OFFICE PODS – A REMOTE WORKING SOLUTION SET TO TAKE SEED IN CHINA

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the end of lockdown in China, new possibilities for working have been realised. The work from home experience has allowed many office employees in China a choice of working venue during any given weekday. Thinking, culture and habits concerning work have also been transformed, with many employees looking to work away from the office on at least one day a week.

Moving forward, many office employees in China want alternatives to their present work settings. They also want more control in how and where they work, and they want to experience more variety in how they work and more variety in where they work.

Office pods could be a solution to these posed issues. They offer a space where an individual user can focus on their work, can take a private call or participate in a conference call or webinar. The same space, if large enough, can also be used by a group of users to congregate for a meeting, for a discussion or for a brainstorming session.

Office pods can come in a range of sizes and can be customised in terms of:

- Interior design;
- Ergonomics;
- Exterior and interior colours;
- Interior and exterior materials;
- Furniture;
- Soundproofing;
- Power supply;
- Lighting;
- Airconditioning, and;
- Incorporated technology (computers, Wi-Fi, video conferencing systems, etc).

Well-designed office pods also incorporate a number of features that are designed to:

- Ease the nature of work for the user;
- Promote user health;
- Elevate user wellness and wellbeing, and;
- Boost user productivity.

Office pods can be housed in many locations around a city. They can be located in office building lobbies, in shopping centres, in coffee shops, in hotels, in residential communities, in airports, in train stations, in public squares or simply on the street.

Once a network of office pods is established around a city, a reserve-and-use-per-minute/ pay-as-go-per-minute system could be utilised by user members to use a particular office pod at any given time.

Finally, from a property landlord's perspective, the advantages that an office pod bring are clear. Three examples are:

- Office pods can occupy vacant space and generate rental income;
- Office pods can add a further value dimension to the property by offering people a quality third place to work from, and;
- Having an office pod located within your property makes your property that much more attractive to people.

2 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak has been an unprecedented event in China. Its impact has been felt across geographies, society, the economy and the property market in the country. This report looks at the concept of office pods and provides an understanding of:

- How the COVID-19 outbreak has impacted home/remote working in China, and;
- An indication of 'what's next?' for remote working and office pods in particular in China.

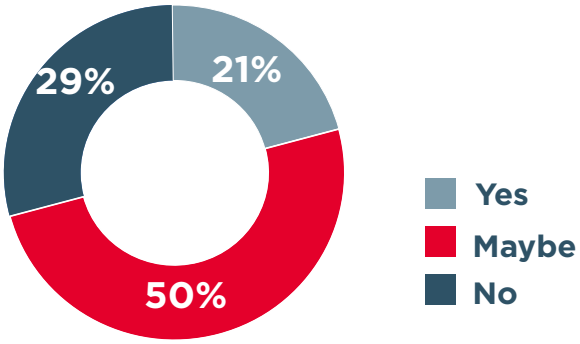
3 HOME/REMOTE WORKING IN CHINA – COVID-19 IMPACT

During the lockdown period in China in early 2020, there was a lot of uncertainty about the virus, its spread, its impact on the economy and its impact on our daily lives. However, in the course of only days, swift actions were taken to ensure processes were automated to enable remote working, and life and living adapted to a new reality.

Since the end of lockdown in China, new possibilities for working have been realised. The work from home experience has allowed many office employees in China a choice of working venue during any given weekday. Thinking, culture and habits concerning work have also been transformed, with many employees looking to work away from the office on at least one day a week.

Figure 1:
China companies: Will you adopt a home/ remote working business platform for your employees? (February 2020)

Source: Cushman & Wakefield Office Agency, Cushman & Wakefield Research



This perception has not gone unnoticed by companies operating in China. According to a Cushman & Wakefield survey conducted in February 2020, 71% of those companies suggested that they would or maybe would adopt a home/remote working business platform for their employees (Figure 1).

Since this survey was taken, employees have returned to work, businesses have returned to a semblance of normality and China's economy has returned to positive growth. Even though the vast majority of office employees are now working from their respective offices on any given working day, there are still many workers who have adopted a hybrid working system of working from the office, working from home and working from a remote third space.

4 OFFICE PODS IN CHINA – WHAT'S NEXT?

Moving forward, many office employees in China want alternatives to their present work settings. They also want more control in how and where they work, and they want to experience more variety in how they work and more variety in where they work.

