

Office of the Future: The Blueprint

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the culture builders

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Having discovered a need for holistic insight around long-term workplace strategies and practices among professional services firms, world-leading property specialists [CBRE](#), business culture consultants [The Culture Builders](#), secretarial and office support specialists [Intelligent Office](#) and strategic planning software providers [ObjectiveManager](#) have come together as Insight Partners.

Over the next few months, we'll be rolling out our six-part blueprint for the future office strategy.

Find out more at:

www.objectivemanager.info/oof-blueprint-intro

As governments begin encouraging businesses to re-open and return employees to the workplace, it's becoming increasingly clear that leaving lockdown will nevertheless be a gradual process. With the introduction of social distancing requirements in the office and extended remote working likely to prove a fixture of life for some time, firms will have to develop new, sustainable working strategies and adopt many of the flexible features forced on them by lockdown. Beyond the operational issues of having to distance desks and install plexiglass walls, what are the broader implications of these changes?

Having worked closely with our clients over the past several months, [CBRE](#), [The Culture Builders](#), [Intelligent Office](#) and [ObjectiveManager](#) recently got together to discuss the needs of each sector and have collated our expertise. As we progress, we'll provide holistic insight to help professional services firms build new foundations on this difficult terrain and, together, we'll draw up a blueprint covering long-term responses, re-thinking the workplace and how to build the Office of the Future. This first paper asks: how do we begin?

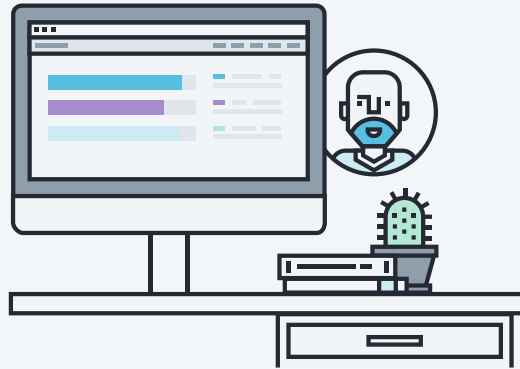
PHASE 1



Time to make a plan

Strategy and operational priorities

PHASE 2



Back to the office?

People, places and purpose

PHASE 3



New working models

Working practices and innovation

“Businesses will look to reduce their risks by having smaller, more distributed offices.”

Lewis Beck, Senior Director, Head of Workplace EMEA at CBRE, says his recent focus has been around helping clients to work remotely and get back into the office. However, longer-term, businesses need to consider, in greater detail, how they design their workplaces.

“We’re seeing our clients start to think about how they remain productive while remote working – but they’re also thinking about office density issues. We may see a future where, even though people can get back into the office, businesses will look to reduce their business interruption risks by having smaller, more distributed offices.”

Time spent in the office, he says, will also likely become more of a valuable commodity to be spent prudently – shifting the focus of office space usage from ‘business-as-usual’ to more targeted, collaborative efforts.



Lewis Beck Senior Director,
Head of Workplace EMEA at CBRE

Rushing back to the office?

With government-mandated lockdowns lifting, many professional services firms are sensing now may be the time to cautiously look at re-opening offices. Though largely able to operate remotely, many employees and partners are keen to escape the home office (where they have them) and get some face-to-face collaboration.

Yet, the recovery is proving bumpy, and many barriers remain. In May, Michael Davison, deputy CEO of Hogan Lovells, said it would be “[unbelievably fiddly getting people back](#)” into the office, and many other firm leaders have detailed the extensive measures needed to declare offices safe for use.

The necessary restrictions – glass barriers, one-way systems and touchless interfaces – mean occupancy levels will continue to be low. Employees at DLA Piper [returned to their UK offices from 6th July](#), though visits will continue to be on a purely voluntary basis and occupancy must reach no more than 15% of headcount to comply with social distancing requirements. Many other London firms are looking at similarly low percentages.

How long will these restrictions continue? No-one can say for sure – and, in the absence of certainty, firms need a flexible yet clear plan to maintain productivity and re-integrate traditional working models when possible. At the same time, they should be positioning themselves to return from the crisis on top of emergent trends in stakeholder expectations, employee needs and client demands.

96%

ADAPTING TO REMOTE WORK

CBRE's European Occupier Flash Survey shows **96%** of Business and Professional Services firms have adopted remote working during the crisis, compared with **86%** across all sectors.

