

Business/ Companies

Meet your 'after-the-coronavirus' workspace: germ-killing desk areas with air purifiers

Designers are starting to come up with the virus-resistant workplace
Employees may be picky about office spaces, choosing employers that put a premium on health

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Photo of a project of One Space, where a one-person shielded pod-type furniture is used in a social hub. Designers are figuring out ways to better shield workers from spreading illnesses in the workplace. Photo: Handout

The coronavirus triggered an unprecedented, worldwide experiment of working at home. Next up: the actual design of workspaces, with a focus on killing germs.

Much of modern designed office space emphasises open space. But, in the “after-the-coronavirus” world, more effort will be placed on ensuring that kind of open plan does not encourage the spreading of germs.

The open plan was widely and quickly adopted by many businesses because of its clear advantages: by knocking down barriers, it encourages mingling, which sparks collaboration and teamwork; it uses space far more economically, and it makes supervision easier.

But the coronavirus – which has infected nearly 1.8 million people worldwide and killed about 110,000 – has elevated concern about employee health and how germs spread in the workplace.

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A “healthier” office space will better protect businesses from similar costly illness outbreaks. Meanwhile, jobseekers may increasingly factor in what their workspace will look like, as they protect themselves and their families from illness.

“It is unlikely that fully open offices will succeed in providing the comfort and security of individuals that this virus has brought into the spotlight,” said Greg Pearce, managing director of Hong Kong-based One Space, which designs workspaces.

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Rather than totally abandoning the open space concept, partitions could be placed between workers, which could offer more protection from viruses spread by sneezing or coughing while maintaining a sense of spaciousness. They could be made of materials that kill or reduce germs, for example, and be equipped with germ-killing air purifiers and handy jars of hand sanitisers. Also, touch-free devices on doors is likely to be more popular, designers said.

“We may see less interest in the ‘communal’ table in the design of social hubs. There will certainly be more emphasis on hygiene in these facilities,” Pearce said. “And we might expect to see rising interest in one-person shielded pod-type furniture settings as an antidote to shared seating.”

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The idea of “social distancing” will also likely make it into thinking about community dining and other settings at work that encourage close seating, designers said.

Right now, as businesses reel from the costs of the coronavirus, how to change office space isn't likely to be a priority, designers say. But once it is settled and business returns, employers will rethink their space and how it would fare in another health challenge, they said.

“We believe there should be more space for each member of staff, not just around the workstation but also places like meeting spaces, pantries or other functional areas within the office,” said Kelvin Hui, LWK+Partners director.

In the past, about 60 per cent of its clients have asked for a “half open plan”, where general staff sits in an open plan while managers have private rooms. About 30 per cent asked for a “fully open plan”. The rest have opted for “open plan with different enclosed facilities” set up, such as private telephone booths, individual quiet corners, or work and meditation cubes.

“The open office plan won't be dead, but will evolve to suit changing needs,” said Yanie Low, LWK associate director. “A half-height partition can be inserted between the desks; add-on equipment can also help. More hygiene technology will be introduced in enclosed spaces.”

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