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## *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

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Individuals may feel compelled to either arrive earlier or work later to secure a set-up more conducive to their working style. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

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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 CBRE 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 freed 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 to part-time – equal access to company resources, while emphasising autonomy and choice on 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 unpopularity with regard to this practice, leaving the increasing number of employers 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 these 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.

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That quick powwow 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 teammates 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 prioritise connections and relationships.

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

Such bonds contribute towards a more positive atmosphere at work, which results in reduced stress, improved mental wellness and lower employee turnover.

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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 tangibles typically written into an employment contract, like a

salary and benefits in return for effort and productivity. Symbolic exchanges involve intangibles like the employer providing learning opportunities in return for commitment and loyalty.

So from the employees' perspective, hot-desking represents a disappointingly unbalanced exchange: The company curtails personal freedom by bringing them back to the office, yet does not regard them as important enough to warrant a designated workspace.

Workplace design specialists recently reported that more than 90 per cent of hot-desking workers would feel encouraged to work from the office more frequently if they were assigned a dedicated workspace.

However, there are ways to mitigate the effects of hot-desking:

- \* Handle the issue of inherent unpredictability for workers by implementing a pre-scheduling system that provides certainty on where they will sit.
- \* Ensure that workspaces are properly equipped with the appropriate technical and ergonomic set-up.
- \* Provide an additional mix of spaces for small meetings and larger conferences, and quieter spots with more privacy, which would also be more in line with the ethos of workplace flexibility and hybrid working.

It is easy to mistake hot-desking as a convenient accompaniment for companies' inevitable shift to more hybrid forms of working.

But they shouldn't rush to implement it without much consideration of its deeper human and social impact on how people interact at work and derive meaning from work relationships. It is time for a reality check.

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

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