

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 22 - What will the office look like post-pandemic?

Speakers: Matthew Davis and Helen Hughes

Matthew: Welcome to Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast, this episode is all about adapting offices and thinking about how the office might change after COVID-19. I'm Dr Matthew Davis, I'm an Associate Professor in the Business School.

Helen: And I'm Dr Helen Hughes, I'm also an Associate Professor in the Business School.

Matthew: So, I guess a good place to start, Helen, would be the question that keeps being in the newspapers quite a lot, which is saying, basically, since we've all got so used to working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown, is the office dead? What do you think?

Helen: Well... and I think that's the million dollar question. I don't think it is, and I think the more you speak to... or the more I speak to different organisations and so on, I think there is a real appetite for getting back to the workplace. I think, certainly, you know, for organisations there is a real value in that for all sorts of reasons, for culture, for technology, for safeguarding. There are all sorts of reasons why they might want employees to be back together. And I think, you know, as much as it has, in many ways, been a real success show, the working remotely, I think lots of employees are really desperate to get back into a workplace.

So, no, in a nutshell, I don't think the office is dead. But on the other hand, I think we've started to see such an appetite for working from home amongst people that have perhaps never in the past had the opportunity to do that, or who have, sort of, recognised that things that they thought they couldn't possibly do at home are actually a bit more possible than they realised. So, I think we've seen these great innovations in the working from home era, and so I think the question is not so much is the office dead? But what do we use an office for? I think the COVID situation has really thrown up all sorts of questions about actually why we use an office, and what that space might be used for.

Matthew: That's interesting. So, I think I'd agree. I think the more industry data I see, surveys, whether it's individual companies or cross-

industry surveys that have been done over the last six months in particular, I think the majority of people are saying, "I really enjoyed working from home," for a lot of people they want to keep that, but they want to be back in the office two to three days a week, but what will that office look like after COVID-19, then? And I guess in my mind, it raises a question of: what is better in an office than at home? And what does that mean, then, for companies, for designers, in terms of how they design these spaces? Because it's difficult to see people going to the effort of commuting in to sit at a desk and not interact with others. So, I guess, what does that mean for the spaces we're putting in and how people might use that? I know when we were speaking in the past about this, Helen, you had ideas around what that might look like.

Helen:

Yes. I mean, I think, you know, there are loads of designers with much better ideas than I do about the specifics of the office, but I think what we do know from previous studies and literature is that people interact with their offices in different ways. So, you know, we may see that actually these individualised offices that people may have gone to as, sort of, sanctuaries, if you like, for concentration or whatever, actually can do that stuff at home, and maybe what they actually need the office for now is those periods of connection with other people. So, maybe there needs to be more thought around what those look like, and I don't think it's going to be good enough to say, "Right, we've got a coffee area that you can meet with people."

I think people are going to expect more from that space. You know, whether it's hub areas, little... sort of, different types and formations of meeting rooms. And I think it's going to be in the interests of organisations to really invest in some thought around what those spaces look like, not least because if they are going to be social interaction spaces, given that we're coming back at a point where we've just been experiencing a pandemic, we're going to need to make sure that those spaces are safe. And I think one of the things that we've talked about, you know, in the past, as we think about returning post-COVID is the fact that this is a really different time to be talking about the design of workspace because you've got to add into all of this that there is real, genuine and quite serious anxiety from a lot of employees who have, perhaps, not socialised with other people for a very long time, and in particular are going to feel quite anxious moving into social spaces, you know? Returning to work in an office environment in a social space where there is going to need

to be some thought around, you know, how that building is designed so that it's not at maximum capacity, but that you can still, sort of, enable those serendipitous conversations around a water cooler, you know, how do you get the value from that if you've got know where everyone is at all times and monitor those spaces? And I think that raises a lot of questions, actually, about the design of the workspace to get the most value from it.

Matthew:

That's interesting, Helen, because I think the experience of what it's like to be in an adapted office hasn't really been looked at so far, has it? So, we've got people how have been making offices COVID secure so we can get core staff in, and I think we're seeing more businesses and organisations planning for how do we bring people back as you say, maybe in shift rotas or in distances offices, but actually what does that do to the experience of being in the office, then? Because actually the people who are keen to go back to the office have in mind the office they left maybe 12 months ago, and the space they're going back into might be quite different. And what we don't know is: how does that support them? Do you lose, actually, the benefits people think they're going to get from being in the office, of this camaraderie, of this opportunity to interact easily and freely?

