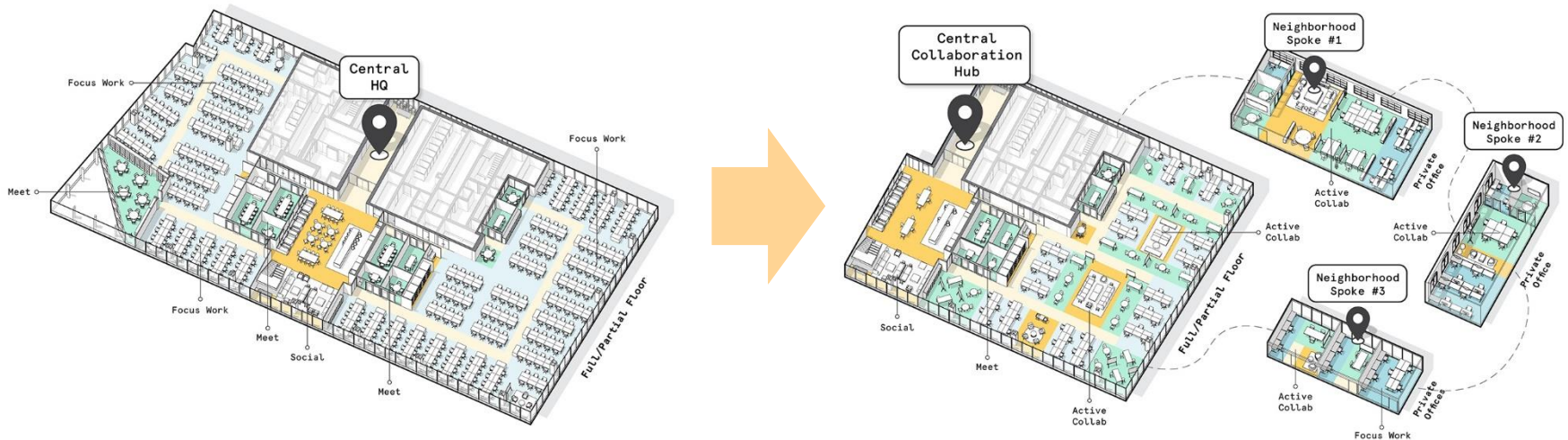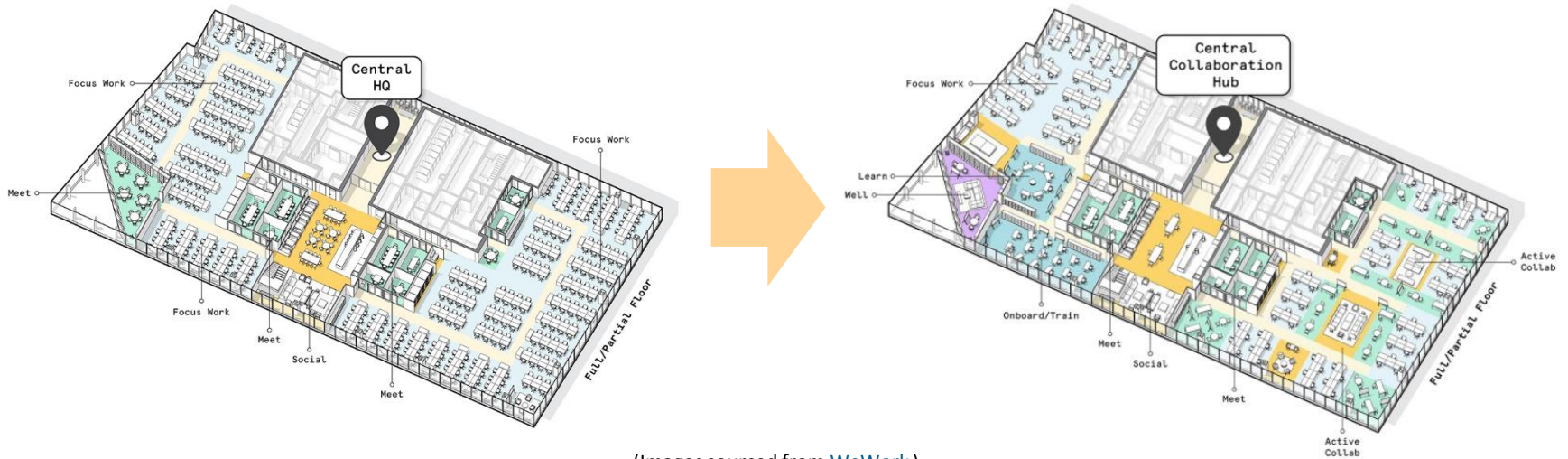

(Images sourced from WeWork)