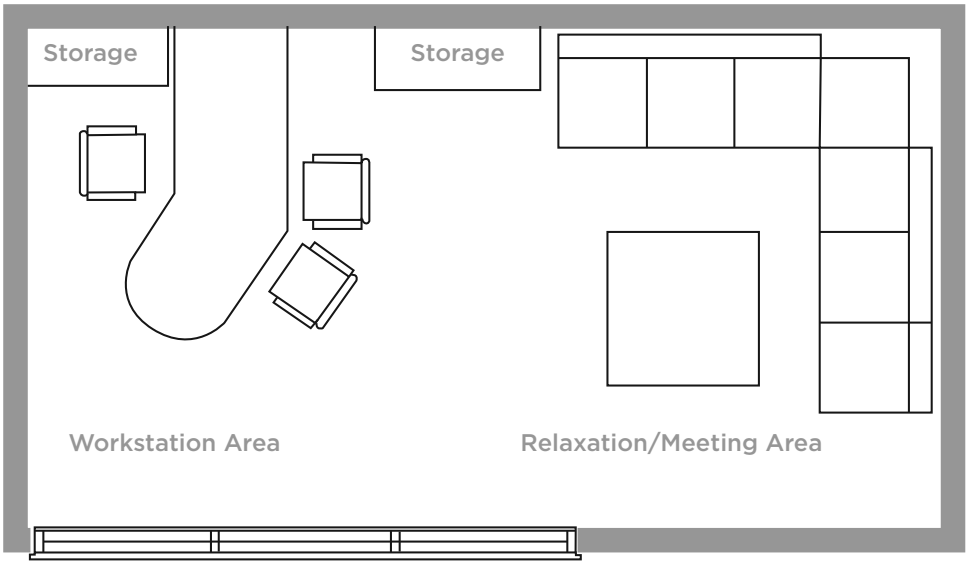
Office pods could be a solution to these posed issues. They offer a space where an individual user can focus on their work, can take a private call or participate in a conference call or webinar. The same space, if large enough, can also be used by a group of users to congregate for a meeting, for a discussion or for a brainstorming session.

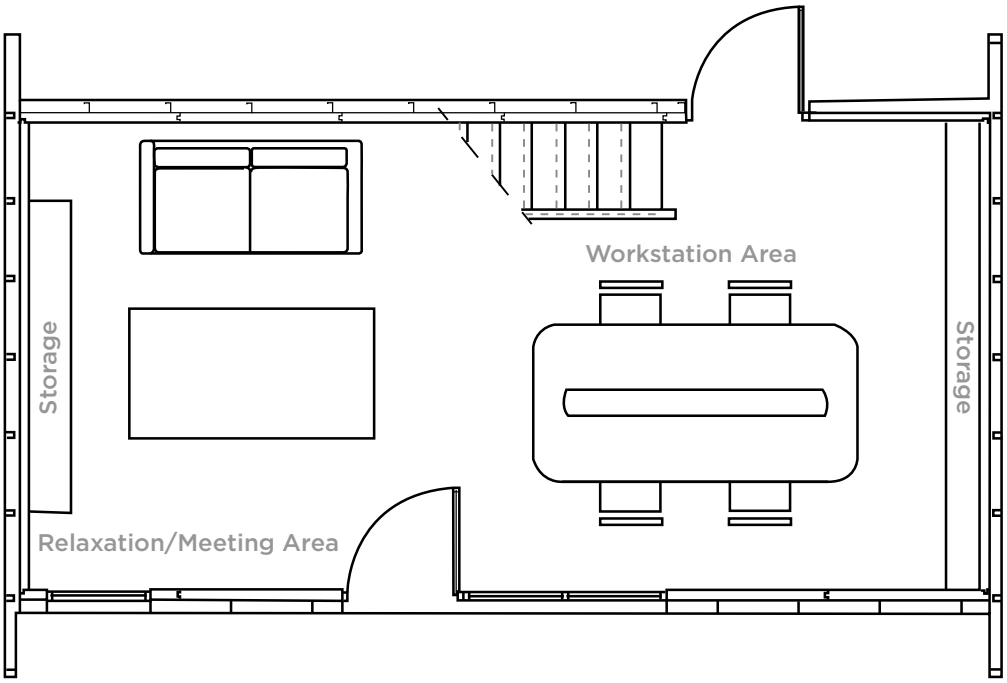
Office pods can come in a range of sizes and can be customised in terms of:

- Interior design;
- Ergonomics;
- Exterior and interior colours;
- Interior and exterior materials;
- Furniture;
- Soundproofing;

Figure 2:
Two simple mid-to-large sized office pod layout plans

Source: Cushman & Wakefield Research





- Power supply;
- Lighting;
- Airconditioning, and;
- Incorporated technology (computers, Wi-Fi, video conferencing systems, etc).

