The Burtt-Jones & Brewer Knowledge Sharing report

Burtt-Jones **&** Brewer
Workplace Design   Consultancy

Introduction

As we chatted with our clients before and during lockdown, we learnt about the impact of Covid-19 on each organisation and how it varied. In conversation, every client talked about their experiences as part of a series of interviews, sharing their thoughts, considerations and some of the practical solutions they found to the unique problems presented by coronavirus. These conversations have been summarised in the following report.

All clients interviewed are either a) professional services, b) small to mid scale corporate organisations or c) small, mid or large scale administrative/government organisations.

- The 15 clients interviewed represent approximately 15,000 staff in total, and the scale of organisations ranges from approx. 80 to 7,000 staff.

- We interviewed CEOs, Operations Directors, and Heads of Real Estate or Facilities/Property Teams.

- 50% of clients interviewed are part of larger, multinational corporate businesses, their UK office representing a major hub or regional HQ.

- The remainder interviewed are a mixture of professional services and compliance organisations with a single office location, with the majority occupying a floor or a number of floors in multi-tenant buildings.

- All clients except one are located in London: the City, West End, Canary Wharf, Westminster or Mid Town.

- Sites range from Grade 1 listed period properties to some of the most iconic office buildings in the UK.

- The report is not intended to directly address or offer any compliance or implementation strategies. It is a summarised record from those at the front line, sharing the experience and impact of Covid-19 at first hand.

OVERVIEW

The report is centred around four main topics:

1. Immediate Need (how each client managed lockdown)

2. Home Working (challenges and opportunities)

3. Returning to a Covid Compliant Workspace (if, how and when)

...and finally, we asked if each client was already thinking longer term about their use of workspace,

4. The Post Covid Workplace

Lockdown

1

2

3

4

Immediate Need

Home Working

Returning to a Covid Compliant Workspace

The Post Covid Workplace

"Each client remarked on the in-built resilience, adaptability and capability of their organisation to rapidly change."

Immediate need

Transitioning to home working

- All clients used their business continuity / resilience plans to manage the transition. The bulk of the transition was completed within a week of lockdown.

- **Every organisation adapted successfully, with differing levels and types of implementation issues, reflective of their size and working requirements.** For all it was business as usual.

- **Those with agile working strategies already in place reported the smallest number of issues.** They were able to immediately transition, having already invested in mobile technology, communications platforms, training and infrastructure.

- Aware of the potential for disruption caused by Covid-19, **one client had already started resilience testing in December, trialling remote and home-based working**.

In-built resilience

- **Each client remarked on the in-built resilience, adaptability and capability of their organisation to rapidly change** working behaviours and successfully transition to a new way of working.

Teething problems

- **Consisted mostly of IT and furniture/ technology issues**, mainly for staff who hadn't worked from home before and were struggling with technology or finding a suitable place to work.

- A small number of staff requested hard copy files from the office, but **most were able to rely on digital documentation.** Some staff **prepared ahead of lockdown**, taking critical hard copy documentation home.

"Organisations quickly implemented online support networks, focusing on employees' wellbeing during isolation."

Immediate need

Online support networks

- Larger corporate **organisations quickly implemented online support networks,** often managed from the global HQ, **focusing on employees' wellbeing during isolation** and drawing attention to the social and mental health aspects of home working, in place of giving out generic advice about home working and working standards.

- **Smaller businesses implemented similar strategies**, but on a more personal basis, many **retaining and echoing some of the practices from the office**: Friday afternoon drinks, all staff town halls via Zoom, as well as direct, personal communications between managers and employees.

Communication and staying connected

- **Video conferencing** was initially **used as the predominant communication platform.** Calls within teams/departments and across the wider business initially took place on a daily basis.