Future workplaces

To support hybrid working, offices are being redesigned and optimised to support social interaction and collaboration. More active and co-working spaces and less fixed desks:

(Images sourced from WeWork)

A Balancing Act

The research suggests that there is a balance to be struck between the opportunities that WFH provides for cutting out the distractions from interruptions by colleagues (likely tied to individual performance) and the benefits to the organization by having employees sharing knowledge, having chance discussions, providing support and mentorship.

15 hours or 2.5 days WFH appears to be a tipping point, suggesting around 50% of time physically collocated with colleagues.

The benefits of being in the office are unlikely to be equally shared – e.g., younger, less experienced workers typically stand to gain from sharing the office (and interrupting) experienced colleagues.

Equality….. Not everyone has a safe or supportive environment from which to work at home, not all jobs will suit WFH.

What else do we need to know

Right now, the data collected by Governments and organisations alike focuses on what employees think they want when they return to the workplace.

However, when they do return, these preferences and desires are likely to evolve alongside the relaxation of social restrictions and the emergence of new work patterns – how I work will be influenced by how those around me work….

There are other specific concerns about collocation too. One example is that the flexibility and autonomy that were so prized in WFH may be eroded or that the opportunity to mix and share ideas with others outside of the immediate team are lost.

We can't base long-term decisions and change over assumptions about how we think we may work.

How to approach the return to the office?

Engage with staff

Recognise that everyone's pandemic experience has been different

Make the most opportunity out of the disruption

Don't rush this process or make large scale changes in haste

Build in technological resilience and adaptability

Pay extra attention to vulnerable employees (e.g. new starters)

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The Project and Team

- Multi-disciplinary research team funded by ESRC.
- Examining how offices have, or will be, adapted in response to COVID-19.
- Exploring how offices change as more workers return, as well as the different ways that offices and working practices may change long-term.
- The project runs until September 2022.

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RQ1: How can offices be successfully adapted to support social distancing, low occupancy and hybrid working?

RQ2: What types and level of office provision are required in the future to support organisational performance?

RQ3: How can the design process for office adaptation and associated change in working practices and technologies be managed?

RQ4: What is the experience for staff working in socially distanced offices and what barriers or concerns are there for staff returning to offices?

RQ5: What are the effects of different forms of socially distanced and hybrid office working on social networks, workflow and performance?
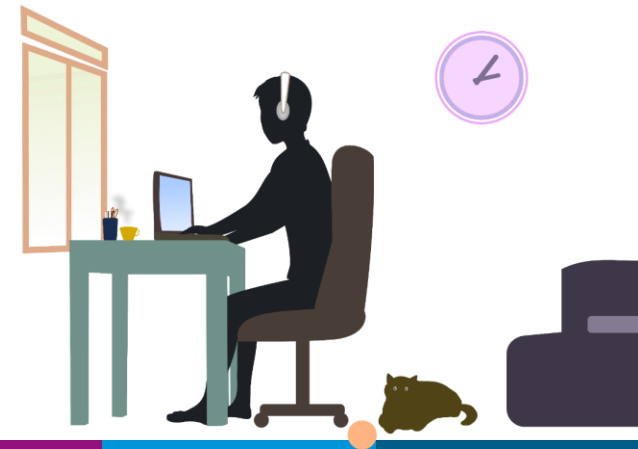
How can I get involved...?

➢ Stakeholder interviews
➢ Scenarios workshops
➢ Access to staff for employee interviews
➢ Access to offices for case studies
➢ Sharing of own practice, survey data, building information.
➢ Share reports, guidance etc. re: return to offices, office design.
➢ Take part in podcasts or webinars.

So…..?

➤ WFH broadly linked to greater job satisfaction, better work-life balance, organizational commitment and similar career progression.

➤ Downsides in increased hours worked, professional isolation and entrenched gender differences.

➤ Most workers are likely to need a proportion of time collocated with colleagues in an office.

➤ Need to rethink what the office is for – varies for different individuals, groups and organizations.

➤ Embracing hybrid presents challenges to performance management, diversity and equity.

➤ WFH and hybrid during COVID is not normal, beware lagging effects and poor data…..

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Thank You!

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