Will offices go the way of the DoDo after COVID-19?

BY ANITA KAMOURI & KATE LISTER
Will offices go the way of the dodo bird in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis? That’s a question on the minds of workplace designers, CRE and FM executives, employers and employees everywhere.

In a word, “no.” Evolution in the workplace, as in nature, doesn’t happen overnight. But will the crisis change the way we work and accelerate the remote work trend? Almost certainly. Here’s why.

Middle managers will be more likely to support remote work
Resistance from middle management has been one of the biggest obstacles to remote work for decades. Though an abundance of research shows otherwise, many managers fear productivity will decline if people are allowed to work from-home. Having done it themselves, many will realize their fears were unfounded. “When you go through something like this, it forces you to ask questions and think about things differently,” said the CEO of Goldman Sachs in a CNBC interview. He went on to say he felt the experience would make his company more comfortable with workplace flexibility.

Many of the employees who couldn’t work from home before the crisis, will want to keep doing it
Less than 4 percent of employees worked from home half-time or more before the pandemic, but 80 percent say they’d like to, not all the time, but at least some of the time. The work-from-home experience during COVID-19 was not ideal for many workers. Many struggled with bored children, barking dogs, noisy spouses, internet overloads, IT complications, general stress, and more. At the same time, many will have enjoyed not commuting, being around their children and pets, greater flexibility and autonomy, and the many other benefits of working from home.

Business leaders and investors will demand greater agility
COVID-19 publicly exposed just how unprepared organizations were for a pandemic. A survey conducted by PWC at the end of March found that 60 percent of U.S. CFOs felt their lack of preparedness for remote work would hurt organizational productivity. The bottom-line impact could total in the billions of dollars. It’s not a question of if another natural or man-made event will force people to work from home, it’s a matter of when. Organizational agility will be an important key performance indicator in the future and as a result, leadership will be more likely to endorse remote work programs as part of their overall business continuity planning.

The experience will shine a light on the impact of commuter travel on sustainability
Investors, both retail and institutional, are increasingly voting for sustainability with their wallets. The COVID-19 crisis offered a vivid demonstration of the impact of commuter travel on the environment. Only weeks after the forced work-from-home experiment began, cities were reporting cleaner air. The experience will demonstrate how work-from-home strategies represent an easy, quick, and inexpensive way to reduce an organization’s environmental footprint.

Economic woes will refocus attention on remote work as a cost reduction strategy
During the last recession, the major focus in corporate real estate was on cost savings programs. Since then, the focus has changed to creating workplace experiences that attract and retain talent. In the economic downturn that will inevitably follow the COVID-19 crisis, the potential for work-from-home to reduce real estate costs, increase productivity, and enhance scalability will once again come into focus.

**THE NEW NORMAL**

Flexibility in where, when, and how people work is the new normal. We expect a significant increase in remote work after the crisis. That will inevitably change both the amount of office space we need in the future and the function of the space remaining. Just how big a change we’re in for is what everyone wants to know. Results of the Global Work-from-Home Experience Survey we launched in March, in collaboration IFMA/Workplace Evolutionaries (WE), will help us better plan for the future of where and how people will work in the months and years ahead.

For many, the COVID crisis has forced them to work from home without the tools, technologies, training, and resources they need to be successful. Entire companies have had to do, practically overnight, what early adopters of remote work spent months and even years preparing their people to do. As unfortunate as the circumstances may be, this is an unprecedented opportunity to learn from the sudden work-from-home experience, and emerge from it with new insights, intelligence, and approaches for the future.

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