Hot-desking? Now?

Disrupting any routine tends to make us tense, and now, just after we’ve settled into an everyday life that has us spending much of our time at home, we need to make changes again — this time to return to what things were like before most of us knew how to schedule a Zoom call.

Yet once we get back to work at company offices, many of us are also going to have to follow a series of new rules. More stressors! We might need to keep wearing masks, even though they impede many of our discussions, and we may need to keep our distance from colleagues, even though that also throws our mingling into disarray. Ubiquitous bottles of hand sanitizer in workplaces will remind us that many people, some of whom we know, have gotten very sick and even died during the pandemic.

Some organizations — trying to better support a partially stay-at-home workforce and eager to capitalize on employees’ desire for flexibility while (for many) looking to save money on office-related expenses — are contemplating a more radical change: Scrapping dedicated workstations for each staffer in favor of “hot-desking.” In the hot-desking model, people select whatever seat seems to best meet their criteria when they arrive in the office. The whole system is a lot like boarding a Southwest Airlines open-seating flight: Some people choose windows, some aisles — and some get the leftover middles.

And just like the Southwest seat scramble, hot-desking can be quite stressful for the people asked to do it. This should give businesses pause before adopting this policy in haste and assuming this move will benefit employee well-being and their bottom line.

The science is clear: [People feel most comfortable](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JCRE-10-2015-0033/full/html) and safe when they’ve got a single space that they “own” at work and is theirs to return. That sort of comfort is particularly important now because it can, to some extent, buffer return-to-work stresses and help create a sense of familiarity and normalcy after the big disruptive changes from Covid-19, if the group is new to hot-desking.

A settled workplace also makes it more likely that people will work to their full potential when they’re in the office, since stresses divert some of our stock of mental energy. Humans’ [improved mental state](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003687016302514) when they’re in their own space, their own territory, is [based in our prehistory](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/147470491201000502) as a species, so it can’t be ignored.

Furthermore, hot-deskers often wonder where needed teammates are if all members of the group aren’t assigned to sit in roughly the same area. Storing things can also be a challenge. An assigned desk removes the distracting stress of uncertainty and [contains performance-enhancing](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0360132318300064) nature-linked and identify-affirming items, like training certificates, family photos and plants. Lockers or similar can help with that to some degree, but they can also add another step to the workday, as items must be retrieved and stored.

There are also morale concerns. Hot-deskers sometimes feel that their organizations don’t value them enough to provide them with a workspace of their own (though this opinion is becoming rarer as employees start to change their expectations of having individual real estate). Partly for these reasons, many people might decide to minimize their time in the office when asked to hot-desk.

Yet the research consistently indicates that [hybrid working arrangements](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/10/cover-remote-work) that bring people into the office three days a week and working from home for two produce the best outcomes for both employers and employees. Workers need a critical mass of face-to-face time to produce the rich, nuanced conversations crucial for building relationships, problem-solving and creativity. [Eye contact, body position and personal distance](https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-hostos-interpersonalrelations-1/chapter/nonverbal-communication-chapter-4/) are all needed to fully communicate, to form bonds, to work together as a group and more.

Of course, hot-desking does have some advantages beyond saving on overhead costs — which in the post-pandemic environment can be needed to get businesses back in the black. The practice provides managers more day-to-day flexibility with how work environments are used and the ability to adapt to fast-changing needs.

They can be beneficial to some employees as well. Different desks can align better with different tasks — workers can select a more isolated space when they need to concentrate, for instance, or a more group-oriented one for a planning meeting.

Ultimately, the success of any hot-desking system depends on the options people have to choose from. Alignment with work needs is key, but so is being near teammates. It’s important that colleagues can see where the members of their group are — at least if they stand up. These factors can minimize some of the stresses of hot-desking. Given the overall strain we all face in returning to the workplace, the more they can be alleviated, the better.

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