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Part Three: The Future Workplace

Office of the Future: Experts predict what the workplace could look like in five years

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The Business Journal, along with our sister papers in San Francisco and Sacramento, examined the office of the future in a special report. This part looks at how the the office will look in the long run. Click here to read Part 1 on the initial return to work and Part 2 on how the return to work after Covid-19 is going in the Bay Area.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ESMERALDA RAMIREZ / SILICON VALLEY BUSINESS JOURNAL; GETTY IMAGES

Despite the many unknowns around how the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to affect our professional lives, forward thinkers across

industries are planning for the next five years: How will offices and downtowns change? Will there be a long-term shift to remote work? What new technologies and services will be deployed to change the way we do business?

We talked separately to five experts about what offices will look like five years from now, and here's what they had to say:

Jonathan Brill, a futurist who serves as senior adviser and board member with the market research company Frost & Sullivan

New behaviors, new technologies, new designs — what do experts think our offices will look like in the next five years, given the lessons being taught by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Ruth Cotter, AMD senior vice president of worldwide marketing, human resources and investor relations

Matthew Griffin, a futurist who is the founder of the 311 Institute, a U.K.-based think tank

Russell Hancock, president and CEO of Joint Venture Silicon Valley

Edith Ramirez, City of Morgan Hill's economic development director

A return to the office for some, but continued remote work – and offshoring – for others

Brill: We've been working on digital transformation and we've been embodying a lot of these ideas, at least in the mid- to large-sized companies, for quite a while now.

I look at this moving forward and I wonder: Do we go back to the office? Google, on one side — their literature suggests heavily that it's possible to have large groups work from home. I question how possible it is for innovation and for politics to occur remotely.

Cotter: We think there's more balance. There will be a portion working from home. There will be a portion that will be hybrid — half working from home, half in the office — and then there will be a portion in the office. It will vary by job description, skillset, needs, etc. I think that benefits the employee over the next five years.

We've all talked a lot about work-life balance and striving for that perfection and engagement as we think about quality of life. And I think Covid-19 has taught us — more time at home and how you sort of manage your workday.

Griffin: Post-Covid, what we're really seeing is an acceleration of these three trends that we saw pre-Covid: The move to digitization, move to the cloud and automation.

When you have a look at particularly that third one, based on how we work, there's a whole bunch of some different interesting case studies all over the place. You've got Automatic, the company behind WordPress: For years now, they've operated a fully work-from-home, decentralized workforce. Literally, they don't really have

offices at all. They hire the people they want to hire, irrespective of what geography they live in.

Moving away from the open-plan office – or not?

Cotter: How long is social distancing going to be in place? Even if Covid goes away and we get a vaccine in time, is that still part of your risk mitigation, and what does that mean? Are we going back to defined physical offices for the physical workspace? We're not sure. I think we need more time.

Honestly, I think we have to figure out what the potential of a pandemic — now that we know what it is — looks like moving forward and what that means for the workspace.

Hancock: People are also talking about how the workplace — its physical and spatial features — will now be different because nobody will ever want to work in proximity ever again, so they're going to be reconfigured to have plexiglass all over the place and nothing within 6 feet of each other and so forth. I don't see that coming, either.

I do see a vaccine coming. I think we're all going to be vaccinated within five years, probably more like two years. And I think that we'll just be right back to interacting like we always did, because that's what humans do.

The notion of separation really is very contrary to the human instinct and the human impulse. When the dust settles, I think we're going to have offices that people use between 70 and 100 percent of the time.

Ramirez: Going forward, there is going to be that expectation, both from the company side as well as the employee side, where they're going to want to be able to have the flexibility that they need, and the extra elbow room, if you will, to feel safe and feel comfortable and feel productive. What we have seen is absolutely the importance of open space and flexible work environments.

New technologies and services will focus on collaboration, connectivity and transportation

Brill: With things like video conferencing: We've got the picture and we've got the voice, but we don't really have the emotional context.

We don't have really the emotional tenor of the room, the ability to track what's going on in the space in the same way when you're looking at little postage stamps of people, and I wonder if there's room for innovation around things like that, just kind of making sure that the big personality doesn't dominate the room. Can you have sort of a software facilitator?

Griffin: On the mental health side of things ... You can take surveillance-style CCTV technologies, which is essentially artificial intelligence, plus machine vision, plus a camera, plus a microphone.

When we're doing video calls, for example, these cameras, these microphones, don't just pick up what humans can see. They can pick up higher tonal ranges and they can pick up lower tonal ranges. But they can also pick up the flushes in your skin color. They can also detect your heartbeat and heart rate ... We can automatically monitor whether you're nervous, whether you're happy.

When we start bringing in a microphone into play, all of a sudden, I can tell from the tone of your voice, I can tell from the language that you use, the speed that you speak at and all these other things as to whether or not you are happy or depressed.

Hancock: It starts to sound like science fiction, but there are exciting technologies in the mobility space that can change the game. What are they: Drones for delivery, drones for travel, or merging the car with the drone, so actual vehicles — transport vehicles — that people can be in and they can be at tree-level, in that space that doesn't have to be as highly regulated.

There's serious innovators that are working on that form of transportation. There's what they call the pod car mass rapid transit where they build a grid system, you get into a car, it's in an overhead structure. You punch in your location and it puts you there.

And who knows? Maybe Elon Musk is going to bore us a tunnel, and then the self-driving thing — that continues, and that might increase congestion rather than reduce it.

Ramirez: We know that even for the government side, we are seeing the possibilities of people working from home. And we are continuing to gear up and develop our telecommuting policies that will continue to support that. So from that perspective, we think that there's going to be continued pressure to continue to beef up our infrastructure for telecommunications.

Downtowns will keep getting denser – or run the risk of emptying out

Cotter: I think the big question is: Is transportation moving forward?

Pre-Covid, there was a lot of congestion, a lot of greenhouse gases, a lot of concern in general about commute length, the number of cars, public transportation, etc. That's going to be a longer journey than five years' time. But what was encouraging was the use of bicycles and scooters and those types of amenities for mobility in the downtown area.

If you imagine more people are working from home and living downtown, I think we will continue to see several streets — even if they're side streets — closed down for greater amenities, whether that's more local farmers' markets, dining, engagement events — I'd actually be quite excited about that, and I would look forward to a very community-centric, localized, vibrant downtown moving forward.

Ramirez: On one hand, you have the state coming down with very housing-forward policies that are going to be producing and allowing for a lot of that housing to just be built outright at much greater densities with a lot less parking, all in the downtown areas. And that's to some extent what is needed and appropriate, especially for those to be able to have those urban places where it's OK to have a little bit of that more density.

But at the same time, we're also seeing what the transformation of Covid is costing with the restaurants needing more space, and the unknown future of whether this is going to be an ongoing thing, and how quickly communities are going to have to pivot to create that extra space.

Hancock: We were on a path to see a real transformation (away from suburban tech campuses). I was excited about it. ...

Urbanists and new urbanists and city planners and some enlightened folks at companies like Google rediscovered downtowns, and they came at it from a couple of different directions.

One was just the efficiencies. Downtowns already have those things: they have services, they have an economy, they have an ecosystem... That was the trajectory that we were on, and I think we're still on it.

Allison Levitsky

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