

TDA

PEOPLE + SPACE × DESIGN

INSIGHT

# What next:

human-centred strategies  
for a successful return to  
the workplace



# A year of soul-searching for employers

**This week marks a year since businesses up and down the country were given the order to shut their doors and send their staff home.**

Granted, we had already begun to see a gradual move away from the standard, office-based working model in the past few years. But the work from home mandate triggered a mass exodus from the workplace that's up there with the Industrial Revolution when it comes to major changes in working culture.

It's a shift that has had employers asking themselves some deep questions about whether or not the traditional working model that we've clung to for so many decades remains in the best interest of their business, and their staff.

## **What was so great about normal anyway?**

The UK government's "road map" announcement on 22nd February gave us all hope that as a nation we are nearing the end of our struggle against COVID-19. And that we can look forward to a return to normal as early as 21st June 2021.

But is the old version of normality really what we should be aspiring to? Perhaps not. Perhaps now is the time for businesses to embrace the lessons we've all learnt over the past year and use them as a catalyst for positive transformation.

As workplace consultants, we believe there has never been a better time for forward-thinking businesses to shake things up. And to pave the way for a much brighter future by letting go of the notion that a one-size-fits-all office-based model is the best way to ensure staff productivity and wellbeing.

Now is the time to evolve.

# Reset, reimagine, reboot.

**This is not an article about installing plexiglass screens and setting up hand sanitising stations. We are sure you already have that covered.**

This is an article about imagining a different kind of future for your business.

Exploring the topics of People, Space, and Design, we'll discuss ways you can adapt and evolve your workplace in order to become the kind of company you want to be in light of recent events.

## The ideas we'll share will help you to:

- Support staff wellbeing
- Drive profitability
- Increase productivity and creativity
- Attract and retain top talent
- Achieve high levels of employee engagement

OUR GOAL IS TO HELP YOU DEVELOP HUMAN-CENTRED STRATEGIES FOR RETURNING TO THE WORKPLACE STRONGER THAN EVER.





PEOPLE

# A return-to-work strategy with people at its heart

**One of the most important takeaways from the past year is that working from home isn't just an excuse to slack off.**

In fact, home-based workers have proven once and for all that showing up in the office every day is not a requirement for efficient time management and delivering great work.

Employers who recognise this will now be presented with an array of exciting new possibilities for redesigning their workplace so that it is no longer just a place that staff feel obliged to attend five days a week. But instead, one that they actively can't wait to come back to.

To achieve this, an empathetic, people-focused approach is key.

# Where to begin?

Shaping your return-to-the-workplace strategy with an employee-centric mindset will help boost your chances of success by ensuring that your people are engaged and ready to adopt a new way of working from the get-go.

First and foremost, we recommend assembling a core strategy team. This should include key decision makers and office management staff, as well as senior representatives from various departments that can advocate for the specific needs of their teams.



You can then hold an open and honest discussion that aims to answer important questions such as:

- Which are our mission critical teams / roles?
- Who needs to be in the office in order for the business to function with maximum efficiency?
- Which roles transitioned well to remote working and which didn't?
- Which roles saw little drop off in productivity having transitioned to home-based working?
- Do we even want a full return to a full-time office-based model?

At this early stage it is also vital to listen to the needs of your staff.

**It's important to consider:**

- Who wants to come back to the workplace full-time and why?
- Who would prefer to remain at home or transition to flexible working and why?
- Are there any staff with health concerns or medical conditions that put them at risk?
- Are there staff members with ongoing care-giving responsibilities who would benefit from more flexibility?
- Are there staff who are more at risk due to a lengthy or overcrowded commute?

While you've got their attention, you can also learn about employee behaviour by asking your staff to tell you how they would like to use the space while they're there.