And the other, in my mind, the other big unknown as well is what does that do for how you are able to interact with your colleagues who are maybe not in the office? So, particularly if we're having to have lower occupancy, so less people in the office at the same time, how does that all work, then, when some people are on Teams or Zoom, others are in the building, some in a room, some not? And also, people who are working much more flexible hours now, maybe as well, and we're seeing more of a divergence in working patterns. And I think there's a big unknown for us in terms of what does, not only for the experience for employees and what they need from the office to cater for this, but also what does that do for businesses in terms of really important things like knowledge sharing, performance, retention of staff as well, and culture? And I know we looked at this in past projects, Helen, we got some insights, and the literature tells us some things as well, but that was all pre-COVID and pre-new way of working in new offices.

Helen:

Yes, absolutely. And I think this is really where the value of a project like the one we're going to be doing is going to really, you know... I think we're really going to see that. Because I think what we haven't seen so far, and which hopefully we're going to

be doing with our new research project, is, you know, being able to look at a more socio-technical, a more holistic, view of that problem. Because, as you said, the problem itself doesn't just necessitate technical solutions, it's not just about designing and new building and getting architects involved, and designers, to, sort of, make the space physically attractive to people and usable, it's not just about that. It's actually about, when you do develop that space, what do people use it for? How do they interact with those things?

So, the problem in itself is inherently socio-technical, and I think that's why this project, to me, that we're going to be doing, is so exciting because it brings together different stakeholders, different organisational partners, it brings together different academic and disciplinary backgrounds, so, you know, it's not just about psychologists like you and I thinking about how people use their workspace and what value they get from that workspace, but it's also about working with, you know, our other colleagues on the project who are perhaps engineers by background and can help us understand how a virus might spread around those environments, you know? How the building can be better designed to help that. So, I'm really excited to not just be thinking about this for a change as a psychologist, but to be thinking about that in relation to these other disciplines as well.

Matthew:

So, I'd really agree, Helen. I think is a really classic, kind of, social technical question, thinking about do we make the physical space, the supporting technologies and work systems, and actually thinking about the, kind of, the culture and what we're trying to do as an organisation coming together, I think often when you look back, in the past, design or use of, kind of, offices and work buildings has been a facilities issue, or has been, kind of, left to administrators and others to work out how to fit people into a space rather than actually thinking with a blank sheet of paper: what is it we're trying to do? How best can we get physical space help us work smarter, work better? And I think, you know, for all of the difficulties and the fallout of the pandemic, actually, it does give us an opportunity to think again about how we're working and what we're doing. And I think in our project we're going to be looking at different companies and how they are changing their office spaces and their ways of working to actually, kind of, both respond to COVID and to do things differently and hopefully more effectively.

Helen: Yes. And I think one of the things that is so interesting, as well, is whether there are... and how organisations are going to be doing it differently, so I was going to say whether there are these differences across sectors, perhaps, in terms of what office needs to be? Whether there are differences in different locations or different work sites or types of environment? And I'm excited that all of these questions, we can begin to start to look at through the work that we're going to be doing.

Matthew: So, there are lots of ways of getting involved in our new project which is called Adapting Offices for the Future of Work, and it's funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and we're running for 18 months, and we've got lots of things we're looking to do to help us understand what businesses have been doing and are doing to adapt their offices to make them both COVID secure, but also to make them fit for the future and new ways of working. But we also really want to understand what it's like for employees working in these types of adapted offices or, kind of, new offices, or working from home with people who are in those spaces.

So, a few different ways to get involved, both if you're a designer or a manager of office space, but also if you're an employee, we'd love to hear your experience of working in adapted offices, or under socially distanced conditions, and we'll be running activities both as interviews, workshops and also in depth diary studies and network studies as well to build up a really comprehensive picture of what it's like in these new workplaces, which may not even be an office at all, you might be getting out and walking around and working outdoors as one of your workplaces. We'd love to get a wide range of companies and organisations as part of the project.

Helen: So, as the project develops, we'll be producing various reports and blogs and infographics and more podcasts, and if you do want to get involved in the project as well as contacting us in the ways that you've described, Matt, you can of course visit our project webpage and the link to that is in the episode show notes. Thanks for listening.