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San Antonio Magazine

COMMUNITY

New Workplace Design Trends to Watch

COVID-19 is creating changes in the office. Here's what you can expect.

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Published: August 2020

Crowded conference room tables, desks fashioned out of reclaimed wood and shared workspaces with community snacks may become a thing of the past. Instead, local interior designers and architects say post-pandemic commercial design will likely favor wipeable surfaces like are used in health care facilities, more outdoor spaces and automatic lights and faucets.

“The whole world is going through this thing and we’re all trying to figure it out together,” says Christina Davis, principal over the interior design department at RVK Architects. “There will definitely be changes that last.”

While in the past automatic faucets, soap dispensers, lights and doors were often seen as a luxury, Davis says they are now becoming necessities.

Mary Bartlett, partner at Marmon Mok Architecture and lead over its interior architecture practice, agrees and says they’re also seeing businesses invest in wall-mounted modules or automated kiosks that can check the temperature of an individual before providing their badge access to swipe into the building or suite.

Companies that have brought employees back into their buildings are spreading out desks, increasing the height of cubical dividers and adding plexiglass protections around reception areas. Others are staggering their work schedules to keep capacity down, having some departments come in on Tuesdays and Thursdays and others on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Megan Moshier, principal with Studio8 Architects, says clients can often start by looking at the furniture they have, implementing distancing and moving chairs or desk that were facing one another. Others are bringing in shields or new safety measures. “There is not a one-size-fits-all solution for this, and planning for the now, the near and the future is important.”

Bartlett says spacing employee desks out has been easier in San Antonio than in New York, or even Austin, because commercial real estate prices per square foot are more affordable locally, meaning many businesses had more space. Even with that being the case, Bartlett says the virus may impact the commercial growth San Antonio had been seeing in places like downtown, especially among large companies that are discovering their productivity level can hold steady when employees are working from home. “If you can work effectively remotely and you feel safe and we feel safe, I think that will be a more permanent trend,” she says.

Virginia Visser, principal at Workplace Resource, which provides planning and design for office interiors, says the expectation that a corporation will have some remote working option—even if only for a certain number of hours—is something that will become the norm, with some companies even giving up their large communal workplaces. “If companies didn’t have work from home options before this, they will moving forward,” she says.

For those who do need to be in the office, cleanliness has to be ensured, even after a vaccine for COVID-19 is found. “Today it’s COVID. Next year it could be something else,” Bartlett says.

That means unfinished wood or woven waiting room couches that absorb germs could be replaced with more wipeable options, like hospital-grade vinyl, antimicrobial synthetic materials and copper or brass for door handles that aren’t automatic. Conference rooms may accommodate a few people plus a large screen for participants to join via Zoom and some offices may add outdoor-style conference room tables so large group meetings can take place in the open air.

Visser says standards for recirculating air within offices will also become more stringent for new builds. And while the trend of coworking was growing downtown, Bartlett says that model will have to shift to survive. The idea of shared workspaces, close collaboration and laid-back environments simply doesn’t make people feel safe right now.