#### Do they need a space to...

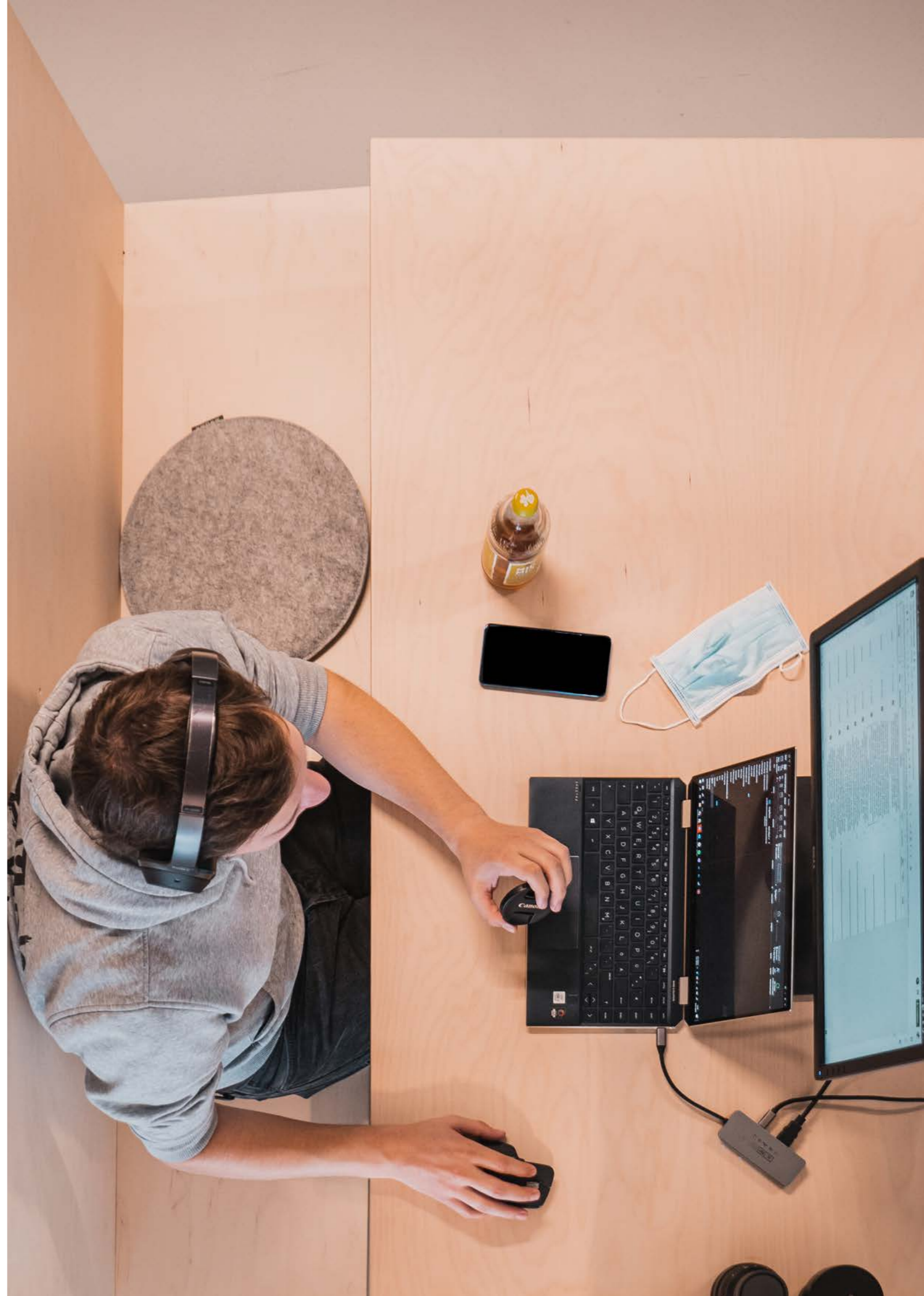
- Use specialist technology?
- Take private phone calls?
- Work quietly without distractions?
- Hold formal or informal meetings?
- Host clients?
- Collaborate and brainstorm with colleagues?
- Rest and recuperate?

Figuring out the answer to these important questions will help you to develop a vision for your workplace transformation that's deeply rooted in your peoples' needs.

You may find that a hybrid working model would be well-suited to your teams. And that collaboration and face-to-face contact is high up on staff's workplace agenda, meaning that hospitality-style informal seating areas and meeting spaces could be a great use of your space.

Whatever your new future looks like, we're pretty sure it won't resemble a bank of open plan desks.

Armed with all this vital information, you'll be able to confidently take the next step in your journey towards a triumphant return to the workplace: replanning your space.



+ SPACE

# Defining your space needs

**The office space itself constitutes a major operating cost for most businesses.**

In this unstable economic climate, savvy businesses will want to make sure that their space is fully optimised. Especially as this overhead is eating into profits that may already have taken a dip as a result of the pandemic.

Of course, a decrease in occupancy thanks to your new working model may leave you with more space than you need.

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In this section, we'll explore two ways you can reimagine and repurpose your space to ensure that it adds more to your bank balance than it takes away.



## OPTION 1

### Turn your surplus space into profit

Once you've planned who's coming back to the office and when, you may find yourself with unused space that's proving to be a financial burden.