- However, feedback quickly highlighted that this created **a culture of 'too much' communication, creating fatigue and preventing work from getting done.**
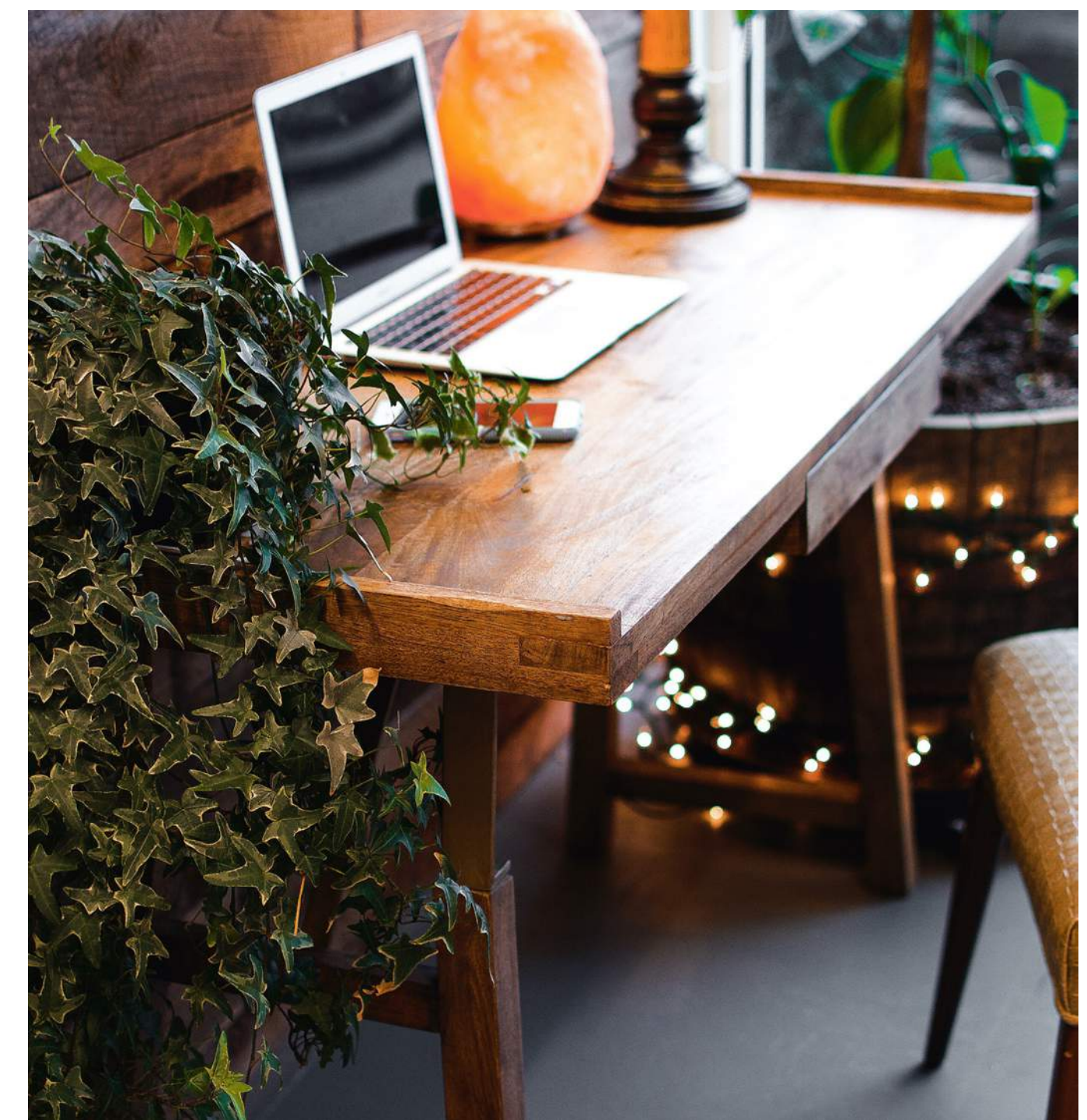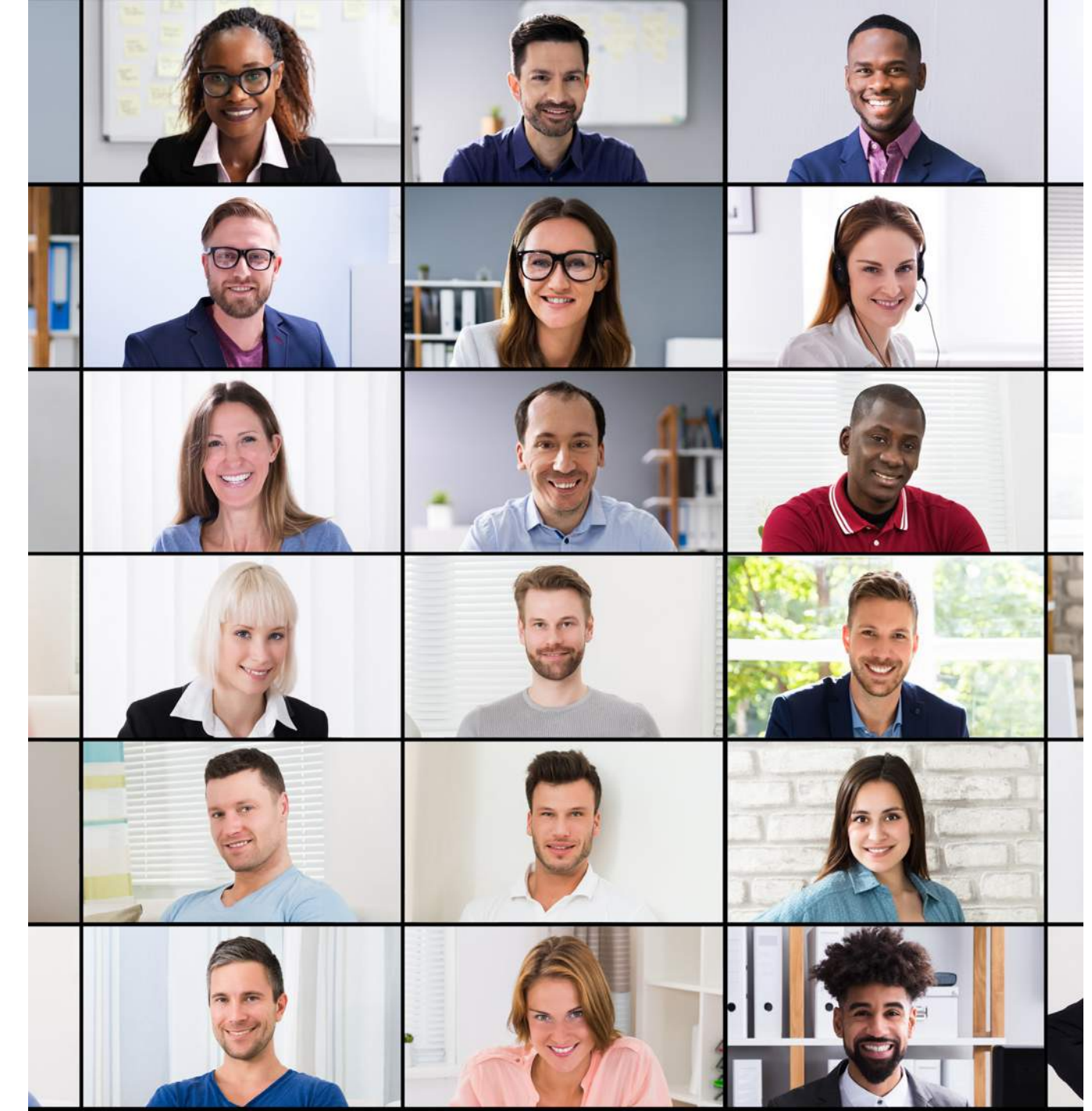
"A number of staff are already reporting they wish to continue working from home."