Well-designed office pods also incorporate a number of features that are designed to:

- Ease the nature of work for the user;
- Promote user health;
- Elevate user wellness and wellbeing, and;
- Boost user productivity (Figure 2).

When examining the four points listed immediately above, examples of selected features which can be integrated into well-designed office pods and which have a positive impact are:

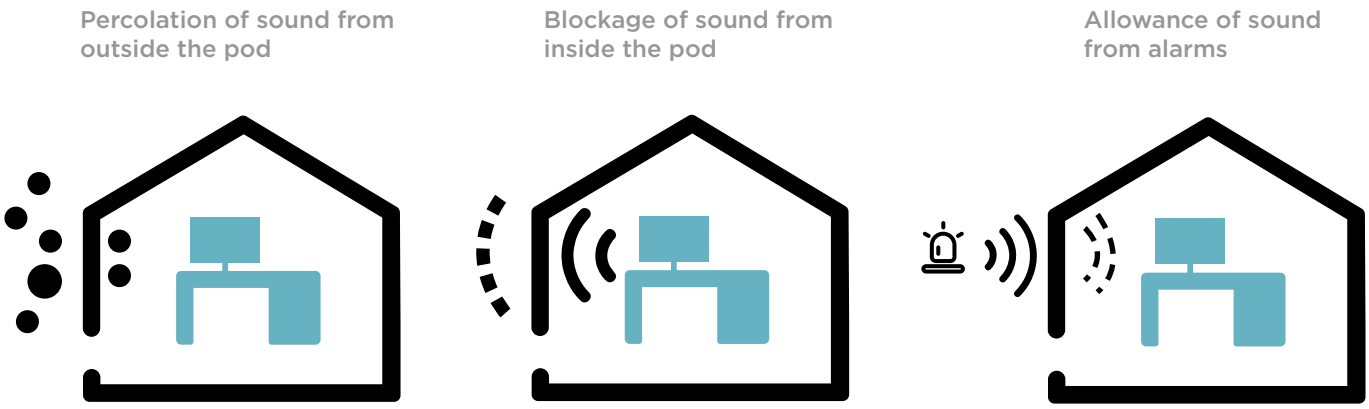
- Suitable soundproofing to ease the nature of work for users;
- Clean air and the usage of safe materials for the betterment of user health;
- Good ergonomic design, thermal comfort and lighting to boost user wellness and wellbeing, and;
- Appropriate colours to promote user productivity.

Suitable soundproofing to ease the nature of work for users

Working in an open office, in a coffee shop and sometimes at home can be distracting given the noise levels evident. A well-designed office pod is designed in such a way as to provide a quiet working environment, but not to totally block sound, because that is unnatural and can be dangerous (in the case of a fire and the sound of a fire alarm). A well-designed office pod will allow sound generated in an office pod to stay in the pod but at the same time, will allow sound from the outside to percolate in, albeit at a reduced sound level. This will allow the user to better concentrate on the work task/s at hand and in doing so, ease the general nature of work (Figure 3).