If that is the case and your lease is due for renewal, relocating to smaller premises may be the best way to cut back on real estate costs.

However, if you love your current location, have a willing landlord and still have some years left on your lease, there is another way you could put that space to good use.

Why not consider subletting your unused space?

Not only will you be stopping your extra space from needlessly burning a hole in your pocket, you'll also be able to generate revenue by renting the space out to new tenants.

### A flexible, future-proof strategy

A Cat A+ fit out could help you to develop the perfect offer for prospective tenants.

This innovative concept has been causing quite the stir in the commercial real estate sector.

Occupying a sweet spot between a landlord Cat A "shell and core" space and an all-singing, all-dancing tenant Cat B fit out, Cat A+ offers tenants a comfortable, purpose-built office space that's ready to occupy immediately.

By choosing this option you'd be creating an attractive proposition for businesses looking to acquire a plug-and-play workplace without having to invest in a full Cat B fit out.

The beauty of this strategy is that by holding onto your surplus space and renting it out in the short term, you'll always have the option to reoccupy the space in future should your business grow.

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## OPTION 2

### Boost productivity with vibrant workplace neighbourhoods

To be truly human-centred, your workplace transformation strategy must recognise that no two members of staff are the same. Every team will contain a wide range of personalities and working styles that must be catered to if you wish to create a supportive and inclusive workplace environment.

Not only that, but you will also need to answer the question of what to do with your space when much of what it was previously used for is now being done from home.

When it comes to effective space planning, both of these factors present management teams with a sizeable challenge.

Could multifunctional workplace neighbourhoods be the solution?

### Serving your community

While open plan spaces impose a one-size-fits-all approach to working, workplace neighbourhoods offer distinct, purpose-built zones that have been designed to facilitate a particular work mode, task or personality. These could be spaces where staff can take advantage of specific technology, brainstorm with colleagues around a whiteboard, soak up some café culture or get stuck into a meaty task that requires serious concentration.

Whereas the open plan desk model causes staff to make various mindset shifts as they switch between tasks throughout the day, workplace neighbourhoods improve focus and productivity by allowing for a strong mental connection between the place and the task at hand.

Meanwhile, they encourage creativity by giving staff plenty of chances to collaborate with and be inspired by other members of the workplace community as they move around the space.

### A leap of faith

Moving into a workplace neighbourhood configuration may feel like a drastic departure from the standard working model. But the benefits are clear.

Not only do they enable you to maximise the use of your available space by providing a lean, agile alternative to desk-based working, they also give staff complete autonomy over where, when and how they complete tasks. More importantly, they will help to create a sense of community and belonging within the workplace culture after a long period of feeling isolated from our colleagues.

That said, when introducing this new way of working it will be important to show staff that you are not simply getting rid of desks for the sake of it, and that they are still welcome in the space despite no longer having their own designated workstation.

Next, we'll take a quick look at some ways you can help your staff to feel right at home in their new space with a thoughtful approach to design.



× DESIGN

# Making conscious design choices

**You've carefully assessed what your people need to feel supported as they return to the workplace, or not.**

You've made sure you're getting your money's worth out of every inch of your space.

Now its time to tie the two together with some thoughtful design choices.

A big consideration will be making sure that all your staff embrace the same vision for your business. This is especially important if you are adopting a hybrid working model for the first time.

Manifesting your brand values and culture through carefully considered, sustainable design features will be key to influencing employee behaviours and achieving high levels of staff engagement.

One way you can do this is to support the wellbeing of your staff by introducing elements of biophilic design into your space.



# A healthy dose of nature

Popularised in the 1980s, the term biophilia relates to humans' deep connection to nature and natural processes.

Biophilic design thinking grew up around this idea as architects and interior designers developed ways of incorporating nature into the built environment so that we may experience benefits such as improved wellbeing and reduced stress while indoors.

**There are plenty of ways this could be applied to the workplace that don't just involve the odd desk plant. Such as:**

- Choosing natural materials, textures and tones
- Incorporating naturally occurring patterns such as spirals and honeycombs
- Making the best use of natural light or using artificial lighting systems that mimic our circadian rhythms
- Providing internal and external views onto nature
- Making improvements to air quality and air flow

We've got a whole post about [why biophilic office design should be part of your return-to-the-workplace strategy](#) if you'd like to learn more.

Design elements such as this will help to breathe new life into your space. Allowing you to create a welcoming environment that offers staff a renewed sense of purpose after a tough year.



