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The Future of The Office



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In recent years, we have seen an evolution in working environments driven by a shift in employer focus from purely financial to more holistic drivers such as well-being, sustainability and flexibility. The recent pandemic has forced even the most traditional of companies to adapt. This combined with the post-millennial demand for a fully flexible and often integrated work and lifestyle balance is likely to see a seismic change to the traditional office as we know it going forward.

Smart buildings/sustainability

Sustainability is now high on the agenda for developers when creating new office space. This means that there has been a revolution in the way that many buildings are designed.

On a very rudimentary level we have had some level of reactivity in offices for well over a decade, for example with lighting. However, the key to developing smart buildings is the integration of all systems so that they can fully communicate with each other. A network of sensors allow for newer smart buildings to react to the environment around them in real time, for example, maximising energy efficiency, limiting excess water consumption and monitoring and collecting data to improve energy management long term.

Whilst the initial outlays in the creation of smart buildings are often higher, they will increasingly pay dividends for developers, investors and occupiers. Corporate tenants are already savvy when it comes to the reputational impact of sustainability and will increasingly insist on letting buildings from investors that provide the best available sustainable solutions for them. The resulting effect being that the demand for new office space is therefore for smart new office space. In addition tenants using smart buildings will see a direct reduction in the costs of energy consumption.

Whilst the UK is still somewhat off from making smart buildings commonplace, the technology is available. There is no doubt that as smart building development continues, we will see a snowball effect, resulting in smart 'zones' or smart cities. A

seamless integration of buildings with the grid and other infrastructure (such as transport), would allow for entire areas to share energy seeing smart buildings generating energy as well as consuming it.

"Gamification" of offices and virtual office space

Gaming technology and virtual reality is now being integrated with office space to maximise flexibility. For example the use of visual barriers to repurpose open plan spaces, creating different zones or atmospheres at any given time, simply by using a smart phone or remote control. Augmented reality finishes, such as signage and flowers, have also been developed.

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With regard to homeworking, the virtual office is likely to become much more advanced. Whilst online meetings are already commonplace, there are many downsides to working in a solitary environment particularly when it comes to team integration, learning from colleagues around you or even reading body language. Headset technology already exists and following the onset of COVID-19 we could see a rapid increase in use for this technology, enabling employees to 'plug in' from home to a virtual office and sit with and interact with colleagues around them.

Flexible working and agile space

While many offices had already adapted to facilitate hot-desking to allow for people to work from home, this may, temporarily at least, become redundant in order to minimise infection risk.

That said the pandemic has undoubtedly forced companies to acknowledge the huge

potential cost savings of a home workforce. There will be a resulting rethink at board level for many big corporates (we have already seen announcements from Amazon and Google) looking to save hundreds of millions a year on rents. Whilst face to face interaction will, on some level, always have its place – we are likely to see the trend for reducing office space continue.

Lifestyle and well-being

The future will no doubt also see further blurring of lines between home and work life. In addition to the now increasingly commonplace integration of gyms, bars and coffee shops into the office – we are likely to see companies go further with games rooms/television and cinema spaces (or in companies such as Google – ball pools!). Modular spaces that can be adapted and businesses sharing spaces with common facilities will also become the norm.

Mental as well as physical well-being is now fully on the radar of most companies. With technology enabling employers to churn out work at a phenomenal rate compared to 20 years ago, employers are starting to realise the importance of employees being able to switch off. Wellbeing rooms, quiet areas, onsite medical facilities and meditation spaces, which (to the extent they have existed to date) are often located in inconspicuous areas of a building such as the basement, are likely to become much more integrated within the office environment.

Conclusion

It would be naive to think that the rigid office environment and uniform structure to the working lives of employees will remain the same in decades to come. Change has been on the horizon for some time, albeit that some companies have been reluctant to embrace it. COVID-19 has forced people to reflect and, as corporate leases begin to expire in the coming years, it will be interesting to see whether we will now see an acceleration in the transformation of the office – and city life as we know it. PIN