



ON THE ROAD TO COVID NORMAL

WITH NO END TO THE PANDEMIC IN SIGHT, FIRMS NEED TO BE PLANNING FOR A RETURN TO THE OFFICE THAT CAN BE SAFE AND FLEXIBLE. **BY KARIN DERKLEY**

The legal profession may not be returning to the workplace until early next year under the state government's return to COVID-normal roadmap, but Melbourne law firms need to be planning now to encourage employees to feel comfortable about returning to the office, workplace designers and strategists say.

A wholesale return to the office is unlikely before the new year under the government directive for offices and professional services that "employees must work from home or single site where reasonably practicable" until the state reaches "COVID-normal", which may not be before Christmas.

Even after that, offices will need to take measures to ensure physical distancing and hygiene, including the possibility that face coverings will still be required until an effective vaccine is found.

Meanwhile, employees are indicating they would prefer to continue working from home for at least part of the work week, even once restrictions are lifted.

A global survey by workplace experience assessment firm Leesman found that more than 75 per cent of employees said they were working productively from the home environment, while a Boston Consulting Group survey of Australian employees found that for people who can perform their duties from home, more than half wanted to continue to work from home at least two to three days a week even after the pandemic ends.

Workplace design academic RMIT associate professor Guillermo Aranda-Mena says the pandemic has legitimised working from home to the point where many organisations say they are unlikely to require employees to go back to full-time working from an office.

"Employees are saying we want to be able to come to the office for what we need to do there, which is more often than not the meetings and people interaction. But for doing our job we want to stay home – we don't want to be travelling one hour each way to work."

But few employees are saying they never want to go back into the office, and what they are missing is interaction with their teams and other workmates.

Gray Puksand workplace strategist Heide Smith says the message from a string of global surveys is that 10 to 20 per cent of employees are saying “get me back to the office right now while another 10 to 20 per cent say they would be happy to never go back to the office again”.

“That leaves us with 60 to 80 per cent in the middle who are saying that would like to keep working from home for at least part of the week, but what they miss is the interaction with team mates and the sense of being part of an organisation that comes with being physically present.”

That likelihood of a permanent shift to employees working at least a couple of days from home is already being acknowledged by a number of law firms.

Maddocks says the work from home experience during the pandemic has proved that a dispersed workforce hasn’t changed the level of service the firm is providing to its clients. “Our expectation is that more of our people will want to work flexibly once the pandemic is over,” a spokesperson says. “This includes working more away from the office or working fewer days.”

Ashurst says the firm plans to move to a permanent model where many staff will have an option of splitting time between the office and home if that meets the needs of clients. “As a guide, we expect some staff could spend three days a week in the office and two days at home, although this will differ between teams.”

Herbert Smith Freehills announced that it will allow its employees to work two days a week from home once the pandemic has ended. “Despite the pressure and worries of the pandemic, we know that many of our people have greatly valued the flexibility of how, where and when we work, gaining more time for their families, health and other commitments,” CEO Justin D’Agostino said. “We also recognise that the office will remain an important place for connection, collaboration and learning, with clients and with each other.”

That desire for social interaction is what is most likely to draw people back into the office, Ms Smith says. “A lot of our friendship groups are associated with the office, and a lot of people choose their job and their role based on the fact that the company’s values align with their own. So you get a lot of connection and sense of purpose and belonging through your work, and that is

what we’re missing.”

What that means is that law firms may have to recalibrate their floorplans to shift the focus from day-to-day working either in elbow to elbow open plan layouts or separate offices, to an environment that supports collaborative but safe interactions between teams.

Those who have been successfully working from home, even if under duress and while minding children and home schooling as well, may need to be enticed back into the office when government guidelines allow, especially once children are back at school.

“Why would a person who can work comfortably at home, has a correct setup and is well supported by their business through technology and have the right pieces of equipment that are really highly important to a conducive work from home environment want to come into the office?” Ms Smith asks.

“If we embrace the idea that people will make a choice to work from home two to three days a week and will therefore be making a choice about when they come to the office and why they come to the office we need to create office spaces that make people want to come into the office.”

