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Gyms, bars and ice cream entice workers back to their offices

As people become used to working from home, employers are becoming more creative in tempting them back to the office



Some companies are adding yoga studios to keep employees happy

Kaya Burgess | Saturday June 05 2021, 12.01am, The Times

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From running tracks and ping-pong tables to libraries, rooftop bars and free ice cream, companies are converting their offices into “social spaces” to entice staff back after a year of working from home, architects have said.

Several large firms are ripping out up to 50 per cent of their desks to make way for sofas, relaxation areas, kitchenettes and bars, with many also adding cycle parking, showers, yoga studios and garden areas to provide more creature comforts for workers.

John Avery, director of LOM, an architecture firm, said that employees continuing to work from home a few days a week after the

pandemic would allow offices to reduce the number of desks. The extra space can be converted into meeting areas for events and socialising on the days that staff do venture into the office, he said.

Companies including Santander, NatWest, Roche, BP and Microsoft are among those who have asked LOM to redesign their offices for the post-pandemic world, Avery said.

His firm is working on a new head office for Santander called Unity Place in Milton Keynes. "This has been redesigned and rethought post-Covid to make a more flexible hub for hybrid working with health and fitness space, great food and a rooftop garden and running track."



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It will feature a 150-metre running track on the roof for staff who want to be put through their paces at lunchtime, a market-hall style area for lunch, an auditorium for events, a rooftop bar and gym.

Avery said that some firms were becoming creative to keep employees happy: "There are a few strange things we've been asked for recently [such as] full-size trampolines, a bouncy castle, a helter skelter and a rack of skateboards for people to get around the office."

He said that some, including the skateboards, were unlikely to have "got past health and safety", however, while the firm that requested trampolines discovered its ceilings were too low.

A poll this week found that 49 per cent of employees wanted new spaces in their offices that were "specifically designed for socialising and collaboration" to tempt them back into the office. The survey of 1,017 workers by the Morey Smith design firm also found that 35 per cent of workers said they wanted secure bike parking at their place of work.

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"It's all about giving people a reason to come in," Avery said. He said that one client, a video game developer, had started handing out free ice cream and a bank in the City of London had installed "an indoor garden café, library spaces, conservatory and ping-pong tables".

"There's a real focus on variety," he said. "Some people will be coming into the office because they want to socialise, some might have kids and will be coming in for some peace and quiet — so some firms are putting in quiet rooms or chillout spaces that people can work in — while there will be some people who never want to set foot in an office again."

Tim Gledstone, a partner at Squire and Partners architecture company, said that many people wanted the "creative spark" from

meeting face-to-face with colleagues. Many firms had been installing large dining-style tables in their offices for people to gather round and making their offices look almost like “grand hotel suites without the beds”, he added.

“I think a lot of young people would love to come back to work,” he said.

“Younger people who are living in shared flats are desperate to get out, to be inspired and learn from other people, socialise, go out after work for drinks or go for lunch on a roof terrace.”

Making your office space feel more like home has been dubbed “resimmercial” by Paul Dare, a designer at Morgan Lovell, part of the Morgan Sindall Group.

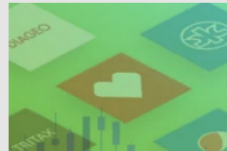
He said that the charity WaterAid had asked for a “large breakout space” in its new office for meetings and events. RPMI RailPen, the railway pensions firm, has a new HQ designed “for people to come back after lockdown and feel completely at ease [with] showers, bike stores, plants, flexible furniture and pods which allow people to do Zoom calls”.

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It isn't the office that's the problem. It's the commute.

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I think we've got used to not having the commute and enjoying that extra half hour in bed, but I actually missed the commute. Firstly my mile walk to the station was free exercise, 100 calories gone before I even thought about being active, then the train journey was when I caught up on social media and read the news. Now I sit in a chair for that half hour of catching up with the world.

Certainly the journey home wasn't as positive but there was often an opportunity for a drink after work or to go out in central London when now I'm generally confined to my small suburb.

I'm looking forward to getting back, to building teamwork in the office and finding synergies with colleagues, its so much easier face to face. At least 2 or 3 days a week - the one thing Covid has done is teach us that homeworking does work - so being able to work from home a couple of days a week suits most people well. However if only half the people are there then its a bit hit and miss, you kind of need all of the people in half of the time.

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