

“TO OFFICE OR NOT TO OFFICE? THAT IS THE QUESTION...”

Russell Coleman, Sales Director at SEC Interiors offers an insight to the challenges facing commercial property owners and occupiers as a result of COVID-19, as well as the changing role of office interior design and what the future holds for 2021 and beyond.



Like the famous soliloquy where Hamlet muses over whether death by suicide would be better than the pain of experiencing life itself but for the uncertainty of what comes after death, so owner occupiers of office, industrial and distribution commercial properties wrestle with the conundrum of continued life working in an office environment, fearful of what they face after the pandemic.

How to make it safe, what makes it safe, will it need to be long term, how do they realise value for the investment, creating an inviting environment to lure existing employees back from the recently gained familiarity of working from home as well as to future employees; the list goes on.

When the pandemic struck the UK, we were introduced to a new phenomenon - “SOCIAL DISTANCING” and the now familiar 2m rule came into operation. Then we got hit with the edict we’ve waited all our lives for – “DON’T GO TO WORK” – and we’d reached our nirvana; but like all things that sound to be good to be true, it was and is.

From the outset, we at SEC Interiors, attempted to imagine the impact, measure it, evaluate it and tried to rationalise the truth of it once the initial hysteria and “Lockdown” had passed, and to strategise what changes would really, truly come about and need responding to. This thought process ran parallel to a deluge of data and instruction that provided us with almost daily changes in the way we needed to interact with others.

There was also the realisation (some recognised it straight away but many needed their glasses with the tint of an English bloom forcibly removed) that this was not a situation that could be resolved by 3 weeks in the spring time sun and was in fact something that would have enormous short, medium and long term impact on regional, national and global economies.

There has of course, because global crises have always created specific need and new opportunity, been some sectors of industry that have seen growth (some, significant growth) as a result of the pandemic. Generally though, pretty much every existing sector has been forced to adopt a ‘fight to survive’ strategy with one of the fall outs of this and the “DON’T GO TO WORK” message, which has been heavily commented on in mainstream, local and industry media, is the “*Death of the Office*”.

Much of this rhetoric has been around large city centre, large national and global corporation HQ style workplaces; however in our main target geography of the northern Home Counties there is less need to be bound by the restrictive circumstances inherently brought to bear by congested, centuries-old city centres, the volumes of people these attract and the logistical difficulties of moving those people around in small spaces and in under-resourced, over-used infrastructure.

We believe, along with others in our region involved in ours and the wider industry and to plagiarise another of our great literary exponents, that the reporting of this passing has been greatly exaggerated.

At the Coal Face

In these earlier days of this ever changing criteria, we reached out to our existing and pipeline client base and quite literally only two or three of approximately two hundred existing clients we contacted, responded with enquiries about screens to add to their existing layouts; none asked for advice as to how they could re-design their space for 2m distancing. Only one of our pipeline contacts confirmed that they wished us to give 100% commitment to designing their office space with Covid-19 mitigation being as equal a consideration as their own both specific and general criteria.

This was mostly, in our experience, due to the majority of those contacted entering into a holding position of going into a furlough-supported shut down of their premises, re-deploying some Staff to work from home, and others occupying this free space in an ultra-socially distanced environment.

One particular personal associate of mine, Peter Alibone, Sales Director at Mazda UK & Europe, adopted the following approach: at their building Headquarters in Dartford, they have redeployed 300 people to homeworking with a gradual return to work with one department per floor - easily managed with a considerable building footprint to work with. This is not just one person's approach to the 'holding position', it's a global corporation approach to their sizeable operation. They are focused on coming back to work, with no planned urgency to change either the building footprint, current environment, layout or lease options; simply strategizing a sustainable, effective and safe approach for now.

The single biggest factor in this for the Office Fit Out industry, and so by default the Commercial Property Industry, was 2m social distancing. Never, even in the 'typing pool' and 'island' desk days of the 50s through the 90s did anyone design an office space that considered separation of work space and stations to this extent. In fact the Office Fit Out and Furniture industry had gone through decades of product innovation designed to be able to work at smaller stations in smaller areas thus reducing the overall footprint of office space.

Also at this time, there was an expectation that the extent of social distancing would reduce as the national strategy developed. At time of writing of course this hasn't fundamentally changed with the exception of the 1m+ rule brought in as part of the "GET BACK TO WORK" campaign; but who wants to work all day in masks or cocooned by screens that almost take us into a Perspex version of the American cellular pod office environment that consumed the industry there in the 80s and 90s but which gathered no real traction in the UK?

