

Emerging through Covid-19: The Evolving Workplace for the Future

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The Evolving Workplace for the Future

As we transition through the various stages of the reopening of society and the economy, we naturally will see the return of employees to the shared workplace. However, there is no denying that the workplace and what we want and expect from it has changed over the past 12-18 months.

Understanding the role of the office/workplace for your company

Many of us transitioned during the crisis to working remotely from our own homes; now, we will need to transition back to working in a shared space. For some, this will be welcome, but for others, it may cause anxiety as it is no longer a familiar space and they might personally feel that they are returning to the workplace too soon.

We know that blended and hybrid working models will be a feature of the workplace for the future, but there is a lot to consider in getting the model right for your own business, and making sure it is working for your employees and the type of work performed. Before making any assumptions as to what your employees want or what might work for your business, gather data and input on what is needed for all of your relevant stakeholders – your landlord, your customers, your employees and your service providers.

Set up a working group to consider options with representatives from management and employees. Scope out its role and set expectations around its deliverables. The output from this working group will influence the design and plan for the new workplace for the future and ensure that flexible and blended working models, if appropriate, will enhance the experience of work for employees, contribute to collaboration and bring people together even when they are physically apart.



Survey your staff – ask your employees for their input on what they need and want. There will be some employees who are eager to return to work face-to-face with colleagues, and some who remain vulnerable and are concerned about their safety and welfare



Understand the expected output from the type of work performed

– review the work that is performed by your employees across the business. Ensure you have a good understanding of what tools, processes, stakeholder needs, and deliverables are required as well as any specific quality standards and delivery time frames



Analyse the challenges and successes of the past 12-18 months

– get a deeper understanding of what worked well when your employees worked remotely and identify the challenges that you encountered. By understanding what has and hasn't worked well you can identify potential new ways of working and adjust processes to fit



Identify your workplace options – study the various workplace options available, including the ideal home office set-up, the government's strategy for working hubs across the country, the regional or head office space you once had, and the serviced offices and coworking spaces that are well established and available across the country



Consider the facilities and services needed by your employees

– the various workplace options will have a range of pros and cons, from the availability of dining options, décor and ambiance, health and safety standards and shared workspaces, to individual workstations, collaboration studios and meeting spaces, storage for personal items, accessibility and mobility needs, technology and smart working tools, transportation and parking options, to their location and community settings. Be realistic as to what supports and services are available for employees for this next stage, as many of the current models used for remote working are not sustainable in the longer term



Consider the costs involved with the various options – as landlords adjust to the new ways of working, there will be varying rent and lease options available for businesses to consider. All options will have a cost factor to be considered in terms of the tools, technology and set-up costs that are required



Stay true to your culture and values – whatever workplace design you choose for your business, it should represent and align with your culture and values. This will help your company stay true to its core principles and facilitate the engagement of your employees



Design and layout considerations

As we move through the next stages of managing the pandemic, the way we work, the way we utilise and engage in our physical workplace and the way we reimagine the use of floor space will be very different for all companies. Design considerations will likely incorporate plans to allow for good physical distancing, safe traffic patterns through offices, sufficient ventilation, and enhanced technology to ensure safety for employees and visitors, as well as collaboration studio and meeting areas.

Employees will likely feel safer returning to their workplace when they know their employer is providing a safe environment. This will enable them to focus on their work, instead of worrying about encountering a vulnerable colleague or putting themselves at risk of being unwell.

The extent to which the pandemic has permanently changed the workplace is yet unknown but there are a few areas you can start to consider as you plan for a return to the workplace:

Review your current workspace and layout

- ✓ How much and what types of space make up your workspace, for example, common areas, offices, storage and open desk space?
- ✓ Does your workspace support your company's culture? Does it inhibit or enable collaboration, knowledge sharing and mentoring?
- ✓ How does the traffic flow within your workspace? Are employees encouraged to move around and build their social network? How is this likely to change post-pandemic?
- ✓ What type of furniture do you currently have, and can it be used to create the right type of space or reduced to provide more free space?
- ✓ What kind of seating arrangements does your company use, for example, flexible seating, assigned desks or hot-desking?
- ✓ What shared resources are available and what teams need to access them, for example, printers, coffee areas, private phone booths or quiet spaces?
- ✓ How do different employees use the workspace? What roles require on-site attendance and what roles can operate remotely?

