As a pandemic-weary world begins returning to workplaces, some people are predicting an end to the physical office as we know it.

There is no doubt that for many, working exclusively from home has opened eyes to the possibility of successfully working from anywhere. The reality is that this trend of a more fluid way of working began a decade ago and is now accelerating in the COVID-19 era. But the experiences and dynamics unique to physical offices remain in demand as employers create strategies to support a more widely distributed workforce.

In the near term, the office experience will include heightened procedures and protocols to keep employees healthy and safe. These safety measures may at times limit feelings of collaboration and social connection that offices typically forge. But over the long term, the needs that were driving the trend of workplace transformation will persist.
BACK TO THE FUTURE

For perspective, consider that even before the COVID-19 pandemic many companies were exploring, if not undergoing, transformational change in their office portfolios. Why? Because they increasingly saw the physical workplace as:

+ The silent partner to a company’s brand and culture.
+ The vehicle that drives employee connectivity, productivity and innovation.
+ An essential tool that provides a competitive edge in engaging and attracting talent.

Companies also recognized the growing trend of “work from anywhere” knowledge workers who use technology to boost their mobile productivity and lessen their dependence on physical offices.

These pre-COVID-19 trends whetted appetites for transformational workplace change. They invited debate about how the role of the office could and would evolve, particularly as a company’s “central nervous system.” More than just a place for work, the office of the future will act as a conduit for employees’ strongest bonds to their company and their colleagues.

**In the future, our work and workplaces will synthesize the best of what work-from-home can be and what work-at-the-office should be.**

NOT REQUIRED, BUT DESIRED: THE ‘HYBRID’ FUTURE

The physical office will be a critical component of a hybrid workplace by acting as the hub or the central nervous system that connects more widely distributed employees with their companies.

Perhaps the single biggest realization from the COVID-19 work-from-home experience is that employees really want and enjoy the power to choose when, where and even how they work. However, this preference for choice was gaining momentum well before COVID-19.
The power to choose does not mean that employees will demand to work remotely all the time. Recent surveys suggest that most employees want to work at least two or three days in the office. It remains a desired place because it helps employees achieve a heightened level of collaboration and innovation among colleagues. Days reserved for tasks that don’t require interaction with colleagues in the office may be spent working remotely and support better work-life balance for employees.

Well-located, thoughtfully designed and tech-enabled physical spaces—combined with the power of choice over when and how to use them—will deliver good productivity and engagement outcomes for employees and employers alike. Tech-savvy physical offices will be needed more than ever to accommodate the new rhythms of a hybrid workforce. Office space likely will be reinvented to create augmented experiences for in-person and remote participants to better communicate and collaborate.

**As they quickly evolve to meet this new demand, physical workplaces will act as the hub that works in concert with remote nodes (employee homes, field and branch locations, etc.) to orchestrate a hybrid effort that most effectively supports the pursuit of cultural and business goals.**

**CULTIVATING THE VALUE OF HUMAN NETWORKS**

In its “hub” role, the office will promote collaboration, innovation and interaction between employees through design features that facilitate human interaction.

Even before the pandemic, the physical office was being transformed to serve this hybrid world as workplaces became more flexible and agile. Many companies were encouraging employees to move freely throughout the workplace without the boundaries of dedicated seat assignments. The workplace was being designed to promote togetherness, but also with some physical boundaries to allow for distraction-free space when needed (something that many workers find difficult to consistently achieve at home). This continued transformation is critical to ensure the workplace remains a sought-after destination that serves the needs of a more fluid workforce.

In a static workforce, effective human interaction that had been formed in the office likely can be preserved in a virtual environment. But as hiring resumes, the need to cultivate new relationships in the office will rise in importance.
It is difficult to find a full-time virtual proxy that offers all employees—especially new hires—the necessary levels of institutional knowledge, career development and relationship building. Moreover, in the next 10 years, the workforce will undergo another generational shift as Gen Z takes over from the baby boomers. **This represents a golden opportunity for a transfer of knowledge through mentorship that tech collaboration tools alone cannot satisfy.**

**One of the most strategic priorities of the physical workplace will be to serve as the optimal place where human capital convenes to support both individual and organizational goals.**

**WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

Our collective COVID-19 experience has opened a new world of workplace possibilities and a very different relationship between employees and their workplaces. But even as cities have remained resilient despite wars, economic downturns and, yes, even pandemics, so too will offices. In many ways, people seek the same experiences from the physical office that they seek from cities: human interaction and diverse experiences. Enabling this will remain a competitive advantage for companies as the war for talent reignites.

Only time will tell, however, whether the COVID-19 experience will fundamentally alter how workers and businesses congregate and how cities and societies evolve. We do not know whether future breakthroughs—such as vaccines, antiviral remedies or new forms of protection—will decelerate or accelerate the forces that have shaped the recent months of our working lives.

In the meantime, it’s reasonable to assume the future of the workplace likely will be less centralized, with more widely distributed teams that are intimately linked through technology. Offices will have to offer environments and services that promote the physical health and mental well-being of all employees. But great offices of the future will do what great offices of today already do: serve as important hubs for the human elements and experiences that technology can’t provide—relationships, teamwork, chemistry and culture.
All COVID-19 related materials have been developed with information from the World Health Organization, Center for Disease Control & Prevention, and strategic suppliers providing services in affected regions. They may not be suitable for application to all facilities or situations. Ultimately, occupiers and landlords must make their own strategic decisions for their individual stakeholders and workplaces. CBRE’s guidance is intended to initiate those discussions and expedite the process. We make no representations or warranties regarding the accuracy or completeness of this material. CBRE disclaims all liability arising from use of these materials by others.