Home Working Insights

Supporting home working

- All clients **reported a need to support home working** and **recognised the importance of providing the technology, equipment and appropriate IT training** required.

- Employees were assisted with setting up and using video conferencing software.

- Second screens and ergonomic task chairs for the home were common equipment needs, many ordering equipment direct from suppliers.

Staying connected

- Many teams now **communicate more closely.**

- However, cross-departmental and cross-team collaboration has been lost. **Chance meetings in the office canteen, tea point and in the open workspace are missing.**

- Some organisations have introduced **virtual chance encounters** via Zoom or similar, to encourage random collaboration between teams and departments. The meetings are 10 minutes long and include between 6-8 staff, selected on a random basis, and they have been positively received.

A softer approach to communication

- There has been an effort to **establish a sense of personal touch to communication**. The CEO of one client has been randomly calling staff members and teams on a daily basis, just to 'have a chat', as well as to talk over the response of the business.

- Another client has introduced weekly updates from the Chairman, part work and part social, including Netflix recommendations.

Changes to meetings

- **Staggered meeting times** have been introduced to **avoid peak online traffic.** Meetings for one business start at quarter past the hour.

- Video calls require **punctuality.** 'Always a bit late' culture has had to disappear.

- Most clients observed that larger team **meetings and training sessions of 10 or more have been a challenge** and are difficult to successfully manage via video conference platforms.

"We expected the novelty of working from home to disappear after a while. We're now beginning to see those in greater isolation starting to struggle – single parents, people living on their own or in a flatshare, often in the city, without access to a garden or other outdoor space."

Home working insights

Productivity

- Despite some initial grumbling, **most staff are happy and able to work to the same standard as before.**

- Flex hours were introduced to accommodate work/life for those with home lives that interfere with work demands.

- A number of clients noted specific **improvements in productivity** in certain teams, departments and processes **as a result of home working.**

- In particular, **increased levels of client engagement** by the Sales/BD teams were reported.

- **Staff who work in an autonomous way,** managing their own workload, **have continued to work successfully,** as have those who already worked remotely and collaboratively in a team.

- **Staff that work in a chain of command structure,** such as administration and support staff, have in some circumstances not been able to work, or **have worked less effectively.**

- **Personal preferences, physical environment and circumstances play a key role** in how easily staff have been able to adapt to home working.

