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**Working From Home:
The New Normal?**

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What are the consequences - unanticipated, physical and psychological - of working remotely?

Among many dramatic impacts of COVID-19, working from home (WFH) is a new and disruptive reality for design professionals globally.

As I write this, I've begun day two of a three-week "shelter-in-place" order issued by six county governments in the San Francisco Bay Area. Many companies around the world, including a number of AEC firms, have also voluntarily initiated their own broad WFH programs.

The good news: many firms have been well-prepared for such large-scale virtual collaboration. Indeed, the technology infrastructure required – personal videoconferencing, virtual meeting platforms, cloud-based software applications, etc. - is essential

to any modern multi-office organization. Over the past decade, drivers have included connecting talent from multiple offices, leveraging talent in lower-cost markets, filling expertise gaps of co-located teams or simply facilitating cross-disciplinary collaboration among separate AEC firms.

However, this time is different - in a big way - and involves sustained virtual collaboration among individuals who normally sit together in close proximity. They are surrendering all physical contact. Even if AEC firms are well-prepared technologically, is their talent prepared emotionally? What are the consequences of isolation, especially for those who live alone? And what are the practical considerations of WFH programs for privacy, acoustics,

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ergonomics and work-life balance, particularly for parents with children at home?

It is uncertain how long these WFH programs – voluntary or involuntary – will last. But when the crisis ends, which it inevitably will, our perspectives on WFH programs will likely have changed. What will be the new normal?

Challenging Legacy Assumptions

The great open-office debate is certainly not new. Companies generally prefer open offices because they provide greater flexibility, increased density and decreased real estate costs. And beautiful, well-designed open offices, which provide multiple options that support different modes of work, are an attractor for recruiting and retaining talent.

Having said that, maintaining acoustical privacy and providing the right conditions for sustained, focused work remain vexing design challenges. Most people toggle between working alone and collaborating. Overhearing a one-way conversation can be more disruptive than overhearing a two-way conversation (the “need-to-listen” effect), so phone calls or headphone-enabled webinars in an open office are always challenging. In a WFH arrangement, this may be less problematic, but not if you are sharing the same work room as your spouse, partner, roommate, or child.

But here is the core issue: foundational to the open office concept is the assumption is that if everyone works for the same firm, in the same city, doing similar things, they should ideally work together in the same location. It is generally understood

and accepted that some degree of in-person interaction is both healthy and necessary to building trusted relationships and productive teams.

What remains to be seen is if and how this assumption shifts (or not) post-crisis. A key question to be answered: is most-of-the-time physical interaction actually better than periodic physical interaction? And how will individual preferences change (or not) as a result of the pandemic?

One Firm’s Experiment

In one multi-office U.S. architecture firm, with a small ten-person office facing an upcoming lease renewal, the office leaders evaluated the usual options: stay in place, look for new space elsewhere, upsize or downsize. In this case, the COVID-19 crisis inspired them to make a different choice: no long-term lease at all for the next 12 months.

In doing so, they are undertaking a brave experiment. How can the firm sustain and grow a creative, productive ten-person office without the benefit of long-term space? What are the tradeoffs? How frequently and where should in-person gatherings still occur, and how should the firm support individuals who do not have a good home office option?

Fortunately, their talent has a critical head start: they have been working together for years, the trusted relationships exist, they are familiar with one another's skills and capabilities, and communication "short hands" are already in place. It would be a very different (and problematic) proposition to start up a brand-new office that way.

More good news: the explosion of co-working spaces over the past decade now provides many flexible options for regularly scheduled and/or ad-hoc

physical gatherings. (Although on hold during social distancing, such physical meetings remain important.) Economic savings are offered as well: renting such ad-hoc space several hours a week is much less costly than long-term leased space.

But what about clients, both current and potential? How will they react to the lack of a permanent, physical office space? This is a risk, and in some cases, it will be a net negative. But the firm's current clients are enthusiastic – they view this as worthy research and appreciate the potential of innovative outcomes. In synergistic partnership, the clients will also learn along the way.

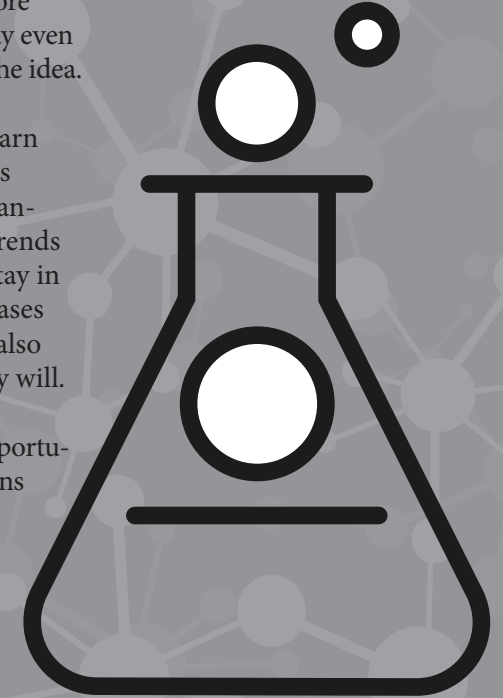
The idea of "non-permanent" workplace, driven by the reality that much (but not all) AEC collaboration can happen virtually, was already a clear and growing trend before COVID-19. Indeed, many clients value more frequent

interactive webinars and reducing the time involved in traveling to and from physical meetings. As a result of their COVID-19 experiences, and despite the enforced physical separations, more individuals and organizations may even become more comfortable with the idea.

We should all be fascinated to learn from this, and other experiments undertaken in response to the pandemic, and how different AEC trends might accelerate, decelerate or stay in place. Exactly how our legacy biases and behavioral habits may shift also remains to be seen, but shift they will.

From every crisis emerge new opportunities, fueled by unexpected lessons and transformed perspectives.

Enlightened AEC firms will experiment, watch, listen, learn and act.



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