



REBOOTING THE WAY WE

Summary

The nature of work has been changing for decades. This article summaries key trends and disruptors, including COVID-19, and how this has fundamentally changed the nature of office work, in particular. Going forward, we know some form of hybrid work will be the new norm. How, as planners, do we fully recognize the inherent changes underway and the lessons from last two years and reboot our approach to planning for the workplace that is inclusive, healthy, and prosperous?

Sommaire

La nature du travail évolue depuis des décennies. Cet article résume les principaux courants et éléments perturbateurs, dont COVID, et la façon dont cela a fondamentalement changé la nature du travail de bureau, en particulier. À l'avenir, nous savons qu'une certaine forme de travail hybride sera la nouvelle norme. Comment, en tant qu'urbanistes, pouvons-nous reconnaître pleinement les changements inhérents et les leçons tirées de ces deux dernières années et réorienter notre approche de la planification d'un lieu de travail inclusif, sain et prospère?

The "tulip" in Vancouver's emerging Creative District is a catalyst and hub, including Nemesis Coffee, that draws together the advanced technology, post-secondary education and office workers in this former traditional employment zone. Photo: Urban Strategies Inc.



PLAN FOR WORK

By Melanie Hare

An evolving context

The nature of work has been dynamic for the last few decades. Technological advances, automation, ‘disruptors’ and shifts in the global economy have been radically changing employment and the factors related to economic competitiveness. COVID-19 has been a dramatic disruptor, significantly altering not only how but where we work and how we get there. So how, as planners, can we ‘reboot’ the way we plan for employment land uses, jobs, and economic resilience to address these new realities?

The future of work is a big topic. Let’s start by looking more specifically at how the nature of work has been evolving over the last decades, and most recently in response to COVID-19. In particular for this article, I will focus primarily on computer and office-based employment. Other types of employment are important to understand and also undergoing significant change, but let’s start by focusing on office-based employment to understand some of the forces at play and their implications.



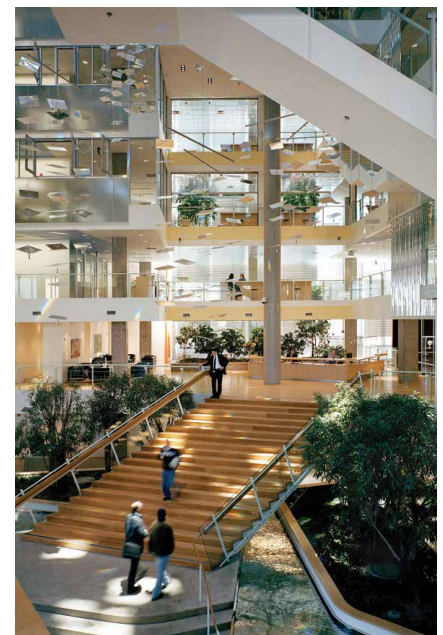
Initiatives such as 'Live Lunch' encourages staff to safely come together once again and share a meal, refueling the informal culture of the office. Photo: Urban Strategies Inc.

The recent trend in the provision of amenity rich workplaces that are deemed key to productivity, as well as to talent attraction and retention, has meant that work, play, food, entertainment (and sometimes living) are all bundled into the workplace. The key resource in the high technology and creative economy is people. Talent attraction in an increasingly mobile workforce means that consideration of total compensation, including access to affordable housing, childcare, transit, and health care, have become key factors in retaining a competitive edge for businesses, municipalities, and regions.

The emergence of flex space, hoteling, and co-work has created a wholly different design for the workplace, where 'your' space is now 'our' space and, even prior to COVID-19, resulted in far fewer square feet dedicated per employee. COVID-19 has taught us that tight 'pods' of workspace may no longer be appropriate but that the desire to work together and collaborate is highly valued.

For many, since March 2020, the impact of COVID-19 has translated into decentralization, allowing work from anywhere. This has reversed the long-standing trend of growth in our largest urban centres and resulted in an influx of residents and investment in our smaller and rural communities.

"WFH" – Work from Home is now not only part of the common vernacular but actually how many of us have been working for the past two years – finally realizing the live/work aspirations of so many planners and planning policies. At the beginning of 2021, 32% of Canadian employees aged 15 to 69 worked most of their hours from home, compared with only 4% in 2016.¹ Moving forward, many have discovered the advantages of WFH, including increased flexibility and productivity. According to Statistics Canada, 40% of Canadian employees have indicated a preference to continue to work 40-50% of the work week from home.² Our experience at Urban Strategies, based on staff surveys, is consistent with these statistics, with many of



The Genzyme Building in Cambridge Massachusetts by Behnisch Architekten is an example of biophilic design, intentionally bringing nature, natural light and air into the building. Photo: Modernism and Its Embracing of Biophilic Design – www.modlar.com.