Figure 3:
Office pods and the right sound of silence

Source: Cushman & Wakefield Research



Clean air and the usage of safe materials for the betterment of user health

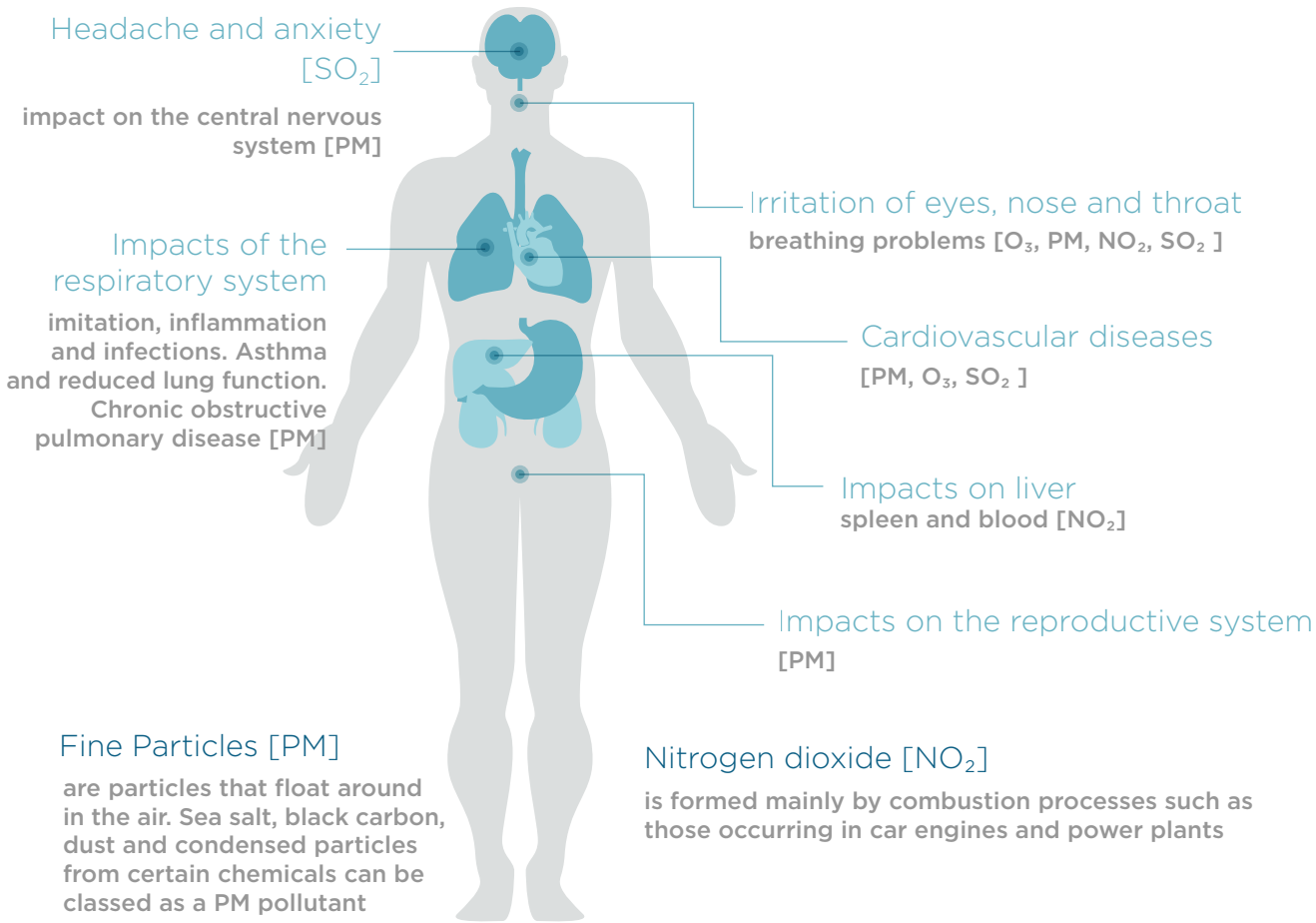
Inhaling clean air is critical for sustained life. We expect air to be clean, but we often don't question the condition of the air we take in. However, in recent times in China, there is an increased awareness of the relationship between health and poor air quality in many Chinese cities (Figure 4).

Certain health effects may appear immediately after one exposure or multiple exposures to a contaminant. These can involve eye, nose and throat discomfort. They can also include headaches, dizziness and fatigue. Other health effects may appear years later. These effects can involve respiratory disease, heart disease or cancer and can either prove debilitating or fatal. In fact, according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, air pollution causes 200,000 early deaths each year in the U.S.

Polluted air can be emitted from a number of different sources, from agriculture, from factories, from traffic or from the built urban environment. Polluted air can work its way into any property via a poorly run and/or designed ventilation system. Indoor air quality can also suffer from indoor materials emitting volatile organic compounds (VOCs), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and microbial pathogens, which can all lead to sick building syndrome (SBS), days off work and lower levels of work productivity.

Figure 4:
Some effects of air pollution on the human body

Source: learnaboutair.com, Cushman and Wakefield Research



Well-designed office pods can mitigate outdoor- and indoor-sourced air pollution by incorporating air conditioners with the right air purification filtration systems and by fitting out the internal space with materials that meet the highest health and safety standards.

