5 key trends shaping the post-pandemic workplace

Most workers are looking forward to returning to the office, post-pandemic, with many saying they'd prefer to spend the majority of their work-week there to meet face-to-face, socialise, brainstorm, and connect with each other again.

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Linda Trim, Director at Giant Leap, one of South Africa's largest workplace design specialists, said that while workers have some new needs and expectations driven by Covid-19, most of the issues and trends raised were already here pre-Covid — and were just exacerbated by the pandemic.

Here are five workplace trends that have been accelerated and now are driving priorities for the new post-pandemic office:

1. Mobile

"Workers will now expect the ability to work remotely and the autonomy to match work to the right setting far beyond the pandemic," said Trim. "Our pre-Covid research has consistently shown that people who spend at least a portion of their typical workweek outside the office have higher workplace satisfaction and score higher on indicators of innovation." She added that people working in a 'hybrid model' - balancing days at the office with working from home - appear more deliberate with how they use their time and have higher job satisfaction overall.

2. Choice

Employees' variety of work settings must now include the home. Said Trim: "Workers' desire for choice in the workplace is not new. We find that employers who provide a spectrum of choices for when and where to work were seen as more innovative and higher-performing." Our previous research found that innovative companies spend more time collaborating away from their desk and spend only about 3.5 days (74%) of their work-week in the office. Many workers depend on specific resources at their office. But the nature of work is changing — we're becoming more versatile, agile, and collaborative. We need a wider array of solutions — both inside and outside the office.

3. Privacy

Many workers already struggled to find privacy in the workplace — now they expect to maintain the privacy they have become accustomed to at home.

"The trend toward more open environments has led to the rise of shared or unassigned seating to provide more space

for collaborative areas for group work, but to the detriment of space for focusing or personal use," said Trim. Employees don't want a complete reversal of these trends, but better space allocation. In our consulting, we find that "mostly open" workplaces were associated with higher performance and greater experience, but noise, privacy, and the ability to focus remain key determinants of workplace effectiveness. Striking the right balance will be key in the future.

4. Seating arrangements

Just months before the pandemic sent office workers home, global design and architecture firm Gensler reported in a 2020 Workplace Survey that workplace effectiveness was in decline. And those in unassigned seating were struggling the most. Said Trim: "In South Africa we've noticed workers overwhelmingly favour a desk assigned only to them and are typically not willing to trade an assigned desk for increased flexibility to work remotely. Organisations will need to develop clever space reservation programmes to balance space utilisation, employee and team schedules, and safety."

5. Health and well-being

"People expect health and wellness to be built into everything. As workers reprioritise the importance of health and well-being, employers now face mounting pressure to combine indoor and outdoor spaces, nudge healthy behaviours, and support a sense of psychological well-being."

Across the globe, workers have experienced working from home, and many find their home environments provide greater comfort. Employers must now work harder to establish how their offices and workplace policies can support health and well-being.

"Now is an opportunity to create spaces where employees not only want to be, but to do their individual and collective best work," Trim concluded.