Most other nations with fairly parallel pandemic scenarios have been as successful in managing and controlling the virus with reduced social distancing measures; France 1m – Spain 1.5m – Germany 1.5m – Italy 1m for example. What they have been much more successful in doing, even with or maybe even because of these measures, is getting people to return to their offices and back to work.

Move to Stabilise Office Design

So it appears pretty evident that one simple change could unequivocally stabilise the post-apocalyptic vision of the future of the 'office' being portrayed in several major media outlets - not least of all the BBC (**see link to article at end of piece*) that in its role as the National Broadcaster and main Public Information Service in fact continues to behave as if it should be the sole influencer for not just social change but commercial and industrial change stating that *"it's now 2025 and Laila has just been allowed to return to work at her office..."* thus scaremongering whole industry sectors into oblivion – and that is merely a reduction in UK social distancing to 1.5m or less in line with other states as referenced above.

We have no hard evidence to support the figures other than our own past and current experiences but it remains that a large majority of our clients (65-70% or more perhaps) have and still look to plan their workplaces with 1600mm x 800mm desks. This, if the above social distancing change is made and the estimated percentage is applied, allows 65-70% of existing offices to comply with social distancing requirements for occupation of work stations – without masks or screens.

Furthermore, whilst the National strategy has barely moved to support a low cost solution to returning to work or to stabilise considerations for future workspace requirements, the private sector has.



One of the potential clients we are working with on designing their proposed new workspace in Berkhamstead, are looking to finalise manufacturing and distribution licensing for tests with results in twenty seconds, thus giving point of entry confirmation so that distancing at interaction can be reduced safely.

For those facing lease events or taking opportunities to utilise break clauses and looking/needing to relocate, it provides opportunity to be able to evaluate their footprint requirements with some stability and around familiar criteria for their main workspaces at least.

This could all give existing occupiers greater opportunity to bring people back to work giving greater strategic consideration to circulation routes and collaborative spaces be it devising one way routes, utilisation of masks when in circulation only, regulating occupancy of Meeting Rooms and spaces, re-deployment of collaborative spaces with reduced numbers or as limited set down zones with sanitization protocols and staggered lunch and break times and the like, but without short term material and capital investment in structural change to their space.

For those looking or needing to re-locate this greater consideration to circulation and collaborative spaces might be:

- *Rather than one way systems, people will look to consider wider thoroughfares and access routes to allow passing at greater proximity*
- *Larger meeting and gathering spaces will be designed with specific entry and exit points*
- *Larger meeting spaces will be designed more often with the flexibility to change size and shape to accommodate socially distanced meetings of differing sizes*
- *More will be designed with relevant AV equipment to allow a mix of physical attendees plus the introduction of others via GoToMeeting/Zoom/Teams as and when needed.*

On the last point, as much as these products have advanced, assisted in getting us through this period and demonstrated to us that we do not need to travel and physically attend every meeting we have, they are not without their frustrations and they DO affect the impact and influence people can have in personal engagement. Furthermore, they do encumber the natural flow, bounce and conversational nature of meetings and in particular presentations.



In a recent article by renowned business leader and author Geoff Hudson-Searle*, he discussed the '**Business Risk across the Digital Boardroom**' * and touched on the continued need for person to person interaction:

Face-to-face meetings allow for clearer communication. In addition to being able to read facial expressions, body language, and inflexion, in-person meetings often end up being more positive and considered more credible than online or virtual conversations.

Without non-verbal cues, you also run the risk of misinterpreting information. In fact, 60% of people regularly misread tone or message when communicating via email or phone, according to Entrepreneur.

Hudson-Searle states 'The way to build trust and drive home purpose is to master honest communication and include employees and stakeholders in key decisions. "We've seen fax machines, long emails, instant messaging, all kinds of collaboration tools come, go and sometimes stay. Business is about communicating with purpose, active listening, empathy. More trust needs to be put into the executive leadership. Trust is the glue."

Not only do in-person meetings tend to be more positive, but they also tend to be more productive. On average, an in-person meeting generates about 13.36 ideas versus a virtual meeting, which generates 10.43. And although virtual meetings are sometimes more convenient, nearly 70% of people admit to browsing social media to pass the time during audio-only conference calls.

Shocking research was released recently by The Gallup Group, indicating that 87% of the workforce is either not engaged (read: they are there physically but not mentally or emotionally), or totally disengaged (they actually undermine the success of an organization.)

This is the highest rate of disengagement ever measured and is in spite of the fact that over 85% of organisations have an employee recognition program (which obviously isn't working). Companies spend more than \$100 billion every year trying to improve employee engagement in the workplace, yet despite their efforts, employee engagement numbers remain under 35 percent. It's vital for employers to understand the role employee disengagement plays in overall business success.

