

Back To Work: Is the Trend Towards Remote Taking a Downturn?



According to recent results by online marketplace Apartment List; remote working declined in popularity in the US in 2021, but admittedly, not by much. Apartment List collected the data in two surveys over April and December last year, and asked workers about their work habits and the likelihood of them returning to the office full time.

Dipping Back into “Office”

While a large chunk of the workforce seems set to stay remote, there was a slight uptick in the number of workers going into the office throughout the study. Apartment List states that: “Last April, 51 percent of workers were working from home at least half the time, and by December, that share had fallen to 44 percent.”

There were also fewer workers operating exclusively from home in December, with numbers dropping from 56 percent to 47 percent over the course of the year.

And while these numbers don’t signify the kind of drastic change that would be good news for office real estate, they do suggest that we may be entering into a new status quo. We might, for example, increasingly see workers choose flexible combinations of workspaces, driving up demand for real-estate-as-a-service and co-working space solutions.

Productivity and Talent

One of the challenges faced by the return to work has been the fact that many companies have actually seen productivity gains from having a remote workforce. Added to this is the fact that hiring remote and freelance workers opens up a tempting new talent pool for businesses. Even giants like Google, which have traditionally been opposed to remote work as a go-to strategy, are starting to soften up and implementing more flexible policies.

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A recent study by the Pew Research Center also shows that many workers have stayed remote even as their workplaces reopen. As of January 2022, around 59 percent of US workers who could return to office said they still work from home.

Though this study also reports that the numbers are lower now than they were in 2020, the impetus for staying at home has changed with many workers saying they are “doing this by choice rather than necessity.”

Changing up the Office Outlook

What all of this means in a real estate context is that, now more than ever, we need to get creative with how we approach space and embrace trends that are breaking the mold in terms of traditional office space usage.

Part of the approach involves offering workers what they can't get at home: a space to collaborate and interact creatively with colleagues. In an interview with Bloomberg, Ryan Andersen, VP of research and global insights for office furniture company Herman Miller, put it like this: “We need to talk more about the experiences people want to have in the office. The office has to be a place for community socialization, even with people who are not in your immediate work group.”

He adds that, for a worker who is spending time commuting in, offices need to provide a mix of social and focus spaces to really add value.

It's an approach we may be seeing more of in the future as companies adjust to the “new normal” of a remote workforce. And while office real estate's future may still be in flux, staying on top of emerging trends that add to the real estate toolkit may be just what's needed to pick things back up as we head into the rest of 2022.

