

What to do with our big, shiny offices?

 By [James Moffatt](#), issued by [Promise](#)

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It's hard not to have all the answers at once. I've been grappling with scenario planning and do not yet have a working model for our agency post the coronavirus in South Africa. My thoughts and ideas for both the industry and our agency seem to adapt on a daily basis. It feels impossible to plan without certainty; the virus remaining an unpredictable protagonist.



Will it be a soft start, with a resumption of economic activity and physical distancing? Or will we be fully lifted but have ad-hoc lockdowns to mitigate resurgent infections? Will there be a viable vaccine in a year? Will a soft lockdown continue until 2021? Regardless, I don't think we can assume that once it is all "over", we will slip back into a strict 8.30am to 5.30pm regime at one location of work. Or... perhaps we will. Who knows?

Remote working has been successful

It's been a month since anybody set foot in our offices in Bryanston, Johannesburg. The entire agency has been working remotely since Wednesday, 18 March. Zoom and Slack have been our go-to means of communication, along with old-school phonecalls and Skype.

Despite my initial concerns about working remotely, I have to say that so far it has gone extremely well.

People are punctual for their online meetings. Everyone is communicating well. The quality of work remains high. Deadlines are being met, and the sense of camaraderie and teamwork has been excellent.

Empty offices

But I am frustrated by the fact that we are paying full rent for 1,000sqm of office space and dozens of parking bays that sit completely empty. Our landlord is not at all interested in this and has said that for them, unless we can prove significant losses, they're not going to be sympathetic. Given that the agency remains busy, we don't have means to negotiate a reduction in rent. But paying for something that you don't use is madness. Especially on the back of an economy that was strained to begin with. Profits in our industry have been under significant pressure for over a decade, and yet our business has had to shell out over R13m in rent in just six years.

New models of working

What I've been really grappling with is how things should look after this is all over. Full-time remote working, at this stage, does not feel like a viable model. I worry about the integrity of our culture and the agile nature of working together in one space. Some employees will be living alone, in a one bedroom flat with no garden or pets. To me, that doesn't feel very appealing, nor good for mental health. We are social creatures after all.

An article I found in *Time* magazine noted that there's a reason companies like Best Buy, Yahoo, and Aetna all experimented with remote work in years past, before telling employees to come back into the office — remote communication was simply not the same. Arguably, the reason WeWork was able to raise so much capital was because investors understood that remote workers preferred not to stay at home by themselves all day. Whether this was due to a required sense of greater purpose, or the need for real social interaction, or variety in day-to-day living, or all of the above. WeWork needed to create a “better than home” experience, a place where people would prefer to be during work hours, as opposed to at home or in a coffee shop.

The company said, “While working from home or ‘third places’ serves convenience, these experiences lacked that foundational human need for a sense of community.”

Scenarios

Some members of our Exco were pushing for a remote working model before the coronavirus pandemic. The claim was that it would be positive for culture and recruitment. I was not entirely ready to embrace this – in many respects, for good reason.

However, the world has changed and we need to experiment with new ways of working. These are some of the scenarios I've been playing with. One would be a rotational work-from-home model. Either morning/afternoon splits, team rotations or perhaps half the agency works from home the first two weeks of the month, the other half the last two weeks of the month. Or simply, the entire agency works remotely for the last week of every month.

Some of these scenarios present an opportunity - ditch the rented 1,000sqm office space and for the same money purchase 400sqm to 500sqm of space in an excellent location. Create a Promise working “pod” that can accommodate huddles with client teams, pitches and occasional group working sessions. As we would own it, we would not have to “whitebox” it after our lease expires and we would design the space exquisitely, exactly to our specification. Should our staff complement increase by a factor of 50%, the fixed size of the Promise pod should not be problematic, as most staff would be working remotely anyway.

The second option would be as per above, but rented from a provider like WeWork.

Another scenario will be the “soft remote working” approach. Creative and strategic teams that benefit from no interruptions could choose to work remotely for a day or two, with a strong project management team overseeing output, as is the norm. However, this would require retention of the agency premises for an occasional full house.

These ideas aren't exhaustive, there are so many variable solutions that may yet reveal themselves.

Promise runs as an idea meritocracy, so we will be leaning on many people in the agency to co-create what the future should look like. And also bear in mind, that the solution will be fluid and may change as time progresses. Whatever solution we arrive at, it must only serve to ensure that the quality of our work and thinking remains excellent and that our culture and purpose continue to flourish. And most of all, that the work we do for our clients exceeds expectation and helps them to thrive in a very challenging environment.

The “why” of our work – our purpose – won't change. But the “how” is certainly up for discussion. I'm going to ask all our leaders to think deeply about our how. We will experiment and be flexible in our approach. But eventually, we need a consistent model. This will inform how we work in the future - and what our commercial office space will look like in 2021.

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