

# The office is open... but how do we get staff to return?

As more offices open back up for business in South Africa and internationally, a new challenge has arisen: After spending almost two years working from home, how do we convince employees to come back to the workplace?



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Linda Trim, director at Giant Leap, one of South Africa's largest workplace design consultancies, said that while some companies have mandated workers return to the office at least a few days a week, others have reopened on a voluntary basis.

## Not the same

"What we have noticed is that many companies have reopened their offices and returned to work voluntarily, but have been disappointed by the experience.

"The spontaneous collaboration offices once provided often didn't occur. And some workers who tried returning to offices quickly gave up and settled back into a routine of working at home."

She added that people tend to spend much of their days hunched over laptops wearing headphones on video calls. Other workers arrived only to discover most of their colleagues were still at home, or on alternating hybrid schedules.

“It simply means that offices need to be much better - and more effective - to consistently draw people to the workplace. The office needs to be made more of a destination with clear purpose and enjoyable benefits rather than a grudge place to visit.

“Ideally businesses want to create a pull, not a push. And to create that pull, and to have people want to come in, the office space has to be redesigned with that in mind.”

## **Update, upgrade**

Companies are responding: some are rolling out new software to allow employees to better coordinate their visits with colleagues, while others are renovating spaces, upgrading in-office catering options or appointing staff to monitor the office experience.

“A number of companies are also experimenting with scheduling, with some setting engagement days when all employees will be required to attend,” Trim noted. Others still are bringing in baristas, motivational speakers, comedians or others to inject fun into the office.

Physical spaces are also changing, often to better support groups of employees.

“Most offices will ultimately have about 60% of space devoted to collaboration, up from 40% prior to the pandemic,” Trim said.

## **In with the new**

Other companies are hoping a brand new building will draw people back.

Consulting giant Accenture PLC recently opened a new office in New York which is open to employees on a voluntary basis. Amenities include access to an outdoor terrace, sweeping views of the New York skyline, along with an interfaith prayer room, tech-free reflection zones, yoga and wellness areas and dozens of conference rooms.

For those who opt in, a new system accessible via an internal app that is in development can help Accenture employees find their colleagues who may be seated on other floors.

To entice people, Accenture has also offered staff free lunch coupons on Mondays and Fridays, when the office tends to be less busy. The company has also organised volunteer events, happy hours and other group activities in the office.

Technology giant Salesforce.com Inc. turned executive offices in its San Francisco headquarters into small group conference rooms open to all employees. It is also tripling the size of some dining areas, moving out desks and adding more couches, TVs and whiteboards for teams to gather. The company plans to upgrade its catering, adding options for breakfast and an early dinner, knowing that many employees will likely commute fewer days to the office, but may want to squeeze in more meetings and time on-site with peers when they do attend.

“The simple overarching principle is to make people glad they are in the office.

“As the working world normalises it really, really matters to have people together,” Trim concluded.