Consider ventilation needs

- ✓ We now know proper ventilation is fundamental to preventing the spread of Covid-19 and having an open floor plan where windows can be opened can quickly improve building ventilation. If you can't open your windows, or doing so won't ventilate the entire area, it may be time to invest in a climate control or air filtration system

Consider the role of technology

- ✓ Understand the many ways in which technology can be utilised to both manage and enhance the workplace experience. These may include desk management tools, room-booking systems, social distancing sensors, touchless exit/entry on doors, autonomous cleaning solutions and voice enabled technology
- ✓ Make use of remote collaboration tools, where appropriate. Many businesses will likely have blended working models, so ensure there are good collaboration tools in place to support both workplace and remote working. Good AV systems will enhance the effectiveness of collaboration tools

Educate and involve employees

- ✓ Good signage, emblems and floor stickers will all help educate and inform employees on how best to use the workspace, follow circulation guidelines and ensure safe use of common areas
- ✓ Employees will have become more comfortable with flexible working and physical distancing over the last year so involve them by asking for their feedback and ideas

Collaboration and innovation space for sharing ideas with colleagues

Collaboration and innovation are even more important as we move beyond the Covid-19 crisis. Progressive organisations understand the real benefits of collaboration among their employees. Re-invigorating our employees is essential to improving morale and engagement after a very difficult year for many. A clear plan to improve collaboration will lead to natural innovation and better engagement.

Below are some ideas and tips to initiate collaboration and innovation with colleagues:

Cultivate openness and transparency – be open about the issues and challenges your company is facing and present incentives for employees to offer solutions

Ensure your culture encourages idea-sharing without judgement – one obstacle that often prevents employees from active participation and putting forward their ideas is a fear of judgement or rejection

Encourage cross-functional teams – establish work projects across departments and teams to enable innovation and interaction

Lead by example – leaders and managers need to be visible, approachable, and supportive. Get out there and be engaged. If you are working remotely get involved in cross-functional activities and be very visible

Set clear expectations and objectives – remember to acknowledge and reward positive outcomes

Ensure that your organisation has the technology to enable collaboration and innovation – whether you use SLACK for communicating, CRM for business development, or other technology tools, check that they are working for your business and are facilitating collaboration. If they are not fostering collaboration, consider other alternatives



Coworking space – opportunities and benefits

There are an increasing number of public and private workspace options currently available, with additional options becoming more widespread throughout the country, in part motivated by public demand as well as government policy. In the National Remote Working Strategy and Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, the government sets out its plans to develop and invest in a network of remote working hubs and infrastructure across Ireland. These plans also include the re-purposing of hospitality spaces, which will have the dual benefit of providing working spaces and investing in local communities.

In a Global Coworking Growth Study carried out in 2020 by Coworking Resources, their findings estimated that almost 5 million people will be working from coworking spaces by 2024, an increase of 158% compared with 2020. This trend is already visible here in Ireland, with more and more businesses and individuals utilising coworking spaces and hubs.

The National Remote Working Strategy has a mandate that 20% of the public sector workforce will work remotely by 2021. In addition to that, the EU Directive on Work-Life Balance will soon legislate for the right to request flexible working arrangements by August 2022. This framework for parents and carers provides the right to request flexible working arrangements. Hubs and coworking spaces could become a possible solution to flexible working practices. Employers can begin to prepare for this by considering and developing a flexible working policy. The appendix provides a list of items to consider when setting up a flexible working policy.

Hubs and coworking spaces can allow for a sustainable, social and productive way of working. They can provide a ready-to-go set-up for employees to slot into an established business community, which helps to counteract the risks of remote worker isolation and loneliness.

