Worklife and the Impact of COVID-19
Designing for Employee Flexibility, Health and Wellbeing
Introduction

A little over a year ago, the COVID-19 pandemic began changing our relationship with work – from how and where we work to how work fits around our personal lives. While many businesses had started the transition back to the office from late 2020, a new COVID-19 outbreak starting in June 2021 and subsequent lockdowns across most capital cities forced many Australian employees back to working from home full time and into a new era of greater uncertainty.

More than ever, it is clear that COVID-19 has fundamentally transformed the role of the workplace. In the past, workplaces were seen as places of constraint – defined physical spaces designed for productivity and efficiency that separated work from everyday life. With the global pandemic forcing the hand of companies worldwide, increased adoption and investments in technology have enabled employees to work whenever and wherever they want.

Accordingly, the meaning of “worklife” has broadened, evoking a sense of freedom and a blurring of lines between work and personal life. New challenges have emerged in the work-from-home era, such as combating the “always on” factor and addressing the need for greater individual flexibility during a time when health, psychological and emotional needs are at their highest.

How is the new pandemic paradigm manifesting in workplace design? COVID-19 has accelerated some pre-existing design trends, while starting new ones focusing on health and wellbeing, flexibility and space utilisation. In this whitepaper, we explore changing perspectives on worklife and examine the impact of COVID-19 on workplace design outcomes including worklife balance, employee wellbeing, hygiene, indoor air quality and noise.

People, Proximity and the Changing Workplace

Before the pandemic, the office space saw several design trends over recent decades, notably “densification” and the rise of co-working. As technology has become more streamlined, so has the space each employee needs to work productively. Driven by the need to maximise smaller office spaces due to rising property prices, companies sought to utilise space more efficiently, opting for high-density, open-plan layouts without walls and dividers. Some companies, lured by the benefits of hassle-free management and the communal atmosphere, entered into co-working spaces with other companies.

At the same time, the emergence of new collaborative technologies such as video conferencing, virtual whiteboarding, and team chat channels like Microsoft Teams and Slack, have slowly made the employee’s physical presence less essential. Yet, despite such advancements, the prevailing mindset was that physical presence in the office was key to productivity and success.

Pre-COVID statistics confirmed that the office was considered the central hub of worklife. According to research by global flooring company Tarkett, a majority of employees preferred working in the office (46%) before the pandemic. Location and accessibility of the workplace was ranked as a priority by over 50% of workers.

Liberation from long commutes, and greater freedom in balancing professional and personal lives, has resulted in a preference shift. According to a 2020 McKinsey study, 80% of people surveyed reported that they enjoy working from home. 41% say that they are more productive than they had been before and 28% say that they are as productive. Research by Tarkett found that post-COVID, 53% of survey respondents would not consider a job if they could not work from home.

The permanent shift towards remote working has provided designers with an opportunity to rethink the importance of presence, proximity, and place in workspace planning. A notable factor is the growing preference for a high-quality headquarter space and open-plan environments to fulfil employees’ need for social interaction, further highlighting a shift away from traditional office definitions.
“With higher-quality office spaces in demand, environmental factors contributing to productivity and wellbeing, such as air quality, acoustics and thermal comfort, cannot be treated as an afterthought.”
Balancing Work, Health and Wellbeing

Employees find healthy work environments that cater to employee wellbeing the most appealing, a trend that was in place even before COVID-19. According to Tarkett’s research, 66% of respondents believe wellbeing, including mental health, is the most important issue in the workplace, with 34% choosing environmental factors as a top priority.5

Australian office employees are among the most overworked globally, so achieving balance is critical. The Australia Institute has reported that Australian full-time workers record among the highest number of hours per week when compared to most developed OECD countries.6 With the merging of “home” and “work” during the pandemic, employees are feeling the “always on” factor more than ever. Research by British insurance company Aviva after the pandemic hit claimed that 44% of employees surveyed feel like they never switch off from work.7

The pressure to work long hours or to be “always on” were trends that started before the pandemic. Presenteeism – when employees show up to work despite feeling unwell – was a major workplace issue pre-COVID, but now has taken on a new form. The Aviva research found that the percentage of employees who had taken zero sick days during the pandemic over a three-month period had grown 17 percentage points from pre-pandemic figures.8

In hopes of combating the loss of productivity associated with presenteeism, companies championed programs designed to encourage a healthy work-life balance. Now, in the COVID era, presenteeism is cast in a deadlier light – there is also the risk of spreading COVID-19 by working sick and exposing colleagues to potential infection. In response, companies are expected to implement “zero tolerance” policies for showing up to work while symptomatic.

