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BUSINESS

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# The Cubicle Is Back. Blame (or Thank) the Coronavirus

As businesses reopen, social distancing rules will lead to new partitions between workspaces, reminiscent of the fabric-clad dividers of the 1980s.



ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES

**THE CUBICLE IS** making a comeback.

As thousands of companies contemplate restarting operations, executives are weighing how best to reconfigure workspaces that have, by and large, been designed to minimize cost and foster the face-to-face interactions that can spread the deadly coronavirus.

Some companies are looking at high-tech approaches to enforce social distancing and track interactions, with location-monitoring apps and badges, artificial intelligence surveillance cameras, and high-tech health checks. Other innovations will be simpler: stickers to enforce 6 feet of distance between coworkers; staggered shifts that allow for more spacing; more regular cleanings; and of course oodles of hand sanitizer.

But one of the most important innovations may turn out to be cardboard or plastic dividers that turn open-plan offices into something more reminiscent of the 1980s.

“You’re gonna see a lot of plexiglass,” says Michael Boonshoft, a spokesperson for Cushman & Wakefield, a commercial real estate company that has drawn up guidelines for reopening office spaces. “Having that divider will make people feel safer. That shield between desks will be really important.”

Cushman & Wakefield is importing innovations from offices it operates in China, where it has helped more than a million people return to work. Besides temperature checkpoints, masks, sanitizer, and wipes, the guidelines recommend rearranging desks and meeting room seating to ensure social distancing, having workers use disposable desk covers, and installing dividers between workspaces.

“Companies aren’t going to have a ton of time and money to create a whole new office concept in a month,” Boonshoft says. “So these are quick- and inexpensive-to-implement ideas.”

**“You’re gonna see a lot of plexiglass.”**

– MICHAEL BOONSHOFT, CUSHMAN & WAKEFIELD

WeWork, the on-demand office space company, has kept some sites open to support essential businesses during the pandemic. Last week the company shared with members a blueprint for maintaining safety at its locations. Measures include rules on social distancing at shared desks

and in meeting rooms and kitchens, regular cleaning, and modifications of air-conditioning systems to reduce recirculation that might spread the virus. But a representative says the company is considering other steps, including installing partitions in what had been open office spaces.

“Partitions are really hot right now,” says Ben Waber, president and cofounder of Humanyze, a company that analyzes digital and physical communications between office workers to gauge productivity and collaboration.

Humanyze is working with clients including Panasonic in Japan to determine how to redesign office layouts to minimize potentially dangerous interactions without cutting off communication. The company measures workers’ movements inside buildings using anonymous data from smart ID badges.

Waber says a key challenge will be balancing new safety measures with opportunities for productive interactions: “At the end of the day, the only reason to be in an office is to collaborate.”

Cubicles appeared in US offices in the 1960s as a way to encourage personalization, movement, and meaningful interactions among office workers, according to *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*, by Nikil Saval. Robert Propst, a designer at Herman Miller, came up with the idea for a modular, low-cost, cubicle-filled space as an antidote to the rows of typing desks that were common at the time.

**“Partitions are really hot right now.”**

– BEN WABER, PRESIDENT, HUMANYZE

Over the following decades, however, the cubicle ironically became associated with regimented, monotonous, and depersonalized office life. It fell out of favor early in this century, as Silicon Valley startups embraced open offices to encourage collaboration, and companies elsewhere mimicked the idea.

Some businesses are eyeing more high-tech tools for ensuring social distancing and preventing the spread of the virus.

Smart cameras may be one way to guard against unsafe worker behavior. [SmartVid.io](#), which makes AI surveillance systems for identifying unsafe situations at construction sites without identifying individuals, last month developed software to warn managers when workers fail to maintain safe distances from each other. CEO Josh Kanner says it is working on an upgrade that will detect whether workers are wearing masks.

Inside buildings, some companies are touting efforts that use smartphones to identify possible new infections. The consulting firm [PwC](#) has developed a [contact-tracing tool](#) for office buildings, which it's testing in its offices in Shanghai. Some countries and US states are considering using smartphone contact tracing on a much larger scale, although [the approach is controversial](#).



PwC's approach involves mapping the radio signature of an office so that an app on employees' phones can record where they are more accurately than [GPS](#) or [Bluetooth](#). If an employee tests positive for [Covid-19](#), the tool can then identify other workers who may have been exposed and should be tested and quarantined.

Another means of social distancing will be staggering workers' shifts. [Appian](#), which makes apps for workforce management, recently developed one that monitors workers' health and risk through questionnaires, then determines who should come into an office.

Matt Calkins, founder and CEO of Appian, says it may be some time before offices are full again. "There's no way we're just gonna flood back to work at the first moment and crowd our offices and sit right next to each other," he says.

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