- Some have found the transition easier than others, reporting **improved quality of life,** whilst others have found it **difficult being at home, missing the social connection and team discussions at work.**

- There has been a need to **encourage breaks and reinforce moving away from the desk during the day,** as you would do in the office. Some staff felt the need to remain present all day.

- The **key issues for home working are broadband reliability and access to a quiet work area** without distractions and disruptions.

- The individual physical workspace available at home has perhaps surprisingly not been an issue, highlighting that **desk size isn't critical.** Staff have been working successfully on tables substantially smaller than their office workstation.
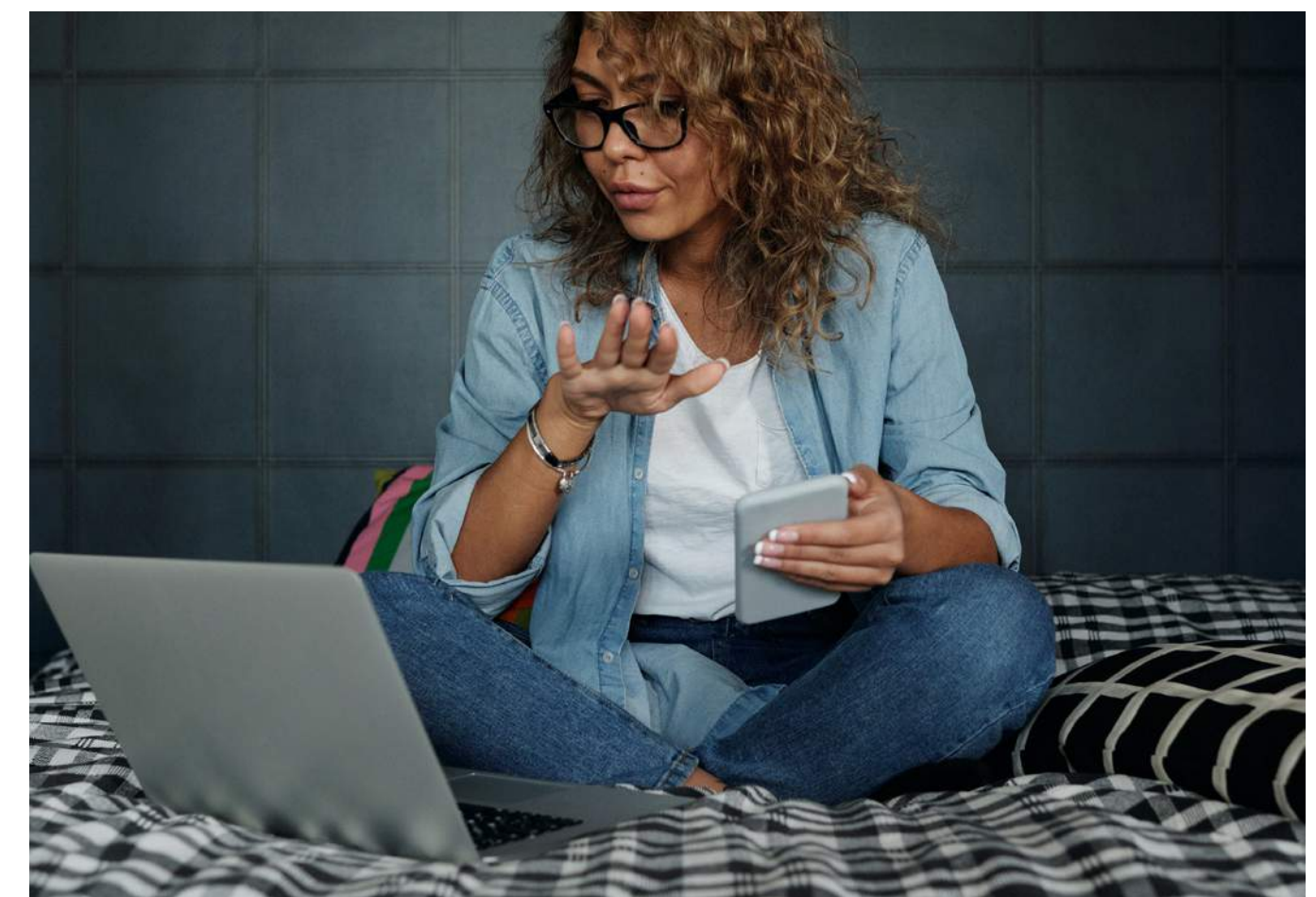
Home working insights

"There is nothing I feel I'm missing. I'm not feeling cut off or out of touch."

