

Temperature scans and face masks: Is this the office of the future?



Lucy Dean
Yahoo Finance AU 12 May 2020

Follow



Is this what the office of the future will look like? Images: Getty

When Australians left their offices in mid-March, they swapped hot-desking arrangements, packed elevators and communal lunch areas for kitchen tables and home offices.

- **Also read:** [‘Alarming’ way coronavirus spreads through offices](#)
- **Also read:** [Can my boss make me download the COVIDSafe app?](#)
- **Also read:** [World’s biggest workplace experiment: Phase one](#)

But as businesses prepare to reopen offices, employees can expect to be greeted by temperature scans, voice-activated technology and more flexible cultures.

Rowan Hamman is the director of commercial real estate design company [Cachet Group](#), which counts companies like LinkedIn, IKEA and major banks among its clients.

“The discussions that we’ve had with executives at the top level have been really around culture - it’s very hard to manage culture remotely when everybody’s working remotely,” he told [Yahoo Finance](#).

Workers and companies need that “magical human element” that comes with physically seeing and talking to somebody.

As such, businesses are making checklists for the short-, medium- and long-term future and making decisions on how to foster a strong workplace culture while ensuring workers’ safety.

Here’s what that might look like.

So, what’s going to change?

Staggered starts

Hamman said businesses are already mulling the benefits of staggered starts to try to limit overcrowding on public transport and in the office.

“We are certainly hearing that [topic] fall into the category of risk management and risk mitigation,” he said.

Businesses are actively trying to lower the chance of all their workforce being in the same place at the same time, because if a coronavirus case does crop up - that means everyone is at risk.

Beyond a staggered daily start time, workers will also likely be staggered in their return to the office.

Businesses will likely welcome workers back in batches, the founder of health and safety software provider [Safety Evolved](#) Alastair Brooke said.

“In existing open plan offices it will mean an effective capacity of around 25 per cent, similar for meetings in meeting rooms,” he said.

More voice-activated technology

Hamman said businesses are also looking at how to use technology to keep everyone safe.

“[For example], touch surfaces - are they able to have voice-activated technology to open doors?” he said.

Additionally, collaborative equipment like the Microsoft hub, which everybody touches, could be altered to function with workers’ voices rather than touch.

“You may see some very different approaches and quite smart technologies to get people to collaborate and continue to engage with one another and build rapport and culture in a very unique way.”

Elevator stewards

Hamman worked in Hong Kong in the wake of the SARS epidemic, where he saw offices there change the way they worked.

One of the most obvious changes was to elevators.

“In Hong Kong, there are lots of people so when you approached buildings, there was a steward who would press the lift button for you, you would be ushered in and they would count the number of people in the lift.”

Brooke agreed, describing crowded lifts as a “thing of the past”. Staggered starts will also be required to stop elevator bottle-necks.

Face masks

During the SARS era in Hong Kong, it wasn’t uncommon for people to come into work wearing masks, even once the worst had subsided, Hamman said.

For example, if someone had a cold but felt they could work, they might have worn a mask into the office in an attempt to stop the spread of their germs.

“They were genuinely not out of place and I think that, culturally, there’s an aspect to Australia - we’re a bit behind on germophobia, so to speak,” Hamman said.

Remote offices

That desire to mitigate risk could even change the geographical locations of offices.

Businesses that have ‘hub and spoke models’, or models featuring a head office and regional offices, will likely be leaning on regional offices more, Hamman said.

The goal of this is that workers are dispersed across offices, for example, in the Sydney CBD, Parramatta and Chatswood.

“What that does is that if there’s a case that were to arise in one of those locations, they are able to isolate that particular part of their operations quite easily and keep the other parts of the operation going.”

Hot-desking changes

Hot-desking, where workers come in and choose a place to work in the office every day may also change.

Hamman believes it will remain for some workers, especially for workers or parts of departments that need to work collaboratively. However other parts of the business that generally don’t need to collaborate as much, like HR and finance, might have set office areas.

However, director of facilities management firm [Tallo](#), Nathan Schokker believes businesses may entirely eliminate hot-desking.

“Those that limit hot-desking will look to roster systems and increased cleaning to overcome risks, or cross contamination,” he said.

There’ll be fewer people

If open plan offices are completely refitted altogether, that will mean fewer workers will physically be able to come into the office to work, [Safety Evolved’s](#) Brooke said.

Workers will also choose to work from home.

“Working from home will be normal and expected at least part of the time for almost everyone who doesn’t need to be face to face with a client or colleague,” Brooke said.

Not only will workers be asking to work from home, offices may have to incorporate tougher social distancing rules into the workspace.

“Naturally, this change begs the question as to whether firms will need less space going forward?” said the CEO of [CommercialPropertyMadeEasy.com](#), Chris Lang.

However, this is unlikely. Offices will need the same amount of space, but for fewer people to maintain distance.

Lang said office spaces could contain as many as 20 per cent fewer desks to incorporate remote work and physical distancing demands.

Health monitoring and temperature scans

Employee health is now a security risk, James Boddam-Whetham, CEO of crisis and disruption management firm [Noggin](#) said.

“There’s likely to be a bit of a convergence between health and safety and security,” he said.

“I think it’s absolutely inevitable that there is going to be a bit of give and take on the privacy front for workers and [they may] have to disclose a bit more information on the healthcare front.”

Boddam-Whetham said it wouldn’t be unusual for workers to be greeted with thermal imaging run by building management, before even being tested again upon entering their floor or firm’s office space.

Many workers are already required to have a health check or declaration upon commencing employment and at certain intervals throughout their work, but these new requirements mean individuals may have to provide that personal information every day.

It might take a lot longer to get back into the office than you think

Thermal imaging and spatial restrictions raise more questions around worker rights and employer responsibilities. For example, if a worker scans in with a high temperature, are they not allowed into the building? And if they’re let in and someone becomes ill, who’s liable?

Boddam-Whetham it means workplaces may not reopen for many more months down the track, simply because the safety requirements are changing rapidly. Businesses don’t want to get caught out, so could wait until the requirements are more clearly drawn before welcoming workers back.

Mental health checks

Workplaces have been paying increasing attention to mental wellbeing in recent years, work-life transition expert and psychologist [Justine Alter](#) said.

But the need for crisis to consider employees’ mental health is now severe.

“The Covid-19 crisis has and will continue to see a rise in the mental health issues and the way in which these are handled going forward will be the difference between those companies that see their way through this and adapt well with the ‘new normal’, and those that merely tick a box and hope it will be enough for their people,” Alter said.

“Adapting to the new normal will be essential for organisations and employees.”

She said cultural change and physical change is required. For example, physical proof that spatial distancing is being observed by having fewer desks may be critical in helping those who are anxious in feeling safer at work.

“Those that genuinely wish to support their programs will see value in having face to face and individualised mental health support programs,” Alter said.

“Open and honest communication will be key, compassionate leadership is essential. Implementing mental health initiatives as a one size fits will be money wasted. Any organisation that cannot be agile and adapt with the ongoing nature of this will be negatively impacting on their people.”