



Getting workplaces working again

Level 7 is a typical floor, in a typical building, on the edge of Auckland's CBD. It's a mid-week morning, but it could be late afternoon on a weekend. A smattering of workers are scattered across a space designed for 50 staff. The silence is deafening.

This is no business in crisis however, in fact, many key performance indicators have pointed upward over the past three quarters. This is post-Covid working in one of Auckland's prime real estate properties.

It's widely accepted that work as we knew it will never be the same, but what will it be? Are our once-heaving offices to remain ghostly reminders of the preceding era, or can we meaningfully re-invent them to suit a new way of working?

BEWARE THE TREND

When Covid came and the world of white-collar work tipped on its head, new trends rapidly emerged. New Zealand navigated its own course through the uncharted waters. But now, as businesses from boutique to behemoth continue to surface from the disruption and dislocation, the question of how to adapt for the longer term is at the vanguard of corporate strategy.

A lasting approach to work practices needs to be an evidence-based one. A stream of international trends superseding one for another has swamped every workplace

and real estate forum, but increasingly, it's the accumulation of current, local data, that's providing the best insights into the vernacular working environment.

While there is currency in some international trends, it's local attitudes, culture, and practices that are playing a far greater role in shaping the workplaces charged with meeting organisations' needs over the longer term.

THE DATA BRIDGE

An occupational divide has emerged between corporate leaderships' desire to see workers back in the office and employees' desires to remain working ostensibly elsewhere. There is an enormous opportunity to reconcile these differing preferences in the reimagining of the workplace, but to offer relevant solutions, first, we need a clear understanding of why it exists.

Working with two nationwide organisations, Context has collected data on post-Covid work patterns through utilisation studies and surveys.

The data supports many trends and behaviours the organisations had already identified, but most evident were the differences between the two businesses. This was amplified when compared further with data and insights from other, similar organisations.

Factors, including the type of business and its work practices, culture, demographics, management styles, and leadership strategies, all impact a business' operation and its engagement with staff.

These learnings indicate that no single approach will be the answer for future workplace design, but data is a valuable tool for bridging the divide between employer and employee expectations.

>> Many workplaces aren't working

With 62% of respondents indicating that they felt more productive working from home and 60% noting that in-person interruptions and unwanted distractions impacted their work when in the office, it's clear that the pre-Covid office does not deliver to the adjusted needs and expectations of workers now used to higher quality, focussed work time.

>> Satellites are burning up in the work-o-sphere

Before the pandemic, many larger organisations employed a dispersed office model with satellites located to beat long commutes and attract workers. Now that employees are unhitched from their workstations, equipped with mobile devices, secure remote access, and are regularly dialling in from their homes, the role of satellite offices has become marginalised. Instead of shorter, daily commutes to satellites, employers now expect workers to travel to a single, central location when not working from home. The case for an attractive HQ has never been stronger.

>> Earning the commute

Not all home working environments are created equal. For many employees, their flatmates, young families, and a lack of space mean the office remains a preferred place to work. But with 86% of respondents to Context's surveys indicating strongly or very strongly, a desire to retain flexible and remote work practices, it's clear that businesses must make the office a worthwhile destination to earn the employee commute. Offices should provide what home environments can't.



A

2022

Gartner survey found that both Gen Y and Z workers in the US valued face-to-face interaction to seek mentoring and build professional relationships. This is a desire reflected in New Zealand's workforce as junior and mid-level staff pursue career paths temporarily limited by recent events.

Coupled with tech-supported collaborative spaces and facilities to meet and entertain clients, the post-Covid office is emerging as the intersection where an organisation's people connect in real life.

>> Nomads carry what they need

The transient nature of work beyond the office now extends within it as well. The most successful post-pandemic offices are those that embrace just how self-contained workers have become. Backpacks and tote bags are the new

storage mobile. Workers, now universally equipped with devices once tethered to their workstations, are utilising the variety of settings provided in many offices from high-back sofas to café tables.

Work has been liberated by many practical considerations but most powerfully it's the confidence and imagination of workers themselves, using the workplace as an extension of their home environments, that is influencing how workplaces are organised.

>> Working both ways

The post-pandemic office has impacted the way businesses are now thinking about their leasing arrangements. Many organisations are recognising the risks associated with committing to extended leases. As utilisation ratios have changed, the space requirements, and fit-outs within them have too. Combined, these considerations are opening new opportunities for landlords and tenants to reconsider how deals are structured to mutual advantage.

As businesses grapple with how to organise their workplaces for the longer term, one of the questions we're most often asked is "What's everyone else doing?" The most important question however is, "What should we be doing?"

If you're thinking about relocation, renovation, or the reorganisation of your workplace to reflect post-Covid changes, we'd love to help. Get in touch at hello@context.nz



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Context's Alasdair Hood specialises in strategy and design and has a breadth of experience with clients of all scales across a range of industries from workplace, retail, and hospitality to residential. Innovative and forward-thinking, he works with some of Aotearoa's best-known companies and brands to design spaces and places that support their businesses, stakeholder needs, and commercial requirements. He is currently providing strategic consultancy for blue-chip organisations on their future workplace planning.