Companies will also be expected to provide additional resources for mental and emotional support. Working remotely has raised several new mental health issues. Extended lockdown can engender feelings of social isolation and disconnection.9 Being “always on” can lead to employees neglecting their physical and mental health.10 There is also heightened anxiety caused by the risk of COVID-19 infection as well as job and financial insecurity.

Don’t Overlook What You Can’t See

Workplace wellbeing in the pandemic era requires a holistic approach that includes addressing the quality of the indoor environment. Poor indoor air quality and excess noise can have significant health risks and impact the ability of workers to function effectively. According to Tarkett’s research, both noise and air quality are among the top concerns for employees in the context of returning to the office once the economy is fully reopened.11

Noise pollution is regularly cited as a contributing factor for reduced productivity, increased absenteeism and employee dissatisfaction. In a study by Oxford Economics surveying 1,200 employees (74% of which worked in an open-plan environment), half the respondents complained about noise levels, and a majority listed “uninterrupted work time” on top of their “wish list”.12 Studies have repeatedly identified excessive noise as the “most disturbing factor” causing disruption and irritation among workers in open offices.13 With people growing accustomed to working in controlled home environments, noise may even be more disruptive and bothersome to workers when they return to the office.

Indoor air quality also has a major impact on employee wellbeing. Around 11% of the total Australian population has asthma,14 while 20% of the population has an allergic disease.15 Spaces that do not adequately address the build-up of dust and allergens can not only cause or exacerbate health issues for occupants with such conditions, but recent studies have also found a link between indoor air quality and productivity of staff in general.16

“Liberation from long commutes, and greater freedom in balancing professional and personal lives, has resulted in a shift in employee preferences.”
FLEXIBLE WORKSPACES
Before COVID-19, the convergence of home and work were seen as a benefit – now, even more flexibility is needed, touching every aspect of worklife. Companies will need to acknowledge requests for greater individual flexibility, and workplace design needs to adapt in response.

Principles of flexibility have to be built into the office layouts, seating plans and building systems to enable the office to operate in a variety of modes and cater to different workstyles. Layouts and furniture that are reconfigurable, modular and malleable can allow spaces to be adapted to individual and group needs on the fly. Personalisation of individual spaces can be accommodated with adjustable desks, chairs and equipment.

REMOTE WORKING IS HERE TO STAY
It is unlikely that we will return to a status quo in which the majority of the workforce will be at the office for the entire work week. Given the high cost of real estate and employees requesting flexibility, open offices and hot desking present as solutions in this new environment, but they will look different to the high-density layouts of years past. This includes desk arrangements that meet social distancing requirements, and density limits within the office space at any given time.

Common issues with open-plan designs, such as poor acoustic design and a lack of visual privacy, must also be addressed. Designated areas for quiet, concentrated work will be required alongside spaces for teamwork and collaboration. Offices will also feature social and wellbeing spaces to address the need for social connection and relaxation after months of extended lockdowns.

DE-DENSIFICATION AND OPTIMISATION
Hybrid work schedules will lead to the de-densification of office spaces, reversing the trend of office compression. Social distancing guidelines will require organisations to occupy the same amount of space they had before the pandemic, but with fewer people in that space at any given time. Companies will need to bring back space-saving measures they had before the pandemic, such as reinstalling dividers between desks, and welcome new measures to ensure employees can maintain safe physical distance from each other, such as capacity guidelines, physical demarcations to indicate where people can stand and sit, and increased desk footprints.

Not wanting to pay for unused seats, companies are also discussing using space more efficiently on an “as-needed” basis. This could take the form of short-term lease agreements, temporary satellite offices, or “flex spaces” that companies can access temporarily to manage overflow. However, the benefits of flexibility will have to be weighed against the cost of managing the risk of contamination in shared working spaces.