Practical considerations

- **Data security has been a key concern,** whether due to communication apps such as Zoom, storage and access in the cloud of highly sensitive data, or where the work of Junior staff in particular is compromised due to lack of control over their physical environment at home.

- Some departments weren't able to work from home at the start. They have adapted, some are now able to work much faster.

- Some **larger, logistical software and process/management projects have been delayed,** awaiting implementation due to the complexities and risks of implementing change during this period.

New insights and perspectives

- Some staff have already **expressed interest in working from home on a permanent basis**

- All clients reported that their **minds have been opened to the benefits and opportunities of home working,** whereas previously they had not considered it an option

- Senior management in particular had historically resisted home/remote working, but are now more open to the idea, **having witnessed that it can work, and even increase productivity**

- Home working has led to an **increased sense of personal autonomy and control,** but not across the board. Some people have really stepped up and shone, but others, 4-5% have been disappointing as to their reaction toward home working, exploiting the opportunity.

- Companies are **learning more about their staff** as a result of video calling: meeting their children, partner, pets, learning where and how they live, their hobbies and interests.

"*I'm working as long a day if not longer than I used to, but it has totally changed my perspective on working from home.*"

RETURNING TO
A COVID COMPLIANT WORKSPACE

**Physical workspace & Covid compliance**

- Some clients have kept their offices open, with **skeleton staff allowing access in a controlled but permitted fashion** only. Others closed their offices entirely, with **access only by appointment and with permission.** In some organisations, **a small number of staff have continued to work in the office due to preference and proximity.**

- A number of clients expressed a **desire to return to the office,** but on the basis that **the longer term goals of the organisation may change the way people work,** allowing for varying degrees of home/remote working.

- Most clients emphasised that they don't want or need to rush back to the office, noting that they **would rather learn from others' experience** than be pioneers.

- **Single largest issue of concern and risk** noted by all clients **is not about working in the office, but about getting to the office**, the commute via public transport.

- To minimise traffic issues at the tea point, some have been thinking about re-introducing the tea lady with a trolley

"Change in working behaviours has created opportunities to streamline and update processes much faster than previously thought possible. This has raised questions about why change is normally frustratingly slow."

Returning to a Covid Compliant Workspace

- Clients in multi-tenant buildings have been working with the landlord to **develop access strategies, such as a 'one way' lift system.**

- There were **shared concerns but differing views on how to manage the covid compliant workspace.** Some were **concerned about staff "not behaving" or following guidelines,** whilst others were **guided by trust and a philosophy that compliance should not be over-mandated:** "Provide individuals with responsibility and autonomy"

- It is recognised that **some interventions are almost purely psychological,** such as perspex screens around desks, for example.

- All clients talked about a **phased return to the office,** initially at 25% of capacity, up to 50% but no more, each saying they had already been considering strategies for stretching the working day into shifts, and introducing Week 1/Week 2 working patterns.

