

AT WORK

13 ways the coronavirus pandemic could forever change the way we work

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In only a few months, the coronavirus pandemic has upended the daily lives of people around the world. For Americans, the economic impact of the virus has led to new categorizations of "essential" workers, a large-scale move to remote work and [skyrocketing unemployment](#) that is expected to continue increasing.

With more than 30 million people filing for unemployment in the past six weeks, the U.S. [is predicted](#) to experience a coronavirus-induced recession through 2021.

And amid stay-at-home orders across the country, office workers have ditched their daily commutes to work from dining room tables, couches and beds in their own homes. Many may find themselves in this situation for the long haul, as businesses struggle to find a path forward while restrictions slowly lift.

But what other changes will we see in the coming months and years? [CNBC Make It](#) spoke to futurists, employment experts, CEOs, designers and more to find out how the pandemic could forever transform the way we work.

Working in an office could become a status symbol

Following the pandemic, it's likely that more Americans will split their time between working from home and from a corporate office, says Brent Capron, the design director of interiors at architecture firm [Perkins and Will's New York studio](#).

"People will still gather for work," he says. "But the amount of time you work in proximity with others, and what your work week looks like — I see that to be the biggest cultural shift moving forward."

With more people working remotely, companies may open regional hubs or provide access to co-working spaces wherever their workers are concentrated rather than have the majority of their workforce at one central office.

As a result, corporate headquarters may become a status symbol for the companies that still have the budget and a workforce big enough to warrant pricey real estate in a major city.

A company's investment in its headquarters could become a way to recruit talent, says Jane Oates, president of [WorkingNation](#), a nonprofit campaign about unemployment, and a former assistant secretary at the Department of Labor.

Job seekers may consider it a draw to work for a company with a physical location, which could boost brand awareness and overall influence within the industry.

Most meetings could be replaced by email and IM

Expect your post-pandemic work calendar to contain fewer meetings overall, says Nadjia Yousif, managing director and partner of [Boston Consulting Group's London office](#).

The pandemic has been a technological equalizer of sorts, she says, where people previously unaccustomed to using tech tools in the workplace have had no choice but to adapt. And in some cases, workers are becoming more efficient.

"People have been more patient in learning new technologies and engaging with them, simply because they've had to," Yousif says. "I think those best practices will live on. I think we're all developing new muscles to work virtually."

To that end, expect a generally more agile way of working and communicating with colleagues: More meetings will become emails, and more emails will become instant messages.

For team members who no longer work together in a central office, phone calls and meetings may move to video. This could help to build trust among workers who can't interact in person, Yousif says.

When you're able to pick up on nonverbal cues, or you're invited into a colleague's home via video chat, "a different type of intimacy is formed in a faster way than would happen in a traditional working environment," she says.

It could be the end of business travel as we know it

As travel of all kinds is halted, telecommuting is adopted at scale and companies attempt to cut costs and balance their budgets, many experts believe business trips as we know them [will be a thing of the past](#).

"I don't think [business travel] is ever going to be exactly the same," says Gary Leff, a travel industry expert and author of the blog [View from the Wing](#).

Changing consumer preferences and greater interest in social distancing will limit large group events such as conferences and conventions for the foreseeable future, says Leff, and permanently decrease the volume of business travel.

Additionally, Leff expects that during this time, companies will learn that some business travel is unnecessary and can be done via video meetings. He also points out as organizations attempt to recoup their pandemic-related losses, travel budgets will be cut.

Office buildings could become 'elaborate conference centers'

With the office building recast as the ultimate status symbol, its main purpose could shift.

"Does office space strictly become elaborate conference centers?" asks Capron. He predicts office buildings of the future may become facilities to gather, while focused work is done remotely.

This could mean fewer walled-off offices and more gathering spaces to host meetings, conferences and other company-wide events.

Beyond that, the open office floor plan will likely stick around. Despite [criticism](#) that they kill productivity, it's likely companies will still use the layout in an effort to lower real estate costs.

Open layouts will change, however: Desks could become spaced out, partitions could go up, cleaning stations stocked with hand sanitizer and

antibacterial wipes will become the norm, and workers may seek out spaces for focused work, such as [privacy booths](#). Capron stops short of saying cubicles will make a comeback.

Agile workspaces with unassigned seating will decline in popularity. Workers will want the security and control of having a personal space they come to every day or every few days and can clean frequently.

In shared spaces, expect more touchless fixtures, such as door sensors, automatic sinks and soap dispensers and voice-activated elevator banks.

Architects may also design spaces with durable building materials, furniture, flooring and other surfaces that can stand up to frequent deep-cleaning, which is expected to be a lasting necessity of the future workplace for years to come.

Mandatory on-the-job medical screening could become the norm

Health and legal experts predict that on-the-job medical screening, such as temperature checks and antibody tests, will be a reality for those who return to work in the months ahead.