Mobility corridors need to be planned for a broad range of active transportation modes and devices.

our team keen to be back working in person together in the office, but not every day. As with many offices, as we reopen, we have adapted our work space to allow for flexibility, while creating safe meeting environments and intentional in-person opportunities such as “Live Lunch” Wednesdays to foster team culture by encouraging people to come together once again.

While flexibility may be welcome to many, this is not an equal opportunity for all. Access to technology, broadband, and/or child or elder care is not equitable across all workers or communities. Lower income and rural communities in particular may have less access to the hard and soft infrastructure which enables remote work. The opportunity is also not gender neutral, as we have seen evidence of the reduction in female participation in the workplace throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with women still playing the predominant role in care giving in their households.³

Finally, COVID has reinforced the need for healthy and inclusive workplaces. The era of the “cube farm” has been replaced with recognition that people are going to return to the workplace only if the space is safe, comfortable, easy to navigate, invites collaboration, and offers a “wow”

factor.⁴ This certainly requires a rethink in workspace design – from buildings systems, such as HVAC to office design, including common spaces, meeting rooms, and working space to accessibility considerations – but perhaps also in programming, such as inclusion/access to child care, prayer spaces, and potentially even access to natural light, fresh air, and nature throughout the workday.

The opportunity

As planners, now is the time to fully recognize the inherent changes underway and lessons from last two years and revisit our approach to planning policies, regulations, and design frameworks; to think beyond employment as a land use zone and building space; to plan for the hard and soft infrastructure required; and to create work places and spaces that are healthy and inclusive, enabling the development of prosperous and resilient communities. The implications for planners and the communities we work in are multiple, but here are a few to ignite the discussion:

- 1. Blur the “blue” zone.** Given the trend to automation, flex, and collaborative space, let’s consider reversing the Euclidean zoning approach and shift our planning

objective from land use regulation to a focus on form and function-based regulation aimed at creating prosperous and healthy environments. In this we can learn from the City of Toronto “Kings,” a 1996 City of Toronto initiative that replaced land use zoning in two districts on the shoulders of the downtown core with form-based planning. More recently, a similar initiative underway in Vancouver has transformed the “Creative District” between Main Street and Clark Drive. In both areas, ‘deregulation’ has removed the time-consuming rezoning process and enabled the reinvestment of former outdated industrial buildings into a seamless mix of institutional, design, research, innovation, and entrepreneurial workspace. The result has been the potential for more job density than traditional employment zones. In addition to blurring these lines, planning policies need to focus on the provision of the infrastructure (broadband, district energy, green infrastructure, housing) and amenities required to support workers while attracting the talent and employers that will allow the economy to flourish.

- 2. Rethink the workplace.** From planning focused on retaining employment land



Guelph Downtown Dining District Pilot, where the main streets of Macdonell and Wyndham are pedestrianized during the weekend, has helped to leverage the influx of people to cities like Guelph and revitalize the downtown. Photo: McCabe's Facebook photo.

base and bricks and mortar GFA shift to a focus on enabling the workplace as a space for collaboration, flexibility and shared spaces. More specifically, our work will not always be in person, or in a defined work shift/day, yet we know getting together to work is sometimes critical and inspiring. What size, scale, and kind of collaborative spaces should be encouraged? How can we plan to create more inclusive, healthy and productive spaces – ones that have good accessibility and mobility choice and offer workplace amenity, similar to required residential amenity space – both indoor and out? How can zoning and building code provisions be revised to respond to innovative designs that are not only creating flexible space – be it office, worker, training, or retail space – but also ensuring access to clean air and integration of nature in buildings, as proposed in biophilic design?

3. Optimize the trend toward decentralization. The uptick on WFH is likely to stay. The resultant trend toward decentralization allows for a reset on the environments in which people can choose to work. Let's ramp up the amenity levels and types of shared spaces while advancing the transit access that can continue to differentiate our central business districts. At the same time, let's leverage the trend of people moving out of bigger cities as an opportunity to revitalize smaller centres, main streets and older suburban strips as places of work. To do so, let's plan for e-connected, smaller scale, and lower cost entrepreneurial corridors offering highly walkable environments for those working, living, and entertaining in the area.

4. Shift how we plan for the commute. As the nature of the workplace has

changed, we will also need to revisit how we plan for the work commute. With less need to travel in traditional ways and workday times, has the era of transportation planning and road design for peak am/pm traffic ended? The emergence of hybrid work weeks and the increase in on-demand services may radically reduce the need for dedicated worker's parking stalls. As we promote modal shift, there is an emerging range of mobility devices available to deliver people to work and goods to market – the e-bike, scooter, drone – that will provide a welcome complication to our right of ways but will need some thoughtful design strategies.

Planners are adaptive and creative. Let's recognize and embrace the changing nature of work and collaborate by bringing public policy makers, regulators, and private sector planners together to create refreshed planning frameworks, processes, and designs that embrace contemporary work places. In doing so, we can best plan for community prosperity and economic resilience. Let's reboot!

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