THE END OF THE OPEN PLAN OFFICE?

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Staying Safe at Home. Staying Open for Business.

In my 20 year office agency career there has been a consistent and constant drive for office efficiency, to pack more bodies in, squeeze desk sizes, cut back on circulation and break out space and the absolute holy grail, ensure the boss has a desk exactly the same size and type as a graduate. I've seen plenty of occupiers with that 'battery hen' mentality.

The majority of buildings are designed to an occupancy ratio of 1:10 sq m, albeit we have seen a drive to reach 1:8 sq m in recent times. Tenants expect a densely populated open plan environment and landlords have facilitated it. It's what we are all used to. But how will this be affected in the world where social distancing is the norm. There are plenty of articles out there on how to occupy your office post Covid 19 so I won't labour that point but we are now faced with many efficient buildings that won't be occupied to their optimum density. What does the future hold assuming a mix of homeworking and sparsely populated offices?

Now let's throw, 'Wellness' into the mix. It's the buzzword of modern times and it's an important factor in staff recruitment and retention. At DTRE our occupancy ratio has always been a very generous 1:15 sq m net per employee. It's not that typical I suspect. Our break out areas are extensive, and much to my Partner's disgust I got my way and we installed a dartboard with regulation oche. After all we want employees to come to work and be motivated when they are there. You spend 8-10 hours of every working day of your life in the office so generous break out space and comfortable surroundings are good for collaboration, imagination and 'wellness'.

I guess it's a similar principle to the co-working serviced office we have seen championed in the past 3-5 years. The WeWork craze of 'lounging areas' wooden benches, long tables for collaboration, lap top working, hot desking, crittall windows and zero partitioning. You get the picture.

Yes, we adopted some of those principles like most have, apart from we know the people we work with, they are friends not just colleagues. Something which can't be said about a 'serviced office environment where I would say that the occupants are more transitory and potentially more risky in a Covid 19 led environment.

DTRE are the exception not the norm, so will social distancing see the end of the 'battery hen' mentality in office space. The endless goal to occupy space at 1:8sq m in a building where often the mechanical and electrical systems and the toilets can't cope. That's a thing of the past surely, we now need more space for the same amount of employees, not less?

Hold on a minute, that can't be right, I thought it was the end of the office? I hear you say this will be countered by working from home? Yes, I totally agree but we won't all work from home will we? I've already said that I think about one day a week is about right for my particular role, any more I think I'd go bananas. It's just not all it's cracked up to be is it?

For a start, my desk and office chair are useless compared to the ergonomic masterpiece in DTRE towers. My back aches like mad after a day of Zoom. So here is a thought, your employer makes you work at home – they will therefore have to kit out your home with a proper environment, desk, chair, IT equipment etc. We won't stand for less will we if we are being made to work at home. What of these employees who just don't have the space, not everybody has the luxury of a study or a spare bedroom, particularly those on lower pay grades. The exact sector of the workforce I would expect will be targeted for home working. Chronic back ache, screaming kids and an inability to turn off work and home leading to stress.

Let's face it, the office is a social hub and as human beings we need the interaction. All work at home, no office play would make life pretty dull if you ask me. Given my experience, a whole working week at home doesn't register on my Wellness scale, open plan or otherwise.

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