Capacity

Covid-19 Compliance

Design layout reflects organisational needs
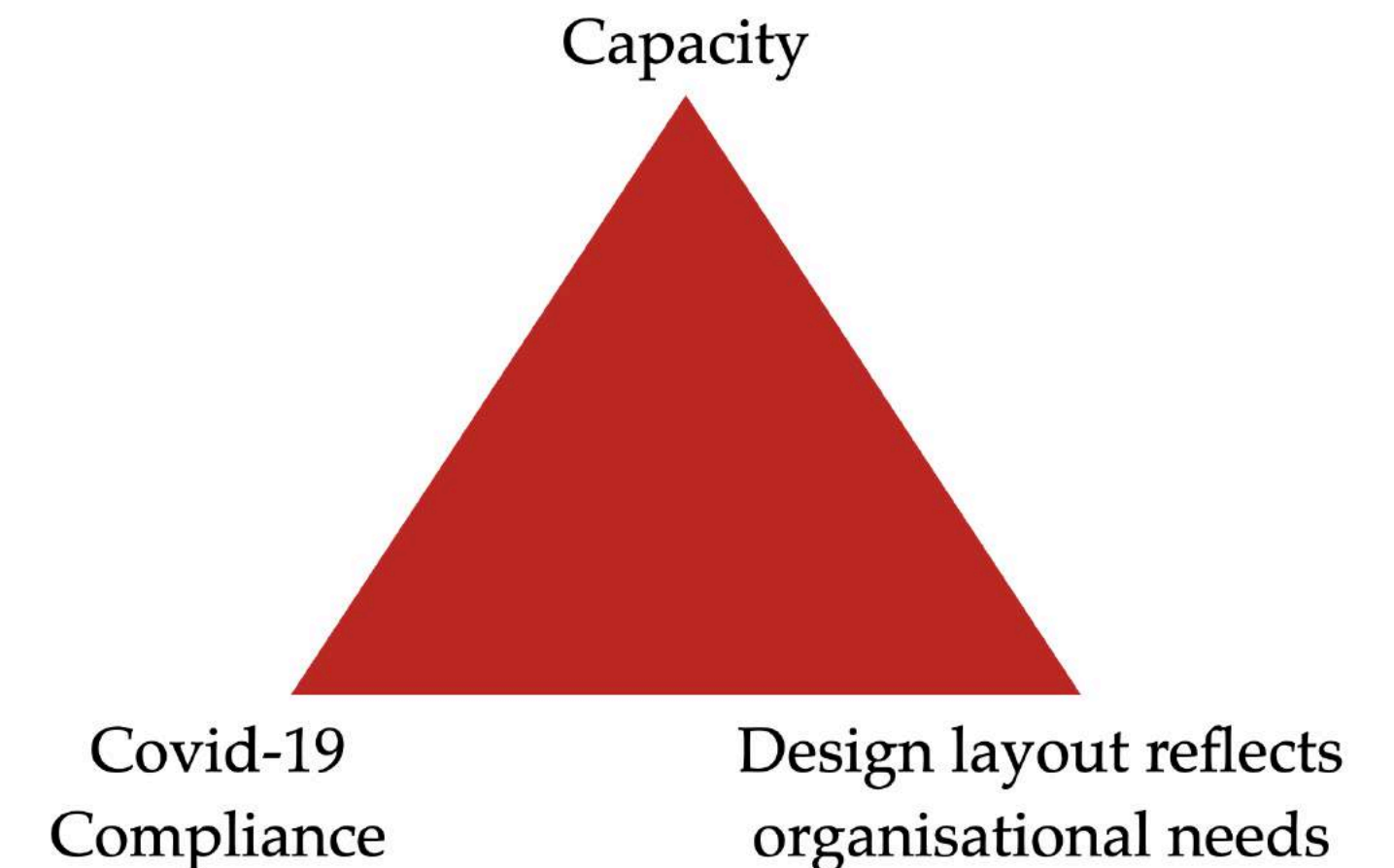
"Our large Central London office is a luxury we don't need."

Post Covid Workplace

"This experience will change the value we place on our office."

Rethinking space use and needs

- Most if not all clients are **"already thinking about how much space is needed."**

- Some companies may opt for **greater spatial flexibility instead of expansion,** considering things like letting a floor or part floor of their current occupation, and shorter, more flexible lease breaks across different floors.

- The **open plan workspace may not be a Covid compliant option** in the longer term, or at least it may need to be heavily adapted to suit.

A place where we belong

- Despite the space use reconsiderations mentioned by almost everyone interviewed, many are also realising that "There is value in having a place where we belong."

Post Covid Workplace

Connectivity in the Covid era

- "We need to find **substitutes for physical connectivity.** How do we replace sitting around the lunch table, enjoying the company of others? How do we collaborate and get inspired?"

