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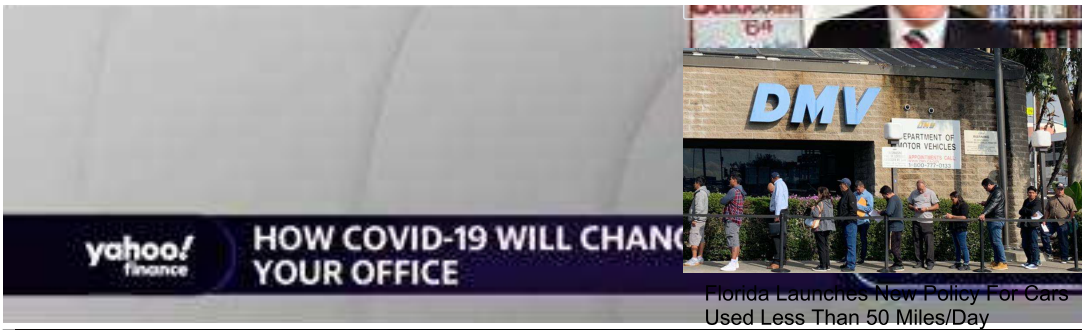

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Offices have been trending toward open workspaces for over a decade, as employers look to boost collaboration and maximize use of space.

But as states begin to lift shelter-in-place orders and employees prepare to return to work, more than 80% of landlords and office managers are already re-envisioning the workplace, according to a study of 400 participants by VergeSense, a San Francisco-based proptech company.

“Every client we’re working with has one overarching concern: how do I create a safe environment for my employees, both from a health perspective and from an emotional and mental health perspective,” said

What to Read Next

Verity Sylvester, co-founder of Branch, a New York City-based office furniture company.

Companies are creating structural changes to encourage social

sheets of plastic separating employees' space, according to office furniture suppliers.

"The ever-popular 'open office' trend is going to have to be quickly rethought and adapted — Nobody wants to bring their teams back to a true open concept environment," said Sylvester.

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Had an interesting Zoom today with a group of architects and office planers.

A nearly 100% sell-out of plexiglass and plastic/cloth office dividers.

One very large tech company—just today made an order for ~5000 that just about zeroed our all in the US.

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"We are about to see a reversal of a decades-long trend," said Joe Learner, Savills vice chairman, director and Midwest Region lead. "For years and years, there has been a move toward densification and collaboration. Companies wanted more people into the same area, so they took away 'me' space and increased the 'we' space."

While Trump Urges States To Reopen, White House Adopts New COVID-19 Precautions
HuffPost

But restructuring an office is not practical for small businesses — a full-height cubicle can cost several thousand dollars per employee, according to Sylvester.

"There's a divide in what companies can achieve in outfitting their office for the new environment," said Sylvester. "Small and mid-sized companies just do not have the resources to invest in brand new office furniture, especially as we navigate through a challenging recession," said Sylvester.

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Cubicles and sneeze guards are not the only expensive items on companies' futuristic office wish list. Companies like Amazon are using short-term measures like thermal cameras to detect employees with a

fever. But thermal cameras do not detect asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19 and can reportedly cost between $5,000 and $20,000.

Social distancing sensors have also gained traction. Cameras and other

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One San Francisco-based sensor provider, VergeSense, had a 242% increase in the number of prospective installations this quarter compared to last quarter.

But even providers say sensors are too expensive even as a short-term measure, considering a COVID-19 vaccine would make social distancing tech redundant.

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VergeSense sensors now measure social distancing, but they usually measure desk utilization, indoor air quality, environmental data and other metrics. Photo by: VergeSense.

“Because we want people to have this technology, what we are charging only covers part of the cost it takes to provide it. This solution

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For companies that cannot afford sensors and “sneeze guards,” there are low-cost options to keep workers safe. Instead of thermal sensors, companies can use thermometers and ask employees medical screening questions. And instead of cubicles, privacy panels can be a lower-cost alternative. But office consulting firms say that structural changes might not be necessary after all.

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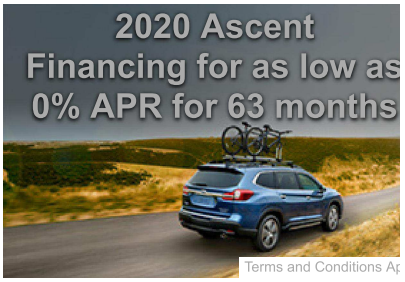
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