

# FUTURE CITIES SERIES: CAN SMART BUILDINGS REVIVE THE OFFICE?

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Legal Briefings - By **Alex Lundie**

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Our Future Cities series explores how smart buildings can help tempt workers back to the post-pandemic office

This article is part of our Future Cities Series where our experts explore the pressures facing our cities in the post-Covid era and map out the key issues and industry themes in re-thinking urban life.

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We have all heard how the Covid-19 pandemic has emptied offices around the world and the growing belief that wide-scale home working is here to stay. By this reasoning, the large city centre office is dying out. But, as with many areas, the pandemic could instead accelerate changes to office spaces that were already underway, giving a lifeline to the office building. Smart buildings use technology to connect systems within the building to enhance its 'performance', including how it meets the needs of its occupants.

## THE WAY BACK

In the initial return to work phase, smart building technology can help to meet physical distancing requirements, with capabilities to limit occupancy in common areas by controlling access. Touchless features, for entrances, elevators, copiers and vending machines, will also be positive ways to limit the spread of infection. Occupancy tracking can help building management to target high usage areas for enhanced cleaning and where this information can be shared with occupants, it can help to stagger use of popular areas in a building to avoid overcrowding. For example, real-time information on elevator usage or wait times in the cafeteria can help occupants to plan their visit. It is even possible for occupants to get cleaning information, to know when a desk or meeting room was last cleaned.

## EFFICIENT USE

Taking a more long term view, smart buildings are set to control and enable use of the office in the not too distant future. Where home working continues, at least on a part-time basis, tenants will want to reduce the amount of space that they lease because there will be fewer bodies in the office at any one time. Smart building technology can help to ensure that the reduced office space is used efficiently and help occupants navigate the shifting sands of the hot-desking environment. Monitoring use and availability of meeting rooms and desk spaces; allocating or reserving a desk near colleagues; or guiding users to a vacant desk, available resource or to a misplaced colleague.

## THE PLACE TO BE

Efficient use of the space will only be the baseline for the office. In order to hold its own with home working, the smart office will have to become a more appealing place to work. It needs to offer more space, greater freedom and flexibility for the occupant, and also to provide a stimulating, personally tailored experience, and place much greater emphasis on health and wellbeing. This will be achieved through a combination of systems - automated building systems, in building sensors, users' digital devices, building amenities (cafes, health clubs, entertainment) and integrated apps to bring it all together.

The smart office will:

- enable people to order their coffee or book a workout, check on queues for the cafeteria or set up a virtual queue, so you can arrive just in time.
- enable people to control meeting rooms from their own phone, rather than a shared console, and ensure seamless presentation capability from any device.
- report on environmental factors such as air quality and help people to find their Goldilocks zone in the office (not too hot and not too cold).
- help people stick to healthy habits by booking meeting rooms on the other side of the building or stopping the elevator 3 floors down so they walk the last part.
- enable participants who are out of the office to 'sit' at a conference table in holographic form.

There are many strands of technology to pull together to make the office truly smart. It will need an ecosystem of suppliers to support the component systems and an integrator to oversee the whole. Other challenges will arise around the security of the systems, the use of personal information, in particular facial recognition or other biometric data, and for the most advanced smarts using artificial intelligence, ensuring that it operates in an ethical manner.

The rewards are significant. If it all fits together, things work seamlessly and people get to interact with their colleagues in a stimulating environment, the office will find a new lease of life.

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