

From disruption to the transformation of a contemporary workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has caught our society off guard and brought about the unexpected. The sudden and swift spread of the virus has shut down much of the world's economy, and most individuals – except for essential workers who kept the world running – have stayed home behind closed doors to protect themselves and others. As a result, entire city blocks and business districts that were previously lively from dusk until dawn were transformed into virtual “ghost towns” seemingly overnight. Most of the world's knowledge workers have converted a portion of their homes into makeshift offices, trying to manage “work-life balance” while maintaining a certain level of productivity. Although it was not initially known how the pandemic would develop and what would the toll on society would be, it soon became clear that the world of work was undergoing a metamorphosis and would resurface in unfamiliar, new forms.

Because of the growing uncertainty about COVID-19, and the ensuing public debate around sustaining the global economy during the first half of 2020, the *Journal of Corporate Real Estate* has announced a call for papers for a special issue devoted to manuscripts on the aftermath of the pandemic and the workplace-related challenges that the lockdown has caused. With enforced social and physical distancing, the office environment has taken a toll and will need to adapt to meet future expectations and demands of their occupants. In addition, several sectors of the workplace industry have been adversely affected, and the future remains difficult to predict. That said, the aim of the special issue has been to cover the impact of upon the occupants themselves (e.g. workplace management, arrangements within existing workplaces and design of new workspaces), the effect of occupants' COVID-19 workplace decisions on the wider commercial real estate markets, the consequences for home-based work and the changed perspectives on the role or value of offices as a result of the increase in remote working.

Initially, we sought papers that would focus on post-pandemic office trends and discuss various concepts, models and in-office tools that would help managers to meet workers' expectations and follow newly introduced health measures such as social and physical distancing. In addition, we were keen to hear how traditional office spaces would react to the new trends and how the once-booming flexible workspace industry would navigate the disruption to their business model the pandemic had caused. Early industry reports indicated that the pandemic will radically influence spatial layout of open-office spaces, pose new challenges for interior design, demand a more precise regulation of the indoor climate and shift other building characteristics that would narrate the future workplace design trends. In addition, it was expected that the parallel advancement of workplace technologies would usher in entirely new ways of managing workflow, but at that time, it remained unclear the extent to which such changes would influence the future of workplace design. All these alternations of the workplace scenery called for a scholarly debate that would benefit industry experts, policymakers and researchers.

The call for papers has raised great interest, with the journal receiving an unexpectedly high number of submissions. This has resulted in a decision to split the special issue into two volumes. The first volume contains four papers that make a meaningful contribution to the said debate. The first paper, authored by Kata Kapusy and Fruzsina Pataki-Bittó, explores changing work values on the part of Generation Z and the subsequent transformation of work environments. Based on an extensive data set from 28 focus groups,



the authors have developed a work value model that presents the core work value categories for this demographic. Based on the presented findings, the paper provides readers with a meaningful list of suggestions on what organizations might expect in the post-COVID-19 period and how they can adapt their work environments to accommodate the needs of individuals just entering a labor market.

The second paper, written by Manuel Mayerhoffer, examines the German coworking industry that had undergone relatively fast growth before the pandemic, but has since been brought to an abrupt halt. The author explores the impact of the pandemic on German coworking spaces by surveying 77 such facilities across Germany and reporting on how these flexible workspaces were largely able to retain their member bases while grappling with significant losses of income. Mayerhoffer's study presents an important account on how coworking spaces might react to a disruption that directly affects their users who are unable to collaborate and work along each other.

The third paper of this special issue sheds light on the COVID-19-driven transformation of Dutch work environments and explores how managing organizations responded to the disruption that was brought upon by the pandemic. Building their findings upon a desktop study and qualitative interviews with both corporate real estate managers and well with workplace consultants, Huiying (Cynthia) Hou, Hilde Remøy, Tuuli Jylhä and Herman Vande Putte report that office modifications have been predominantly related to need for personal protection of workers and administrative control that resulted in agile portfolio strategies and redesign of the office workplaces.

The fourth and final paper by Samin Marzban, Iva Durakovic, Christhina Candido and Martin Mackey captures a snapshot of workers' experience while working from home during the Australian lockdown. The study has been based on two surveys that targeted Australian organizations and knowledge workers to understand the change in working habits, decreased social interactions, increased workload and other factors. With that, the paper largely contributes to the growing bulk of knowledge on the COVID-19-driven work transformation by identifying both positive and negative aspects of working from home during the first wave of lockdowns in Australia.

We hope that the first volume will provide readers with comprehensive insights into the disruption brought to us by the pandemic and enhance their understanding of how various types of work environments, and indeed work itself, have been reshaped.

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