A Mix and Match Approach

If you reconcile the above with another development in working practices, employers and employees have recognised the benefit and efficiency of home working. The movement in this, in our opinion, will be embraced but tempered. An increasing number of people will be invited to work more flexibly with an allocation of time in the office and working remotely. Some of course will have become very familiar and comfortable with working from home all of the time, perhaps just visiting the office for key face-to-face requirements. A proportion of staff will be hankering for a return to a fixed routine and social engagement; some will just have to return as that is the nature of the role they hold. Unfortunately, others will just not have positions to return to.

The ultimate effect of this, which is also reflected in the results of a Regional survey carried out by Aithison Raffety* is that a business's footprint requirements won't change much, however how it is deployed, will do so. Opportunity exists to change the way we work without sacrificing interaction nor by necessarily increasing footprint to accommodate people. This new mix will mean that the office will now be considered a resource available to staff to work in the best way for a given situation (professionally and personally) where reduced numbers of workstations, set out at 'normal distancing' levels will be offset by need for increased circulation, collaboration and welfare footprint.

Aithison Rafferty Survey Highlights:

- *Survey asked business owners and occupiers in the South East of England what their property requirements might be following the COVID pandemic.*
- *It is reassuring that the majority of occupiers are looking to return to their premises by the end of 2020 and that on average, space requirements remain unchanged.*

In the foreseeable future office space requirements will be:

- *59% of businesses property requirements are about the same*
- *While 24% will need less space*
- *17% are looking for more*

At SEC Interiors we are currently supporting an existing client, Audit Bureau of Circulations, to determine a consolidation project whereby they are looking to consolidate one building into two and is it into a smaller footprint building over three floors or one larger property over one floor, and the associated cost benefit analysis of each.

In the early days of the lockdown they surveyed their staff and, with the exception of those whose roles dictated work place attendance, all seemed pretty satisfied with a work from home principle. Three to four months later the same exercise demonstrated that the uniqueness of this largely fell off and that most people actually preferred, in fact needed, to have access to the office in order to balance effective execution of their duties against pure convenience as well as the social congress this brings about. This will be forming a significant part of the benefit consideration over pure cost as to which facility they pursue.



What Does the Future Hold?

So it looks like those in our geographical area of operation with office space are definitely not jumping ship just yet; and as the survey suggests, most have no plans to move to smaller premises or give them up altogether. Particularly as there are now multiple vaccine options already in distribution and on the horizon that will be rolled out far quicker than the vast majority of occupiers will come up against lease breaks or expiry. Those that do, will most likely be able to strike short term extensions against the

completion of the roll out, or should be able to simply feel comfortable enough to commit to their plans. The vaccine roll out should in fact, facilitate a 'call back to work' but with a more measured change in attitude to office attendance. With all these factors in place, we don't believe it likely that we'll see vast swathes of empty office blocks, they will just be utilised differently.

Further Down the Line

Will it though fuel the grand 'Levelling Up' project? Big corporations and larger organisations are already setting up in say, Milton Keynes as people who commute from Watford into London can travel from there to Milton Keynes just as easily, if not more so. North London to Herts and Beds is as easy as to Victoria or Canary Wharf. You can say the same for Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds...the list goes on.

Obviously further down the line, perhaps in 5-10 years' time, will it be that new business/office centres will be built in more rural areas than in large cities? Where there is more space, and the property itself is designed around the criteria that is driving the way we work and therefore how we view the nature of workplace even more than in the last 10 years of creating more inspiring and inviting spaces; public health is now a workspace criteria like never before.

The Death of the Office?

We don't believe so, it is too drastic a concept for human nature to accept as the work place is, and will continue to be, an integral part of people's sociological and personal wellbeing.

To harness the power our team members bring to the business and its success, and to enhance and encourage their own personal and professional growth, we need to embrace the changes that have emerged through the pandemic and create an office environment that provides a harmonious, productive and inspiring work space for all to profit from, with flexibility at its core.

**Article Reference Links:*

Article Link: <https://sec-online.co.uk/interiors/to-office-or-not-to-office-that-is-the-question>

SEC Interiors: www.sec-interiors.co.uk

Geoff Hudson-Searle article: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/business-risk-across-digital-boardroom-geoff-hudson-searle/>

Aithison Rafferty survey https://www.linkedin.com/posts/mark-bunting-b7141a8_covid-property-needs-survey-results-ugcPost-6714092193147047936-iqueK

BBC Article: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-dc2d6e2d-3ab4-42de-8d03-bb7eda5fff8e>