



HOW POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACES ARE SHAPING UP

FIONA COLLIER TALKS ABOUT HOW DESIGN CAN HELP TO ENTICE STAFF BACK TO THE OFFICE AFTER THE WORLD'S BIGGEST REMOTE WORKING EXPERIMENT, REPORTS **NADIA JEFFERSON-BROWN**



A Yorkshire business that has been designing workspaces for two decades has found itself at the heart of the post-pandemic recovery for many employers.

Fiona Collier's commercial interior design consultancy is busy supporting companies as they bring increasing numbers of employees back to the office following lockdowns and the move to remote working.

Last year was tough for Bluesky Design Interiors, but as the months rolled on, Fiona found her team playing a crucial role helping teams get back to a semblance of normality.

Bluesky Design specialises in commercial interiors, with a team of qualified interior architects and designers, and has more than 20 years of experience in the office sector.

"There has never been a more exciting time

to help businesses design and create their workspaces," said Fiona.

"At the beginning of the pandemic, we had several clients rationalise buildings and office space as a way to cut costs. But now most are looking at ways to bring employees back to the office and re-organising the space to do that.

"With many companies rethinking how they will operate going forward, they look to us for advice. It means we must keep up-to-date with all the current workplace developments and be actively involved in media research, knowledge sharing and gathering first-hand experiences."

When she was younger, Fiona watched a television documentary about commercial interior design and decided that was the career for her. She went on to learn her trade



in London, Bristol and Bath, before putting down her roots in Boston Spa.

“Yorkshire is my home, and for a small team we work with some very large and diverse organisations all across the UK. For example, over the last two years, we have been involved with the Home Office, providing consultancy services to enable smarter working principles to be rolled out across their offices in the North.

“Workplace analysis is key for any business. It’s important to do research and properly understand how your people are going to use the office space. We always do this as part of our process. We take the soft elements on board – how to keep employees happy and win their hearts and minds. But we also think about the nuts and bolts of what’s needed to make the business actually function and be profitable.

“And this is more critical than ever at the moment. It’s unrealistic to expect or accept people working from home all the time. A business needs a sense of culture and community to function most effectively. And employees seem to concur.

“We are seeing most employees wanting to work from home three days a week and spend one or two in an office. Those with children want to be able to drop their children off at school. There are savings regarding the cost of travel and associated considerations regarding the environment, but they still want to have face-to-face time with colleagues.”

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But Fiona cautioned: “This is not a blanket desire, however, and different age groups have differing needs. Under-thirties typically want to spend more time in the office for mentoring and social interaction. Once in the office, employees say that as well as meeting rooms they need collaboration and quiet spaces. And smart organisations are using online surveys to get feedback about what staff want from their work environments.

“But it’s not just about what employees want. Providing a couple of nice sofas and a coffee machine will not cut it. You have to understand how your employees will work when they are back in the office so that they can be productive and the business continues to be effective and profitable. We’ve been helping our clients create office spaces that will actively benefit their businesses. Working

together, we determine their ideal accommodation size, undertake staff consultation and feedback, provide advice on current working practices, prepare full interior design, visualisation and implementation drawings, and follow up with site liaison.

“We have a ‘whole team’ approach to our projects. The same designer working on the analysis stage will continue through design and implementation, drawing on support from the rest of the team as necessary.

“We think about ergonomics, furniture height and positioning, acoustics as well as how to manage individuals within the environment. Some clients have digital booking systems installed so their employees can choose their desk for the day, which meeting facilities to book, and even order their lunch via an online catering system.

“Different businesses and different managers and teams have different needs, but in general we are seeing businesses accepting more flexible ways of working.

“Flexible working is nothing new, but the pandemic has accelerated this way of thinking. The office environment has moved higher up the agenda for many businesses wanting to encourage their staff back to the workplace, with attractive spaces that promote collaboration and well-being.”

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