

The new work environment requires flexibility



Stuttgart, February 17, 2021 Empty offices, people working from home, and significantly less traffic on the roads: From one moment to the next, the global coronavirus pandemic has completely changed the way we live and work. Wherever possible, companies have sent their employees away to work in their home offices. And what initially took some getting used to will be the new normal for some time to come – with a huge impact on future office design. This was one of the findings of a joint survey conducted by Stuttgart-based planning and consulting company Drees & Sommer and macom GmbH. A total of 180 IT, real estate and HR managers from some 20 different sectors responded to questions on how the pandemic is likely to permanently change the work environment.

And the numbers speak for themselves. Around 80 percent of all respondents currently work exclusively or predominantly from home, with one fifth still only working occasionally from their home office. The benefits are clear: Many employees appreciate the flexibility and trust. They feel that they have more free time and are not wasting as much time commuting – which has the added benefit of reducing pollution.

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The home office is here to stay

Even though – compared to other countries – Germany has held fast to its culture of office attendance, the pandemic has demonstrated to even the most skeptical that things can be done differently. The door to New Work has been thrown wide open, which is why two-thirds of respondents firmly believe that the proportion of remote work – either at home or in third places such as the café or the park – will increase significantly in the long term compared to the pre-COVID era. The basic prerequisite has already been met, as the vast majority of respondents – 93 percent – do at least some of their work using digital technology. In contrast, only one in ten expects the proportion of remote working to decrease.

This would mean that a lot of company office space would remain unused in future. In view of this, companies should already be thinking about how to achieve a more multidimensional design of office space in future. “In the new work environment, the office remains the key option among many. It serves as a charging station for identity and integrity,” says Martin Becker, Partner at Drees & Sommer SE and an expert on New Work.

Making a space for work

The key features needed are attractive, efficient utilization of space and the use of new digital tools. And we should not forget the most important argument in favor of the office: It is a place for personal encounters and direct communication. As well as being a basic human need, personal contact is also important for business: “Shared spaces, in particular, offer the opportunity for chance encounters. This not only has a positive influence on employees’ psychological well-being, but the shared spaces also create trust and a sense of community – the preconditions for finding creative solutions.” That is one of the reasons some employees yearn for the office, as the flash survey revealed. Key reasons given included the superior office equipment and the better separation of private and professional life. The bottom line, however, is that after weighing up the pros and cons for each individual, a flexible mix of home office and office attendance offers the most promising conditions for maintaining both well-being and productivity.

Heeding lessons learned in crisis mode

But a combination of office space utilization falling below pre-pandemic levels and the need, at the same time, to meet new demands – such as the feel-good factor, hygiene and safety – poses major challenges for employers. Because opinions often differ, particularly with regard to desk sharing, where they are divided almost exactly 50/50. Currently, some 48 percent of respondents do not yet offer desk sharing – and also doubt that this approach would better reflect the way work is organized. “This is the use-of-space paradox. Who wants – or can afford to have – a separate workplace for each employee in the long term, regardless of where they work? So there is no way around flexible usage concepts,” says Martin Becker.

As a result, 66 percent of respondents regarded the change to the usual workplace culture as the biggest current challenge. But the change and transformation process presents companies with a major hurdle: “The things we learned and implemented in crisis mode now require ongoing development to fit in with the new normal. Companies are living systems and therefore need agile transformation and business development,” concludes Martin Becker.

About the survey:

A total of 180 managers in the areas of IT, real estate and HR from some 20 different sectors were surveyed. 59 percent were from companies with more than 1,500 employees, 14 percent from medium-sized companies with 201 to 1,500 employees, and the remaining 27 percent from small companies with 50 to 200 employees. The automotive, industrial and finance sectors were the most strongly represented.

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