

The New York Times

The Pandemic May Mean the End of the Open-Floor Office

As businesses contemplate the return of workers to their desks, many are considering large and small changes to the modern workplace culture and trappings.



The offices of Infection Prevention at the University of California, Irvine, has translucent protective barriers between desks and now requires employees to wear masks. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

By Matt Richtel

Published May 4, 2020 Updated May 10, 2020



SAN FRANCISCO — The modern corporate office is renowned for open, collaborative work spaces, in-house coffee bars and standing desks with room for two giant computer monitors.

Soon, there may be a new must-have perk: the sneeze guard.

This plexiglass barrier that can be mounted on a desk is one of many ideas being mulled by employers as they contemplate a return to the workplace after coronavirus lockdowns. Their post-pandemic makeovers may include hand sanitizers built into desks that are positioned at 90-degree angles or that are enclosed by translucent plastic partitions; air filters that push air down and not up; outdoor gathering space to allow collaboration without viral transmission; and windows that actually open, for freer air flow.

The conversation about how to reconfigure the American workplace is taking place throughout the business world, from small start-ups to giant Wall Street firms. The design and furniture companies that have been hired for the makeovers say the virus may even be tilting workplaces back toward a concept they had been moving away from since the Mad Men era: privacy.

The question is whether any of the changes being contemplated will actually result in safer workplaces.

“We are not infectious disease experts, we are simply furniture people,” said Tracy D. Wymer, vice president for workplace at Knoll, a company that makes office furniture and has been engaged by anxious clients, including some of the country’s largest corporations, to come up with ways to make workplaces less of a health risk.

The actual disease experts say that a virus-free office environment is a pipe dream. Dr. Rajneesh Behal, an internal medicine physician and the chief quality officer of One Medical, a primary-care chain that recently held a webinar for businesses on how to reopen, said, “A core message is, do not expect your risk goes down to zero.”

Much of what is known on the subject of workplace and disease transmission comes from studies about workplace transmission of the flu, which shares some similarities with the novel coronavirus, said Dr. Lisa Winston, the hospital epidemiologist at Zuckerberg San Francisco General at the University of California, San Francisco. “We know that flu spreads in workplaces among healthy working adults,” she said. A [2016 analysis](#) of various research papers from around the world found that around 16 percent of flu transmission takes place in the office.

Other research shows that one of the best ways to reduce transmission in the workplace is to provide paid sick leave that encourages ill employees to stay home.



A common area at Mobify, a Vancouver company with 40 employees, which shares its space with other companies. Alana Paterson for The New York Times



Igor Faletski, chief executive of Mobify, used to circulate freely about the company and interact with employees. Alana Paterson for The New York Times



Mobify was the epitome of the 21st century workplace, with employees sitting side-by-side in communal desks, and open spaces to congregate for Ping-Pong and pool. Now, changes are coming. “It’s less about fun and more about safety,” Mr. Faletski said. Alana Paterson for The New York Times

Another basic step to lower risk, Dr. Winston said, is simply having “fewer people in a space.”

That is a concept that runs counter to the workplace zeitgeist of the past two decades. The embrace of open floor plans stretches back to the first dot-com boom in the late 1990s. It was hailed as essential to collaboration and creativity, but is, of course, also about cramming more people into expensive office space, a situation that people now realize creates unnerving petri-dish conditions.

Mr. Wymer of Knoll, the furniture design company, said his goal had changed from making offices virus-free, which is impractical, to remaking them so that workers feel safer.

“We can’t ask employees to come back to the same office,” he said. “Companies feel we have to address the root fear.”

For now, that may mean no more shared desks (a concept in the business world known as “hoteling”), elbow-to-elbow seating or cafes where people congregate to chat about a project over a fruit water or hazelnut latte. It could mean more use of materials, like copper, that are less hospitable to germs, and reconfiguring ventilation systems that flow air from the ceiling down rather than the floor up, which is considered safer.

Mobify, a Vancouver company that builds online storefronts for major retailers like Under Armour and Lancôme, has 40 employees who share space with other start-ups. It’s the epitome of the 21st century workplace with side-by-side desks in a row, sans partitions, and open space for a total of 100 people at full capacity to congregate for meetings, or for playing Ping-Pong and pool.

Now, Igor Faletski, the company’s chief executive, said, “It’s less about fun and more about safety.”