

## The Future of American Offices After COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has dramatically altered our perceptions of the world around us. Self-quarantine and stay-at-home orders have impacted business environments, forcing many to adapt rapidly to meet public health guidelines. The economic hardships brought on by COVID-19, and the fundamental changes in the way companies do business, will resonate for years to come. Rather than a “return to normal,” many companies are rethinking office spaces in an effort to protect employees and to ensure smooth operations. Office work areas are sure to be transformed in both novel and familiar ways in the coming years, with the modern workplace offering a bit of new and old.

### Before the Pandemic: Office Work Environments

Beginning around the time of the “dot com” era, or around the mid-1990s, office-oriented businesses began to explore new ways of arranging office workspaces. The goal was to get more employees into smaller spaces while fostering a collaborative environment. The cubicles so ubiquitous of offices around the country were discarded in favor of open-concept work areas. Modern workplaces were open and inviting, with few physical barriers between workstations. This open atmosphere allowed easy collaboration between office workers and subconsciously reinforced team-building efforts on the part of office managers and staff.

Frequent in-person meetings were another hallmark of the “new” office environment. Most offices had dedicated conference rooms for small gatherings and for full team collaborations. In the wake of COVID-19’s effects on offices, open plans and in-person conferences have come under scrutiny for their potential in increasing infection risks among office workers.

### A Path Forward: Adopting New and Time-Honored Solutions in the Office Environment

Cubicles, or workstation systems that function like them, may be making a comeback in American offices. Post-pandemic, modern workplaces may feature transparent dividers, helping to reinforce the social distancing guidelines published by public health agencies. Although the dividers will keep office workers separate from each other, the overall look and office atmosphere will remain open, unlike the cubicles of old. Dividers may appear in common areas as well, including bench workstations, restroom sink counters, and eating areas in break rooms.

New—or reimaged—office tech is transforming the modern workplace as well. Companies are leveraging remote-access technologies to reduce the number of workers in an office at any one time. By splitting offices into shifts, some workers can telecommute while others report to the office. The shift teams then switch work locations according to a rotating schedule. Video conferencing platforms are also taking the place of in-person conferences, even within the office itself. Participants can remain at their own socially distanced workstations instead of reporting to a closed-off conference room, reducing direct contact between groups of people.

Finally, many companies are taking steps to enhance office cleaning, with advanced disinfectants to wipe down common areas, high-touch equipment, and fixtures; UV light systems; and antibacterial coatings on equipment items that are handled frequently. HEPA air-filtration systems, already popular in many office environments, will see further adoption. Surfaces that are difficult to keep clean or to sanitize, such as carpeting and fabric upholstery, will be discarded in favor of solid surfaces, including tile, woods, and plastics. These surfaces are more easily wiped down with disinfectant products as needed.

### Summary

By blending traditional office layouts with new technologies and strategies for improving office safety, American offices are witnessing a transformation. The post-pandemic office will be designed and maintained to help workers avoid the spread of infection, allowing them to keep operations running with a minimum of workplace-related illness claims. Ultimately, these new office environments will promote productivity while managing insurance costs—and workers benefit from improved safety in their modern workplaces.

### Sources

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