

onOffice¹⁵⁴

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ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN AT WORK

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↑ Pallavi Dean: "For now,
the office is here to stay"

Photography: Courtesy of Roar

A NEW WAY TO WORK

The founder and creative director of Roar shares how Covid-19 will inspire a permanent shift towards a liquid workforce and hybrid work models

WORDS BY PALLAVI DEAN

If there will be one long-term impact of Covid-19 on office design, we believe it is this: the liquid workforce. While not a new concept, it is now more relevant than ever.

Originally coined by global professional services company Accenture, which describes the workplace term as ‘a workforce that can quickly adapt to changing trends’, I think of a liquid workforce as people who Zoom in their pyjamas from home in the morning, before power-dressing at lunchtime to head into the office for a high-stakes pitch.

With many of the makeshift instinctive reactions we’ve seen in office design last year fizzling out, we can’t help but ask ourselves whether we will continue to observe 2m social distancing in 2022? Will offices still use wayfinding to ensure ‘one-way flow’ – and what about juggling working from home while home-schooling our children?

At Roar, we give these measures a year or two at most. American office giant Herman Miller has described the reactions we have encountered in 2020 as “short-term tactics”, and while they make perfect sense in the midst of a global pandemic, we believe these ways of working will lose relevance in a post-pandemic world.

As office designers, clients don’t ask us to design an office for today; they commission us to create a future-proofed workspace for the next decade. This brings us back to the liquid workforce, demonstrating why we need to rethink both how we design our offices and how we work in order to stay relevant in the midst of a digital revolution.

The Middle East had been slow to embrace flexible work and remote working pre-2020, but Covid-19 has been a trend accelerator – if not a game changer. According to the Dubai Future Foundation, only 10% of UAE firms have allowed their office staff to work from home one or two days a week pre-pandemic, compared with 32% in Japan and 69% in the US. The 2020 crisis made regional companies and governments rethink a range of HR policies such as productivity, visas, technology and working hours – all of which have big implications for office design.

Interestingly, one or two days a week may be the sweet spot for remote working in the future. Netflix founder Reed Hastings, for instance, expects one day a week to be the norm for remote working going forward, with four days in the office and one day at home. Furthermore, researchers at Stanford University expect two days a week of remote work to become the norm, whereas JLL found that only 4.9% of staff want to work from home full time; a third prefer to work in the office full time, with the rest in favour of a more hybrid style of working.

Irrespective of the final number, office designers will have to establish a new type of workspace in the future. If we’re spending less time in the office, when we do return for meetings or collaborations, we need to make every minute count. For us, this means creating spaces where magic happens, both in public and what I like to call ‘collaboration’ spaces, which allow employees flexibility

throughout their workday and the chance to nurture company culture.

Global management consulting firm McKinsey & Company believes office designers must “resize the footprint creatively” post-Covid. This leads us to the following question: should 80% of the office be devoted to such collaboration rooms? While this is a large number, it may not be quite as high for every organisation. However, settling on the optimal split for an operation is crucial to the success of any office space.

Old rules of thumb, including ‘100sq ft per employee’, may no longer be relevant, as office utilisation rates continue to decline. Meanwhile, concepts such as hotdesking, hotelling and co-working – already gathering momentum before the pandemic – will come into greater focus. In the short term, health concerns will reverse these trends, but medium term, as hybrid working becomes more commonplace globally, having one’s own desk in the office may become increasingly rare.

Does that mean the death of the office as we know it? We think not. Traditional head offices will remain, boosted by flexible co-working spaces. While a handful of companies may thrive with zero commercial real estate, most will retain some kind of headquarters. Research from JLL suggests these headquarters may be smaller as companies cut back on expensive leases – however, some may choose to ‘top up’ office capacity with short-term rentals of WeWork and other co-working-type spaces. For now, the office is here to stay. ■