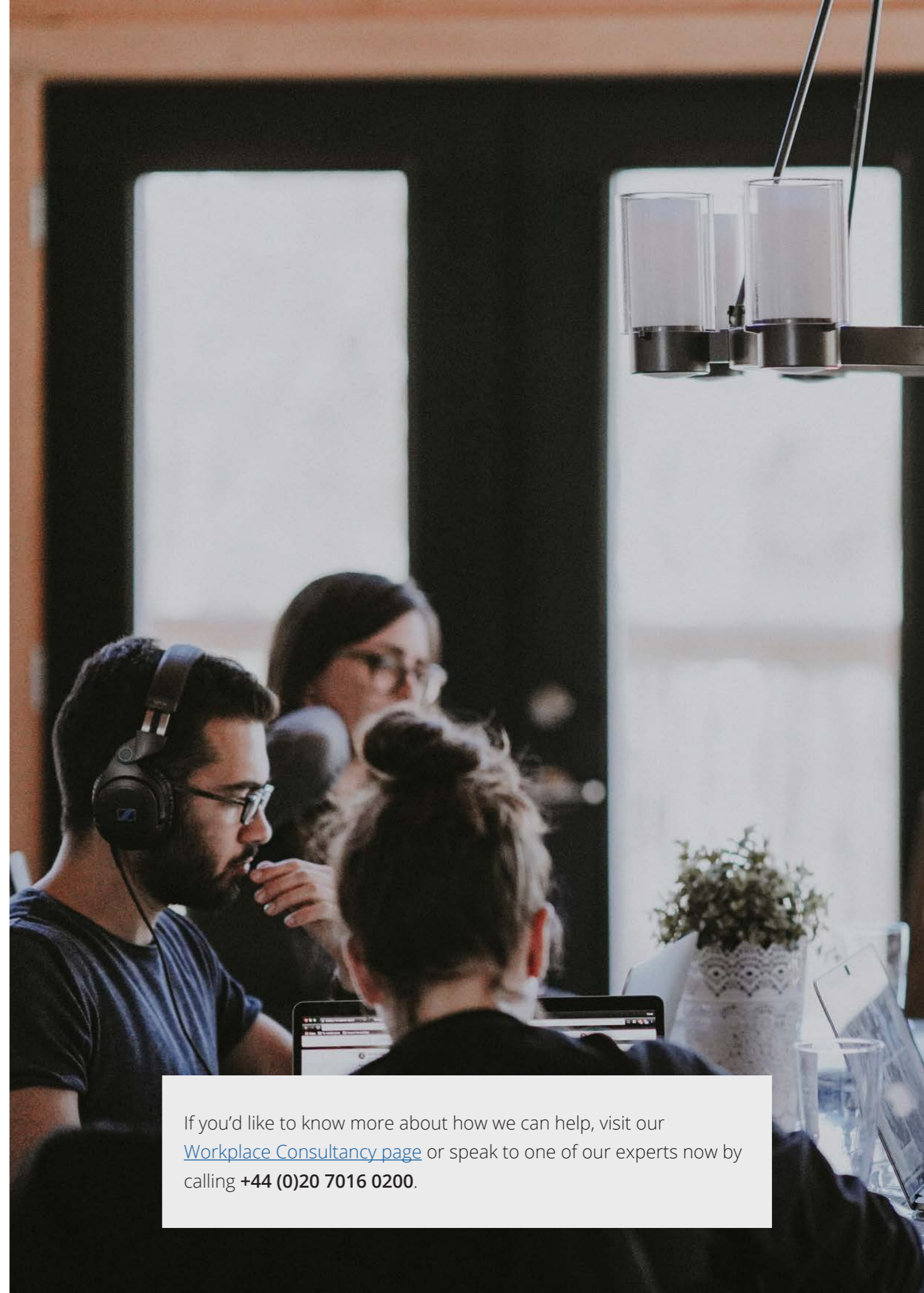
# How can workplace consultancy help?

**We hope the ideas we've discussed in this article have given you some food for thought for how you could make a successful return to the office when it is safe to do so.**

However, they are certainly not an exhaustive list, and they may not be just right for you. But the perfect solution is out there.

If you like the idea of creating a unique workplace environment that will help your people to become happier, healthier and more productive than ever following the pandemic, we highly recommend undertaking a workplace consultancy project.

This personalised service will help you to answer all the big questions you're currently faced with and will offer expert guidance that will enable you to make confident, future-proof space planning and design choices. As well as helping you to transition smoothly into your bright new future.



If you'd like to know more about how we can help, visit our [Workplace Consultancy page](#) or speak to one of our experts now by calling **+44 (0)20 7016 0200**.

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