Changing views on work: outcomes vs time

- "Is work something we do from this time of the day to that? Maybe we could look at work differently. **Could we manage outcomes rather than time?** Focus on productivity, create a hybrid office."
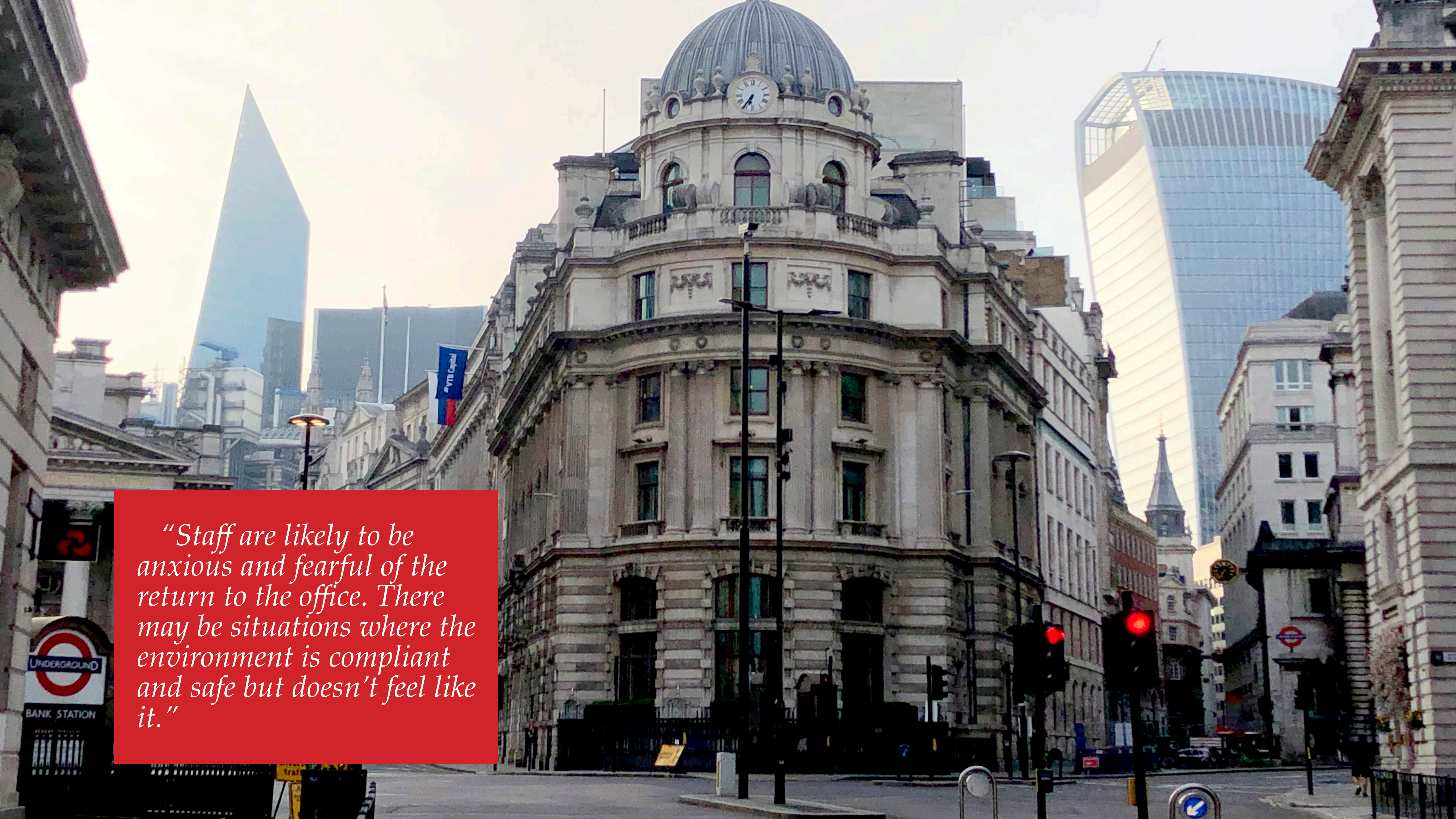
Home and work are not the same

- "**Transitioning between home and work means understanding that these things are different.** Home working isn't the same as working in the office. We miss the down time we used to have at home to think."

"There is value in having a place where we belong."

"Could we manage outcomes rather than time?"

"Staff are likely to be anxious and fearful of the return to the office. There may be situations where the environment is compliant and safe but doesn't feel like it."

Recommendations

Where you are considering a return to the office, here's a quick (non-exhaustive) guide to what we've found so far, based on our own experience and from researching what others are doing.

- Around **40%** is surfacing as the **maximum percentage of staff that can return to occupy the existing workspace whilst maintaining compliance** with limited/no changes to your current layout.

- To achieve a greater number of compliant desk positions, **a balance needs to be sought between Capacity, Compliance and Organisational Layout** requirements (i.e. who sits where).

- **Simplicity** of approach. How you approach social distancing and how you re-enforce it **as simply as possible** will be key.

- **Communications.** It's critical anything you produce is **clear, concise, deliberate and supported with graphics,** as you will be asking staff to break long term habits. Illustrate beforehand the changes and efforts you made to become compliant, and **re-inforce messaging throughout the workspace**.

- **Being compliant may be a different problem than feeling safe.** Staff are likely to be anxious and fearful of the return to the office. **There may be situations where the environment is compliant and safe but doesn't feel like it.** Consider allowing staff to control, to a limited extent, where they want to add screens/hygiene stations, for example.

Questions?

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Recommendations

- **Red herrings.** Avoid over-investment in red herrings on Day One, for example, procurement of perspex screens or dividers. Our experience so far is that it's unlikely they will be needed for compliance if you can successfully manage and control access, decide where individuals work, shift working hours, etc. (unless you have staff that need to sit opposite one another). **Further interventions can always be added at a later date**, through preference.

- **Space.** You will likely be planning short term changes to accommodate staff within the office. Can any of the changes you propose test longer term goals, in a post Covid environment? Such as smaller workstations, a move to digital storage, or developing a more stabilised, longer term home working or agile working strategy. **Decisions you make now may substantially affect the amount of space you need.**

- **Cycling.** When more people return there will be more cycling, walking or running to work. **Consider how to manage and/or adapt existing bike parking and shower provisions.** Is there space to add more in the short / mid term?

