



REOPENING The World's Workplaces

The Future Commute

JUNE 2020

CBRE

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers are spending their days in makeshift home offices, communicating with their colleagues via services like Zoom or Skype. While the pandemic may result in a long-term push to provide workers with more work-from-home options, people will ultimately begin to trickle back into the workplace, albeit one with a greater focus on the health and protection of employees. As people commuted in a variety of ways pre-pandemic, the same will likely be true in its aftermath. However, people and organizations must emphasize safety and personal health by adjusting the ways they get where they need to be.

Safer Commuting Today

The future commute will no doubt look a bit different than what we were accustomed to before COVID-19. According to the Chicago Tribune, returning to public transit is one of workers' top concerns—28 percent of workers who use public transit say they will seek alternate ways to get to work in the future.¹ To mitigate commuters' fears, cities are exploring new ways to encourage social distancing and sanitize high-occupancy areas like buses or train cars. For example, the Chicago Transit Authority is exploring technologies like ultraviolet light to supplement its existing cleaning regimen and encourage riders to return to their routines, as CTA ridership has dropped 80 percent since the start of the pandemic.² In addition, cities are considering new ways to increase safety in alignment with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, including cordoning off certain seating areas, reducing the maximum number of riders per vehicle and increasing service to help spread out ridership.³ We are also likely to see new innovations focused on encouraging health and safety when using public transit, such as touchless fare collection and smartphone apps that help riders decide the best time to travel. Face masks will remain a necessary part of their commute for the foreseeable future, as wearing a mask is the most effective way to reduce transmission of COVID-19.⁴ According to Jano Lieber, the Chief Development Officer for New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority, New York is looking at ways to provide vending machines for masks and other PPE, in addition to taking the entire bus and subway systems out of service each night to be thoroughly disinfected—something the MTA has never done previously.⁵

Many commuters are also likely to forgo public transit for the safety of their cars. Despite the potential increase in traffic, driving to work alone is another way to mitigate the spread of the virus. Employers can help commuters, as well, by allowing employees to stagger start times throughout the day, minimizing rush-hour traffic and reducing the overall commuting population at peak times. Although

commuting alone via car has decreased from 70 percent to 58 percent over the past 20 years, COVID-19 may usher in an era that sees a corresponding increase in solo car commutes, reversing recent boosts in train and bus use.⁶

“The path towards a full economic recovery presents many challenges—most immediate of which is allowing people to return to work in a pandemic environment,” said Ronnie Gurion, Head of Uber for Business. “Workplaces are actively looking for new options that offer a sustainable alternative to traditional transportation. Using the Uber for Business dashboard to customize rideshare solutions that are tailored to workplace and employee needs, as well as local safety guidelines, can play a role in reimagining the commuting experience.”

As cities expand areas for pedestrians, cyclists also have increased commute options. Across the world, local governments are adding new bike lanes and encouraging a cycling commute as a way to protect employees from COVID-19, while also promoting health and wellness through daily exercise. For example, Oakland, California has closed 74 miles of streets for cyclists and pedestrians—cities like Seattle and Milan are looking for ways to reduce car use permanently post-pandemic. While cycling isn’t an option for everyone, it’s an excellent resource for those who live close to their offices. Especially if employers find ways to incentivize cycling to work in conjunction with greater public access to bikeshare programs and electronic bikes, increased access to cycling as a commute option shows a corresponding boost in demand.⁷

Commuter Solutions of Tomorrow

With COVID-19 still front of mind, it can be difficult to envision life beyond the current moment. However, a vision of the future commute doesn’t have to focus solely on ways to make traveling more solitary or sanitary. One possibility for changing the way we think about commuting is the expansion of autonomous vehicles. Although AVs are still in the early stages of development and testing, CBRE Research and CB Insights expect them to account for 15 percent of U.S. vehicle miles traveled by 2030. Metropolitan areas with easily navigable road systems, like Phoenix, Dallas/Fort Worth and Las Vegas, are ideal candidates for the ascendancy of AVs. Progressive cities with large populations could also conceivably limit urban core driving to allow for AVs exclusively (but, of course, this would be a long-term project with lots of considerations around safety, access and infrastructure). These vehicles would also limit the need for corporate headquarters to be near public transit, as commuters could use them to create their own customizable point-to-point journey. While most current AVs still include manual controls, the driverless vehicles of tomorrow will likely be optimized for the comfort of passengers, eliminating the need for steering wheels and other human-operated controls altogether. Additionally, future AVs present a variety of travel options for the elderly, disabled or anyone else with mobility limitations, as these vehicles will offer space and accessibility beyond what current vehicles can offer—wheelchair accommodation, Braille buttons, or simply more space for people to perform tasks unrelated to driving. Similar to commuter trains, workers could find additional productive hours going to

and from the office in AVs, whether that productivity relates to their work or hobbies and other personal development. For example, imagine a daily commute where an autonomous vehicle picks you up for work. In this vehicle, you not only have a solid WiFi connection, but also a sizable workspace that allows you to get a head start on your work for the day. By the time you reach the office, you have already handled administrative tasks like responding to emails, allowing you to jump right into more meaningful work upon arrival. These vehicles wouldn't only cater to increased work productivity—cross-country trips would be much easier in AVs that include beds and other comforts to make lengthy car trips more manageable. While there are no certainties about the use of AVs as part of our daily commutes, it does align with the importance of employers proactively meeting the needs and demands of their employees, who have a variety of lifestyles and preferences.

As we look to the future, the reality is that while some of habits around and approaches to commuting may change—especially regarding mass transit—the acute pandemic panic will fade and people will return to some sense of normalcy. However, as we think about what commuting looks like going forward, we can use what we've learned from this crisis to improve our commutes permanently, in the same way that organizations like Host have sought to improve the workplace environment.

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