Some of the benefits and opportunities these remote working hubs offer include:



Flexibility – companies are not tied into long lease agreements and the space can grow or reduce with employee numbers



IT access – companies have access to a managed and comprehensive IT infrastructure, such as phonelines, internet and computer servers



Networking – employees can benefit from networking opportunities with workers from other companies



Cost savings – coworking spaces offer potential cost savings due to shared utilities, facilities, repairs and upkeep charges, flexible lease agreements and all-inclusive rates for fixtures and fittings, such as desks and chairs



Office alternative – these options provide a viable office environment for employees who cannot or do not want to work from home



Enhanced productivity – coworking can have a positive impact on employee productivity compared to a home office due to reduced distractions from family members and reliable infrastructure such as internet, printers and phones



Reduced isolation – coworking reduces the risk of isolation where an employee is working and living alone



Positive impact on work/life balance – this could be through shorter commute times or by giving employees the ability to relocate to areas of more affordable housing or closer family supports



Good local impact – hubs have a positive impact on regional communities and help other local businesses to thrive

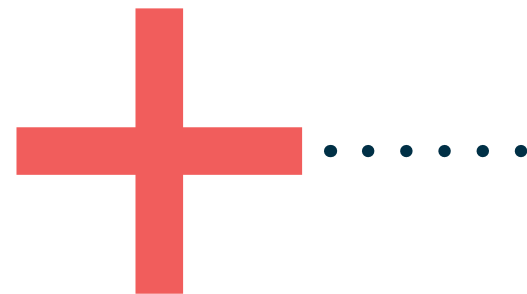


Positive environmental benefits – localised hubs can reduce commuter journeys and therefore lower carbon emissions

The list of benefits is many and varied, not just for the individual or business themselves, but also for family units and the wider community. Hubs provide a whole new option for companies to access business support, facilities, services, innovation, networking, and other services.

Summary:

There is no doubt that the function of the workplace is evolving. Establishing a framework that helps you understand your company's needs both from an operational and employee perspective is an important first step in deciding how you will utilise your working space. The evolving workplace should include design options that create purposeful and inspiring environments for your employees while at the same time providing the necessary services and tools to deliver business outputs. Involving employees as much as possible in the design phase will help them feel part of the decision-making process and support buy-in to whatever changes you make.



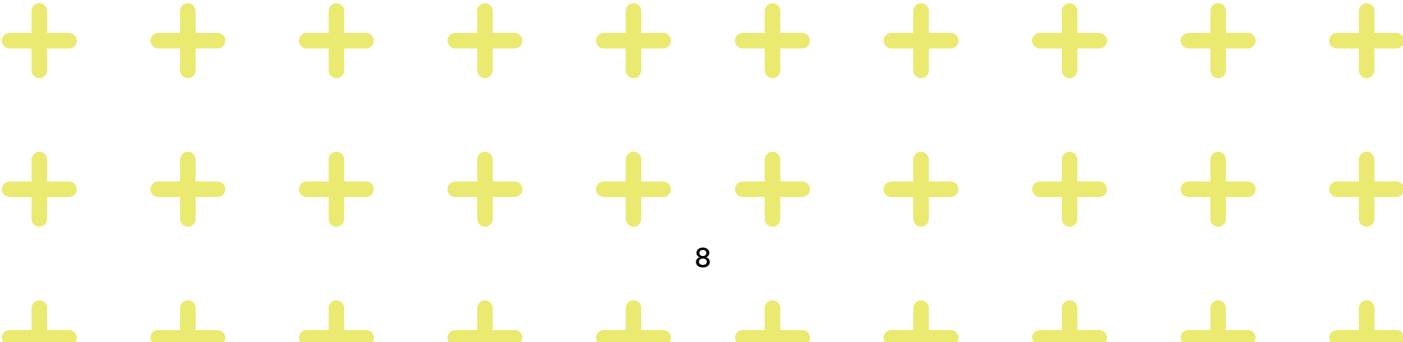
Key considerations in getting your workplace ready:

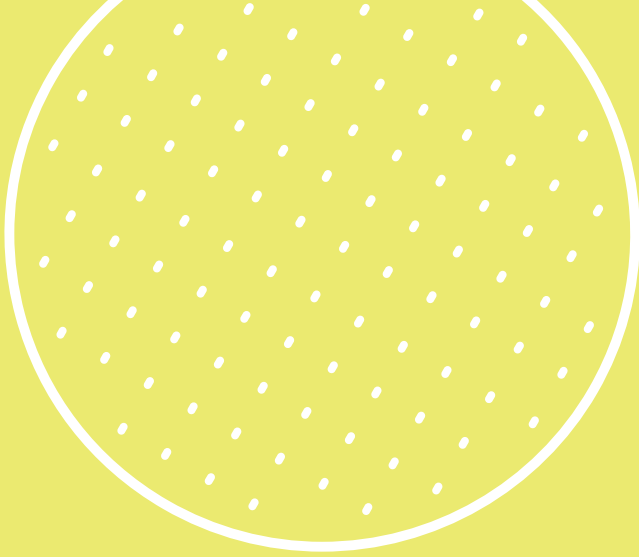
- ✓ Can the work that your employees perform be delivered to the standards needed and within the timeframes required by your customers if they are undertaking remote or blended working?
- ✓ Can you objectively and fairly define teams and roles that can accommodate remote or blended working models? Make sure you are consistent in your classification of what roles can be performed remotely, what ones can accommodate a blended model and what roles require employees to be on-site
- ✓ Do you know what your employees expect from their workplace going forward? If not, survey your employees and ask them what they would like and what model they feel will be best suited to the role they perform
- ✓ Do you have up-to-date knowledge of where your employees are physically located? Some employees may have moved location during the pandemic, within and outside of Ireland. Is it possible for employees to continue to work from their new location or access office space in local coworking facilities or hubs?
- ✓ Do you have sufficient information on the range of potential workplace options? Map out fully each option against a set criteria such as:
 - Local services needed by staff
 - New workplace layout requirements
 - Maximum number of employees that can be catered for onsite at any one time
 - Technical supports required
 - Opportunities available for team gatherings safely such as meeting rooms and collaboration studios
 - Costs of establishing suitable remote workspaces for your employees
 - Availability of coworking spaces in locations that could accommodate some of your current employees
 - Flexibility of terms from your landlord to accommodate
 - Accommodation requirements needed by visiting colleagues or customers
- ✓ What communication channels should you use to keep employees briefed on your plan for the future workplace so that you can manage their expectations effectively?
- ✓ When will your workplace be ready to accommodate employees and what adjustments or changes will be required?
- ✓ What new regulations and safeguards will you be operating and how do you think these will transition over the coming months?
- ✓ How will your company's values and culture align to the new workplace? What adjustments do you need to consider to ensure that employees stay connected and remain true to your company's guiding principles?

Appendix

Items to consider when setting up a flexible working policy

- ✓ What types of flexible working can your company support – for example, remote working, job sharing, flexitime, compressed hours?
- ✓ What factors will your company need to consider when reviewing a flexible working request? For example:
 - Ability to meet customer demand
 - Ability to organise or redistribute work among existing staff
 - Ability or availability to recruit additional staff
 - Impact on quality
 - Impact on performance
 - Availability of work during periods the employee proposes to work
 - Cost factors
- ✓ What eligibility criteria does your company want to put in place – for example, length of service, job category?
- ✓ Who in the organisation will make the final decision?
- ✓ How do your employees apply for flexible working – do you provide an application form?
- ✓ When will employees receive a reply to their request – 2 weeks/1 month/6 weeks?
- ✓ How often can an employee apply for flexible working?
- ✓ What is your appeals process?





About Enterprise Ireland

Enterprise Ireland is the government organisation responsible for the development and growth of Irish enterprises in world markets. We work in partnership with Irish enterprises to help them start, grow, innovate and win export sales in global markets. In this way, we support sustainable economic growth, regional development and secure employment.

About Voltege

Voltege Management Ltd is a leading Irish HR and Management Consultancy. Voltege's ethos is to effectively partner with and deliver support and advice to clients to meet the needs of their business. Voltege supports scaling start-ups, entrepreneurs, SMEs and undertakes larger organisation design and complex projects with major corporates.

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