And in many cases it's already happening: To combat the spread of coronavirus among essential workers, some of the biggest employers in the country, including [Amazon](#), [Walmart](#), [Home Depot](#) and [Starbucks](#) have begun taking the temperatures of their employees before they are allowed to work.

According to labor and employment attorney David Barron, not only are employers legally permitted to check employees' temperatures, they are also currently being encouraged to do so by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"As long as employers don't discriminate — they can't pick and choose who is tested — it's absolutely legal."

It's also possible U.S. workers may be asked to show some form of "immunity certificate," verifying that they have immunity to Covid-19, before they return to work, Barron says.

This approach, in which workers take an antibody test to confirm that they have immunity, is being embraced in countries such as the United Kingdom, which is attempting to roll out an "immunity passport" program.

However, some scientists have warned that it is yet to be scientifically proven that having antibodies for coronavirus gives a person immunity.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the White House coronavirus task force, has indicated that an "immunity certificate" program is "being discussed."

"It might actually have some merit under certain circumstances," he told CNN.

Coworkers could become even closer

If there's one bright spot to how the pandemic will impact the future of work, it's that it could strengthen the personal relationships we form with colleagues.

"For a long time, we've probably taken for granted the ability to see our coworkers every day and maybe didn't realize how valuable that was," says Lakshmi Rengarajan, a workplace connection consultant formerly of WeWork and Match.com. "I think teams will be a lot closer when they're able to move back into the workplace."

Organizational psychologist, Wharton professor and "[Originals](#)" author Adam Grant agrees. He predicts that, as coworkers return to the office, they'll ditch previous messaging habits and actually get up, walk around and visit with each other in person.

"There will probably be fewer sad desk lunches," he says. Workplace friendships could flourish among colleagues who relied on each other during the pandemic and got to know one another on a more personal level.

But despite more in-person interaction among colleagues, handshakes are on their way out. Fauci recently advised that [handshaking needs to stop](#) even when the pandemic ends, and other health experts agree.

Rengarajan says gestures that can convey friendliness and respect from a distance, such as a nod or smile, could become the social norm.

"Maybe it's the rise of eye contact or listening," Rengarajan says.

Read more: [The pandemic has probably made you more vulnerable with coworkers—here's why that could be a good thing](#)

Fashion-ready face masks could become a wardrobe staple

Though business casual will likely remain the norm in offices, two new types of apparel could also spring from the pandemic: The rise of work-from-home office wear, and face masks as a socially mandated accessory.

Workers who video conference frequently may retool their wardrobe to be camera-friendly — more bold colors, large-scale patterns and clean lines; fewer neutrals, small prints and frills.

"If we are going to be mediating our professional lives on screens more, I think people will think more about how they appear on screen," says Natalie Nudell, a fashion and textiles historian faculty member at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City.

Wearing a face mask around the office may become commonplace, especially in bigger companies with more workers sharing tight quarters. This could be an opportunity for the textile industry to innovate how to make masks more protective, comfortable and stylish.

Standard 9-to-5 office hours could become a thing of the past

As professionals juggle the demands of work life and home life all in the same place, many employers have relaxed rules about workers starting and ending their days at a set time.

"I think you'll see a new norm around trust and respect" in the ways employers manage their staff moving forward, says career coach Julie Kratz. With many employees successfully working from home now, it will be a lot harder for employers to deny flexibility around work hours and work settings, she explains.

"For most office-type work, you can absolutely do your work remotely, and with technology, you can build it around your schedule," adds Kratz, who says that many of her clients at tech companies such as Salesforce were already working flexible hours before the Covid-19 outbreak.

To maintain a sense of structure, Kratz says employers will have to set expectations for when they need everyone in the office or online for staff meetings and other team activities. Additionally, she says, in order to create a balance between work time and personal time, employees and managers will have to work closely together to ensure that no one is feeling pressured to respond to emails and messages at all hours of the day.

"By all means, it's not about throwing out all the rules," she emphasizes, "but it's about letting people co-create them."

Home office stipends could become a common perk

When Twitter and e-commerce company Shopify issued mandatory work-from-home orders for employees in March, both employers provided staff with additional resources to help smooth the transition to remote work.

At Shopify, workers were given a [\\$1,000 stipend](#) to purchase necessary supplies for their home office spaces. Meanwhile at Twitter, all employees, including hourly workers, [received reimbursement](#) for home office equipment including desks, chairs and ergonomic cushions.

If working remotely becomes the norm, then home office stipends could become a common workplace perk, says bestselling author and futurist Jacob Morgan.

In order for remote work to be effective, employers will have to provide employees with the resources needed to be productive, he explains. This includes a small stipend that will allow workers to "customize their space in a way they think is sufficient."

This remote flexibility will also allow companies to "save money on the overhead cost of running these massive facilities," career coach Julie Kratz adds.

