Hot-desking needs to go, unless it’s designed to work for the worker

Companies like the cost savings and how it encourages teamwork. This has to be balanced with the human need for one’s own workspace.

Kang Yang Trevor Yu

More companies are encouraging employees to leave their working-from-home arrangements and return to the office.

In line with this, they have begun a shift towards redesigning the office workspace by removing dedicated seating, so workers are hot-desking instead. This is an arrangement where employees have no assigned workspace. Instead, workstations are occupied daily on a first come, first served basis.

The latest CIBRE Asia-Pacific Office Occupier Survey, which involved 80 multinational and local companies from various industries, noted: “Large corporations are almost universally seeking to improve workplace efficiency by shifting away from fixed seating to create a broader range of work settings.”

In the next three years, only 20 per cent have plans to keep their fixed-seating arrangements. Making a case for this practice should be a no-brainer. Most companies are trending towards some form of hybrid arrangement where workers return to the office only on some days, and office space is rationalised such that workstations are shared and occupied only when required.

Companies stand to save on rent with less space needed, and fixed space can also be allocated to other communal uses.

As well, hot-desking is seen as a way to increase collaboration through removing barriers associated with individual work cubicles. Pairs and groups of workers interact and share work materials more freely. Cross-functional collaborations with other departments are also easier with no fixed seating. Company resources can now be seen as accessible to all employees regardless of rank or status.

Hot-desking offers all types of workers – from in-person to remote – equal access to company resources, while emphasising autonomy and choice of how and where work gets done. In short, hot-desking can be seen as the ideal practice for accommodating more workers back in a new flexible office workplace, while still reducing space-related expenses.

But – and it is a big “but” – in reality, employees’ reactions to hot-desking range from the lukewarm to downright contempt.

Recent employee polls routinely report a widespread unpopular with regard to this practice, leaving the increasing number of employees adopting hot-desking in a quandary over whether to continue with it.

The obvious savings in office space rental mask several other operational and human-related costs that, while not obvious at first, may constitute a more serious underlying problem.

So, why do many employees seem to hate hot-desking?

A LOGISTICAL NIGHTMARE

A common complaint is that workers can’t find the right desk configuration that suits them. Whether it is the need for multiple monitor screens, a specialised terminal set-up, allowing for a standing desk or requiring a whiteboard, hot-desking can be a logistical nightmare.

Recent academic studies have even highlighted difficulties for workers who simply desire a quiet place to concentrate in the typical hot-desking open-office space environment. Individuals may even feel compelled to either arrive earlier or work later in the office to improve their chances of securing a preferred set-up or atmosphere more conducive to their working style. Such behaviour flies against the purported intentions of hybrid workplaces and supposed work flexibility.

Even if those logistical kinks are sorted out, hot-desking is turning out to be a nightmare for leaders and supervisors. With subordinates and team members scattered all over the office, collaboration and informal workplace learning are more difficult.

That quick pow wow where teams or smaller groups go into a huddle for a quick spontaneous discussion or briefing is just about impossible. Even with the latest messaging technology, team efficiency gets interrupted and bogged down by not having one’s team mates and collaborators nearby in a fixed space. Asking for help has also never been so cumbersome.

Having to engage in an endless string of messages, or take a long, searching walk around the office, is really annoying when one is working on time-sensitive tasks.

These problems are even more acute for newcomers, who especially need to be closer to specific mentors or supervisors showing them the ropes consistently throughout the day.

Not having a designated workspace also contributes to anxiety and stress for workers, who have to deal with uncertainty and the lack of predictability at the office on a daily basis. Overall, disrupted lines of communication and team member isolation make it that much more challenging for leaders to build any semblance of team culture or spirit under a hot-desking arrangement.

THAT HUMAN CONNECTION

The concept of hot-desking also compromises the very foundation of employee engagement today – connecting with the hearts and minds of employees who work closely and forms the basis of company culture.

People have a fundamental need to belong, says the writer. At work, these feelings of belonging are derived from being able to mark out and identify physical aspects of the workplace as one’s own. That is why personalising workspaces with items such as photos and plants is a natural way for workers to grow roots and develop emotional ties with their employers.

From an employer “branding” viewpoint, hot-desking also has its problems. Workers view relationships with their employer as a combination of instrumental and symbolic exchanges. Instrumental exchanges involve tangible typically written into an employment contract, like a salary and benefits in return for effort and productivity. Symbolic exchanges involve intangibles like this employer providing learning opportunities in return for commitment and loyalty.

So from the employees’ perspective, hot-desking is really annoying when one is searching walk around the office, showing them their options and feeling unable to belong.

Company investments today – be it in terms of overall cost savings or increased productivity – need to be more balanced with the human and social impact on how work is perceived.

From an employer’s viewpoint, hot-desking is really annoying when one is searching walk around the office, showing them their options and feeling unable to belong.

Company investments today – be it in terms of overall cost savings or increased productivity – need to be more balanced with the human and social impact on how work is perceived.

To provide a comfortable environment for workers, companies need to understand that the human and social impact is just as important as the financial impact. A workplace designed to accommodate the needs of its employees will not only increase productivity, but also improve employee satisfaction and retention.

Kang Yang Trevor Yu is an associate professor at the Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University.