CBRE head of workplace strategy and change management Nicole Fitzgerald says it’s important for Melbourne firms to plan ahead to create an environment that is safe for people but also welcoming.

“There’s a really important balance as organisations prepare to reopen the workplace that also feels welcoming and has the



community spirit that people are really seeking out especially in Melbourne's situation where you've been in lockdown for such a long period of time."

Ms Smith says firms may need to focus more on providing spaces that support a collaborative team-based environment.

"Allocated seating is essential . . . for younger lawyers who gain their skills from their seniors through observation and osmosis . . ."

"If I'm coming into the office to connect with my team, I don't need a desk to go and do my work on my own, I need a team space to interact with my team."

In this kind of environment, allocated desks for day to day individual work may be less important, she says. Instead she envisions relaxed lounge areas for more informal collaboration, or standing workbenches where team members can work together with individual laptops connecting to a larger screen.

"There may still be a need for spaces to do individual work in between your team meetings, but the need for individual workstations will be much less. Instead you could have flexible individual work areas or study booths."

However, workplace design firm Icon Interiors senior project manager Gavin Morley argues that flexible desking arrangements undermine the objective of fostering team interaction and a sense of belonging in the office. "Hot desking runs completely counter to the idea of being able to settle in a workstation, to nest."

Allocated seating is essential not just for specific meetings but for the more incidental interactions that take place during the workday, he says. That is particularly the case for younger lawyers who gain their skills from their seniors through observation and osmosis and the easy back and forth that can only be achieved through in-person interaction.

"If you push the notion that no one really needs a space anymore, why don't we all work from home – if you're saying it doesn't matter where you sit or that you could as easily work in a café, you're basically saying you don't want to be part of a team culture. It doesn't create opportunities for mentoring and collaboration, and the whole building of teams falls apart."

A better option he says, is to have work pods with people working back to back but able to swivel around to have a conversation. He says this configuration provides three times the distance between people compared to a side by side configuration, while still keeping close enough proximity to conduct easy conversations.

"These are the kinds of things we've been implementing over the past couple of years to reduce acoustic distraction and improve privacy in open plan offices, and we've found that this configuration can also help minimise airborne transmission of pathogens as well."

Mr Morley says the hygiene issue can be dealt with while still having allocated desks by having a clean desk policy. "You basically have to clear your desk at the end of the day so it can be thoroughly sanitised by the cleaning team."

Hygiene will continue to be an issue in offices until an effective vaccine becomes available, Mr Morley acknowledges. Apart from physical distancing between workstations, and clear occupancy limits for meeting rooms based on the four square metres per person rule, Mr Morley says swipe cards that automatically open doors may become common, along with motion sensor water taps and soap dispensers. Improved ventilation services, perhaps incorporating ultraviolet light treatment in air conditioning ducts, and anti-microbial coatings on door handles and worktops may also assist in reducing the spread of pathogens.

In Sydney where firms have been able to occupy offices since June, common measures have included decommissioning every second workpoint to maintain good physical distancing, using plants or storage cabinets for separation, increasing the cleaning regime, and having a concierge managing lift occupancy, according to Ms Fitzgerald.

Maintaining cleanliness in the office shouldn't come at the expense of a welcoming and humane environment, Professor Aranda-Mena points out. "You don't want to have a completely clinical and barren environment in the workplace. People have had the experience of working from home with their dog at their feet, and they want to keep that sense of personalisation when they go to work."

To cater to the likelihood that team members will continue to work from home, at least part time, firms need to ensure spaces continue to be "digitally inclusive", Ms Fitzgerald says.

"When we're all virtual we're all perfectly framed on our Zoom or Teams calls, we can see each other's faces and we're getting a lot of feedback about how a collaboration is going.

"But we have to make sure we don't forget the lesson of the lockdown and fall into the old habits where virtual participants don't feel as included and the meeting doesn't go as effectively as when everyone was virtual."

Design modifications can help cater for those who are logging in to a meeting from their remote workspace, she says. "So instead of those team members being forgotten about, they need to be in clear line of sight with the people physically in the room so they are part of the conversation." ■