On average, employers that allow employees to work from home part-time save about \$11,000 per year for each employee working remotely, according to research-based consulting firm [Global Workplace Analytics](#). Using some of this money to invest in remote office setups "will buy loyalty from your employees because it shows you care about them, you care about the ergonomics of their situation at home and you want them to be happy and productive," Kratz says.

The workplace could become more equitable for women

With many workplaces now being forced to operate remotely, long-term flexibility could be here to stay, allowing more women to remain in the workforce while balancing home and work life, says Elise Gould, senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute.

This change in workplace structure could have a huge impact on women, as they are [more likely than men](#) to adjust their careers for family. In fact, roughly 31% of women who took a career break after having kids said they didn't want to but had to because of a lack of employer flexibility, according to a [2019 FlexJobs survey](#) of more than 2,000 women with children under 18.

This break, according to [PayScale](#), can easily cost women tens of thousands of dollars when lost wages, future wage growth and lost retirement and Social Security contributions are added up.

A more flexible work culture could also create more equity at home as both men and women are able to spend quality time with their families.

"You're going to see more men starting to want these [flexible options] too, assuming they enjoyed the time at home with their kids," Kratz says.

Though a wider variety of work options won't solve all of our equity issues, other countries show it is possible to create a more gender-balanced culture.

"You can see this in [Scandinavian countries](#), for example; they offer this flexibility," Kratz says. "You see gender equality is much higher in those countries as a result."

Read more: [Why long-term flexible work options could be a game changer for women](#)

Middle management positions could be cut forever

In the months and years ahead, we could continue to see a hollowing out of middle management.

"One of the big things that happened during the 2008 global financial crisis is that organizations pulled out all sorts of layers of middle management, which actually makes it harder to get promoted," says Brian Kropp, vice president at research firm Gartner. That's [one reason wage growth was sluggish](#), he says, even as the economy reached new heights: Workers were not promoted to middle-management roles as frequently, since so many were eliminated during the recession.

It's possible we may see a similar dynamic post-pandemic, says John Sculley, who served as Apple's CEO from 1983 to 1993.

"A lot of organizations are going to say, 'Wait a minute, we don't really need all these layers of middle management that we had in the past,'" Sculley, currently chairman of pharmacy benefit management company [RxAdvance](#), tells [CNBC Make It](#).

Others are more optimistic that the demand for top-tier managers will rebound once the pandemic subsides because organizations will want to emphasize productivity. One fear of a flattening management structure is that fewer managers will be required to oversee a higher volume of direct reports, creating room for error, lack of oversight and mismanagement.

"I personally think good managers are always going to be in demand," says Oates. "You can't have a good workforce unless you have good managers."

Automation could be accelerated

While futurists have long warned of “[job-stealing robots](#),” the coronavirus pandemic has heightened fears that automation will replace the jobs of workers. Because of social distancing measures, many organizations — from restaurants to retailers — have been forced to find ways to operate with as few employees physically present as possible. An added bonus: Robots and algorithms can’t get sick.

Coronavirus “has caused an acceleration of some labor trends like automation,” says Karen Fichuk, CEO of [Randstad North America](#), adding that out-of-work Americans may need to develop new skills in order to find new jobs. “What we’re seeing is this significant need for massive up-skilling and retraining, especially for workers who have been laid off.”

Jake Schwartz, co-founder and CEO of [General Assembly](#), agrees that coronavirus will accelerate automation. “It’s pulling the future forward,” he says.

For years, companies have been working toward [automating repetitive jobs](#) through algorithms that can complete administrative tasks, robots that can streamline manufacturing and drones that can deliver goods. And researchers have found that this kind of [automation is more quickly adopted during economic downturns](#).

“Companies are going to be going digital much faster, they’re going to be automating much faster. And in that context, are we looking at mass unemployment? We don’t know,” says Schwartz.

There could be an increased demand to close the digital divide

Roughly [21 million Americans](#) lack access to the internet, according to the Federal Communications Commission, with some reports estimating this number to be even higher. This means millions of workers, regardless of industry, are simply unable to work remotely.

Though conversations about the digital divide have taken place for years now, the coronavirus pandemic has put an even greater spotlight on this gap, says Kathryn de Wit, manager of broadband research initiative at The Pew Charitable Trusts.

With schools and offices remaining closed, de Wit says, she hopes one silver lining in this situation is that more government officials will see the need to increase broadband infrastructure, especially if remote work becomes a more common option for employees.

"We're seeing local, federal and state leaders step up with these temporary solutions like putting Wi-Fi on buses and [giving] out hotspots," she says. "Those are good temporary solutions and absolutely needed, but broadband is infrastructure. It takes time and resources to build. If we want to make sure that every American can work, socialize and learn from home, then we need to start having a discussion about what a long-term solution actually looks like."

For each state, de Wit says, that solution could look different as "they [each] have different geographies, different resources available and different political and policy environments." But with the right programs and funding in place, she says, every state could provide their residents with equal access to work remotely in the future.