INCREASED CONNECTIVITY AND COLLABORATION
While digital technology allowed employees to collaborate virtually before the pandemic, the prospect of extended lockdowns accelerated adoption and fluency. This is set to continue, with increasing use of mobility solutions inside and outside the office. Organisations are also moving away from bulky equipment, to more streamlined technology such as cloud-based solutions to support remote work.

While technology has proven indispensable in maintaining human interaction during the forced work-from-home era, it will not likely replace the physical workplace altogether. Instead, offices will likely become rationalised, high-quality spaces that support individual and organisational flexibility with virtual collaboration platforms used to connect physical spaces and people digitally.

HEALTH, WELLBEING AND HYGIENE
With higher-quality office spaces in demand, environmental factors contributing to productivity and wellbeing, such as indoor air quality, acoustics and thermal comfort, cannot be treated as an afterthought. Designers need to leverage all building elements to achieve healthier office spaces. Increasing ventilation to cycle out stale air and pollutants will be especially important given the threat of airborne disease. Some floor and wall coverings are specially-designed to reduce indoor airborne dust levels, or better absorb sound to improve indoor acoustics, thus creating more comfortable, productive work environments.

Workplaces will be expected to implement measures to alleviate health-related fears and anxieties. Strict hygiene protocols will need to be implemented with visible records of cleaning. Specifiers will need to consider durable, easy to clean and maintain surfaces that can naturally inhibit the growth of germs and bacteria and help maintain high levels of cleanliness. The adoption of touchless technology for doors, elevators, and toilets to reduce the likelihood of surface transmission will likely gain further traction.
Solutions for the Flexible Workplace

TARKETT

DESSO AIRMASTER® – CLEAR THE AIR
Designed for occupant health and wellbeing, AirMaster carpet captures and retains fine dust and other particulate matter. Fine-yarned DESSO AirFilters trap very fine dust and are combined with the thicker yarns of DESSO DustCollectors, which capture coarser particles. As a consequence, AirMaster is 8 times more effective than smooth flooring solutions and 4 times more effective than standard carpet when it comes to capturing and retaining fine dust. Independently tested, AirMaster is the first product in the world to achieve GUI Gold Label Certification.

DESSO SOUNDMASTER® – IMPROVE NOISE QUALITY
SoundMaster combines a unique 80% recycled, 100% polyester backing with a plush yarn and high pile to deliver exceptional sound control. The high performance carpet can improve impact sound insulation by up to 10dB. When compared with ceramic tiles and linoleum, SoundMaster flooring has been demonstrated to adjust reverberation times and deplete background noise levels, and may absorb sound and improve acoustic conditions by as much as +0.15w.

TAPIFLEX EXCELLENCE 80 – DURABLE ACOUSTIC SOLUTIONS
Tapiflex Excellence 80 is an extremely durable and acoustic vinyl flooring solution for heavy traffic applications. Thanks to its high-density foam backing, it offers excellent sound reduction (19dB), good underfoot comfort and easy rollability, while offering exceptional resistance to indentation (0.8mm). Available in a range of innovative hues and patterns, the product is treated with Tarkett’s trademarked Top Clean XP surface protection for extreme durability and cost-effective maintenance.

ID INSPIRATION ULTIMATE – ALL-IN-ONE HARD SURFACE
ID Inspiration Ultimate is an innovative class of hard surface flooring that combines the strength and feel of wood and stone with Tru-Grain Technology. This rigid composite vinyl tile, offers an all-in-one solution adapted to any environment, combining the advantages of luxury vinyl tiles with great acoustic benefits and a long-lasting immaculate appearance. This product is available in 16 elegant and realistic wood and stone designs that add warmth and style to any space.

About Tarkett

For over 130 years, Tarkett has led the global flooring industry. Around the world, the Tarkett brand is synonymous with quality and is favoured by architects and building professionals for its unique combination of performance, style, and environmental credentials.

Tarkett’s catalogue of innovative carpet and soft flooring solutions is expansive and diverse, and includes the DESSO range of high quality carpet tiles. All DESSO carpet tiles in Australia have GreenTag GreenRate Level A certification.
REFERENCES

3 Above n. 1.
5 Ibid.
10 Above n. 7.

All information provided correct as of August 2021.