- **Mental well-being.** Careful consideration needs to be applied to what could appear to be a new hostile work environment. **Check in with your staff at regular intervals, have a programme for support and referral.**

- **Issues.** Have a way to raise concerns if staff feel the workspace isn't secure, or if they see specific individuals transgressing the rules. **Should the workplace be 'policed', and if not, how should people report non-compliance?**

Questions?

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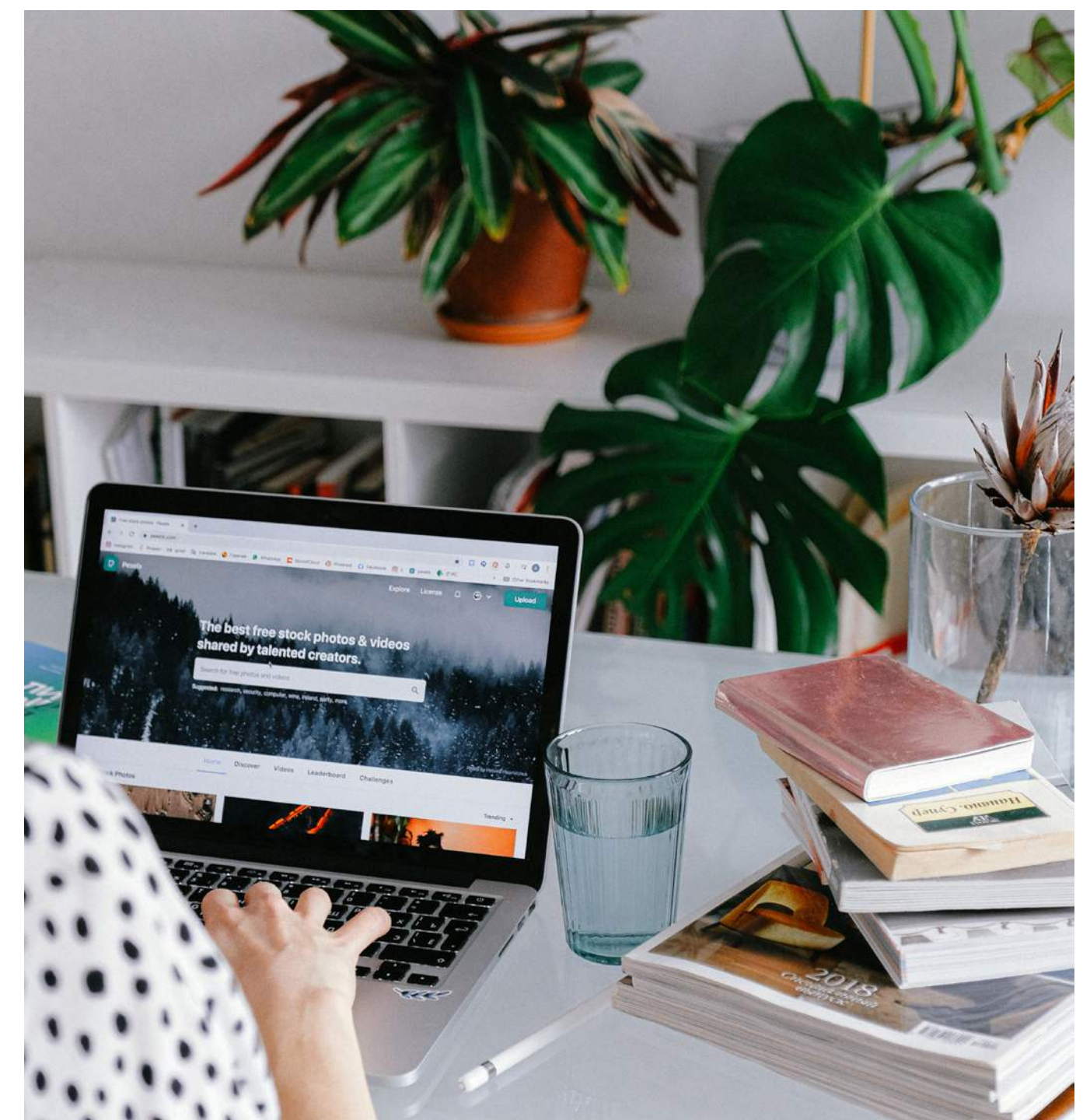
REDESIGNING WAYS TO WORK

We're Burtt-Jones & Brewer. An independent workplace design consultancy. Helping organisations and brands redesign the way they work.

With people, place and performance at the heart of all our successfully designed spaces, our passion lies in making workplaces… work.

If you require any further details or would just like a chat, give us a bell, drop us an email or nudge us on twitter.

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