Download the full report



A plan for the future

Sooner or later, professional services firms will overcome the operational challenges of getting employees back into the office – but the more pressing concern is the need to look beyond the immediate challenges and imagine how the coronavirus crisis will change the workplace model permanently.

Right now, it's crucial that firms separate their immediate, operational concerns from their strategic ones – yet retain oversight of both. Those **Phase 1** priorities should include:

OPERATIONAL

- Remote working management practices
- Protecting physical health in the office
- Maintaining mental wellbeing while working from home
- Keeping support staff productive

STRATEGIC

- Developing an agile approach to work
- Gaining employee consent around office return and new working practices
- Strengthening remote culture and working practices

“What won’t change is the need to focus on keeping productivity high.”

Jane Sparrow, Global Culture Expert and Co-Founder of The Culture Builders, has seen the priorities of her clients constantly evolve due to the unprecedented remote working challenges they’re experiencing. She believes those issues will keep changing and cultures will keep transforming. “The sector an organisation operates within, the kind of remote working culture it had in place before the pandemic and the impact it’s had on the business will all have contributed to its remote working journey. What was a priority three months ago will almost certainly have shifted to something very different now – and it will keep changing. What won’t change is the need to focus on keeping productivity high.”

Two streams are emerging, she says: the practical and the strategic. “The practical stream includes questions of how to make employees feel safe in the office (both physically and psychologically), ensuring leaders are effective in leading remote or hybrid teams, and ensuring those teams stay connected. The strategic side will include considering how physical office spaces are reimaged to become places where people gather to connect, collaborate and share.”



Jane Sparrow Global Culture Expert
and Co-Founder of The Culture Builders

Developing a Hybrid Office

The question of ‘where’ work happens will factor into many of these issues – and the strategic implications of property decisions made now will have significant long-term consequences.

Although 58% of those surveyed by CBRE [in a flash survey](#) expect no change to their locational footprint after the coronavirus outbreak is over, some firms do recognise change is coming. The same survey found as much as 40% do expect a rethink of their physical locations – and a whopping 93% think home working or remote working will accelerate.

Employees seem to be content for remote working to become the new normal, at least to a degree. The Lawyer [recently reported](#) that almost 52% of those it surveyed at law firms would prefer to work from home in the future, at least some of the time, and 8% hope to work primarily from home.

Some firms, like Slater and Gordon, are already contemplating this new future. At the end of May, Chief Executive David Whitmore [announced that the firm will let the lease on its London office expire](#) in September 2020, with 200 employees working primarily from home. Though the firm will look for a smaller replacement office, he added: “When we do look to return to our offices, they won’t look like they used to.”

17%

17% of technologists would accept a pay cut of **10%** or more in exchange for better remote working arrangements, according to a study on **The State of Remote Work by Dice**, a career marketplace for technology professionals.

31%

PRODUCTIVITY MATTERS

31% of those surveyed by The Lawyer felt they were working harder at home than they had been in the office.

Could professional services firms shift to a Hybrid Office model, with some employees based at home and others commuting into the office less frequently than pre-March levels? If so, they'll need to consider the issues posed in **Phase 2**, such as:

- Remote onboarding of employees
- Conducting performance reviews
- How to structure and remotely develop support staff
- Office space distribution

Given the enormous impact property decisions have on firms' profitability and workplace models, it's unsurprising many firms will persist with existing plans. Freshfields is **expected to continue** with its 20-year lease on new premises in London, beginning in August 2020 – but for many other firms with leases expiring in three or four years, new priorities and possibilities are likely to have become unavoidable.

“Firms have had to both accept different ways of working and make better use of technology.”

At Intelligent Office, Head of Business Development Sam Nicholls says the coronavirus pandemic has forced a level of change in professional services firms – law firms in particular – that would have been almost unthinkable were it not an absolute necessity to adapt. “Firms have had to both accept different ways of working and make better use of technology. As a result, leaders have been given the opportunity to leverage innovation that was stalled or only a vague plan before,” he explains.

He adds that, now employees are away from the ‘physical office’, there’s been a greater focus on removing inefficiencies and challenging the support needs of teams and individual fee earners. Though management teams in firms are rightly cautious about how to re-organise their operations in the wake of the coronavirus, it’s apparent many don’t want to miss the unprecedented opportunity to implement a more flexible, scalable and cost-effective operational model.



Sam Nicholls Head of Business Development at Intelligent Office

Out-of-office productivity

The ‘petri dish’ of the last three or so months of lockdown has proven an opportunity to test remote working practices – and many businesses have discovered that productivity remains broadly intact while employees are away from the office.

Although far from conclusive, The Lawyer’s recent survey also reported that 31% of lawyers felt they were working harder than before, and 33% said they were managing the same levels of productivity as pre-lockdown. A survey from consultants Eden McCallum even suggests [UK businesses have seen increased productivity](#) as a result of working from home.

However, the question remains: as we move into Week 20 of social distancing, are cracks beginning to show? Will workplace claustrophobia start to set in by Week 30?

Having employees work remotely for a few months is a very different proposition from a permanent arrangement. You may already be seeing the negative effects on employees’ mental wellbeing as the home-working dream becomes an unavoidable reality – and new pressures will appear as part of the working day if employees are home long-term. In other words, although a welcome progression for employee flexibility, it’s too soon to make a judgement on the sustainability of such practices – but home working will almost certainly prove to be both unavoidable and yet fail as a panacea to all ills. Rather, firms will have to find a true workplace balance – and soon.

15%

COLLABORATION COUNTS

15% of firm revenue may be tied up in collaborative behaviours, according to research developed by Harvard University's Dr Heidi Gardner. Especially in an economic downturn, smart collaboration should be a major priority for firms – yet remote working may be an obstacle, rather than a boon, to those behaviours.

Learn more from ObjectiveManager's webinar recording featuring Dr Gardner.

Learn more



In **Phase 3** of our series, we'll be considering these long-term working model issues, while also highlighting the innovation opportunities emerging from the current period of change and dislocation. With many extant trends accelerating because of the crisis – remote working being one major example – this may be the time to make change stick.

We'll consider how firms can address the following issues:

- Meeting client needs and building relationships in the future
- Collaboration issues
- Digital office spaces
- Future employee expectations

51%

PwC's **US Remote Work Survey** found that the number one reason employees want to go into the office is to collaborate with their colleagues. Collaboration is still proving difficult while working remotely, however, with **51%** of employers expecting to have to offer employees help with building networks and relationships.

60%

Boston Consulting Group **recently found** that up to **60%** of Australian workers would prefer to work from home two to three days a week. Yet, the study also found most want to return to the office when they can – and that they were now more “thoughtful” about the best use of their time and how their environment could help them perform their jobs better.

"Hours of Zoom calls are not going to guarantee smart collaboration."

Arlene Adams, Executive Chair of ObjectiveManager, says firms must be cautious not to confuse heavy use of collaboration tools with high productivity – or meaningful collaboration. "Research from Harvard University shows one of the greatest threats to professional services firms' revenues during an economic crisis is individualistic behaviour. At best, employees revert to focusing on small networks of similar people – which damages collaboration and impacts firms' revenues by up to 15%. Firms need people to be connected around strategic goals and objectives, irrespective of where they are – that's smart collaboration. Hours of Zoom calls are not going to guarantee that happens, because what firms really need is to ensure plans are visible and that everyone in the firm has strategically aligned objectives." Only then, she says, can employees focus on the really important things that move the performance dial in the right direction.



Arlene Adams
Executive Chair, ObjectiveManager

55%

55% of executives interviewed by PwC for its [US Remote Work Survey](#) in June expected to permanently extend remote-working arrangements for employees.

83%

And that's just as well, as demand for flexible working is high: **83%** of employees asked in the same survey want to work from home at least one day a week.

Next steps

The only conclusion we can be confident of now is that offices aren't going away – but they'll also never be the same. Are firms up to the task of making their culture, strategy and collaboration models fit for that world? In each Phase of our series, we'll be offering holistic insight that attempt to answer these questions and guide firms through their long-term decision-making processes. **Phase 1**, Part A will begin soon.

Join the discussion on LinkedIn and Twitter by using **#OotFBlueprint** and get in touch by using the contact details overleaf.

Contact the Insight Partners

the culture builders

The Culture Builders is an award-winning UK-based consultancy that works globally and specialises in culture, change and performance.

Visit www.theculturebuilders.com

Email info@theculturebuilders.com

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Visit www.intelligentofficeuk.com

Email sam.nicholls@intelligentofficeuk.com



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Email insights@objectivemanager.com