Good ergonomic design, thermal comfort and lighting to boost user wellness and wellbeing

Office pods should be comfortable places to work in. Comfort mitigates stress, injury and ill health. On this note, it is very important for an office pod to have good ergonomics, thermal comfort and lighting to ensure office pod user wellbeing and work output are maximised.

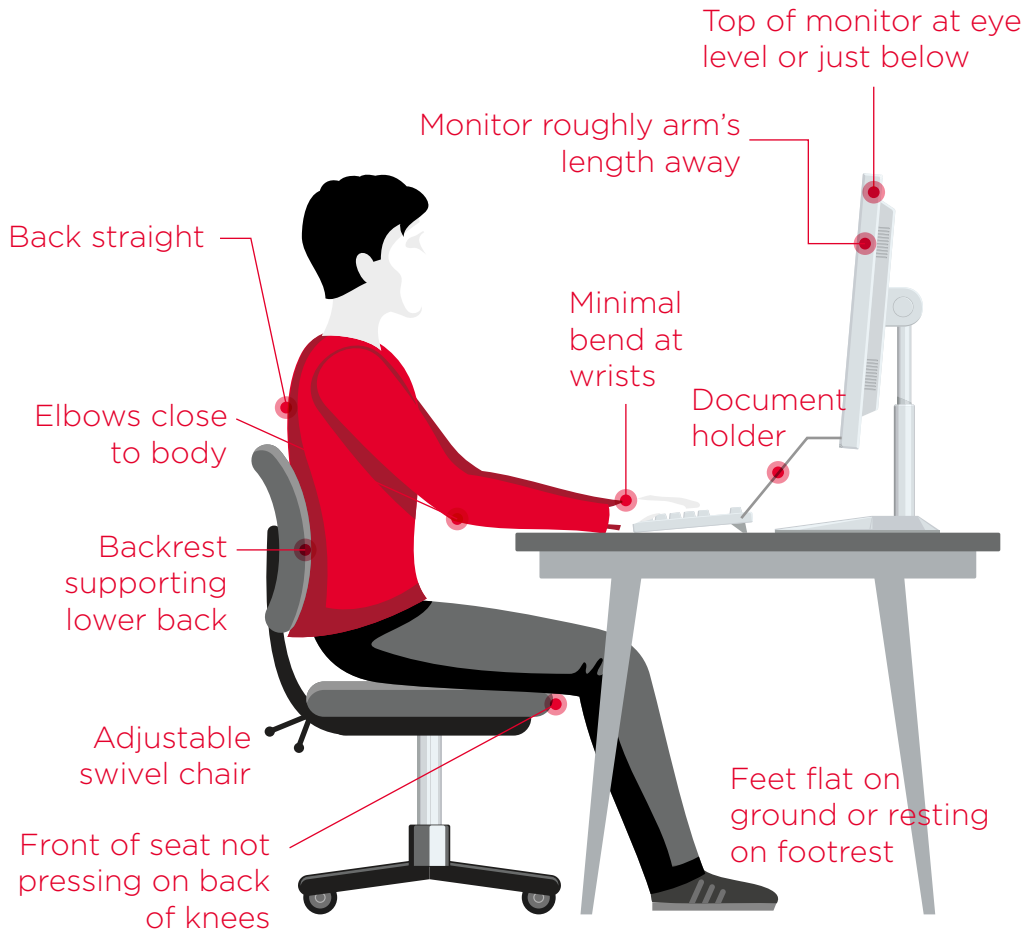
Ergonomics can be maximised by providing well designed furniture (Figure 5).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the U.S., in 2014 the ratio of musculoskeletal and nervous systems disorders, such as back and neck pain, among the working population was 31.9 newly diagnosed disorders per 10,000 full-time workers. In 2014, the median days away from work due to these disorders was 13.

Well-designed office pods can also promote movement and change in body posture with

Figure 5:
Workstation ergonomics: The ideal set up

Source: myDr.com, Cushman & Wakefield Research



installed furniture and equipment allowing work to be conducted while standing and while in a seated position. Also included in many well-thought-out office pods are footrests, active chairs and anti-fatigue mats.

As for thermal comfort, according to WELL, 'six primary personal and environmental variables contribute to an occupant's thermal comfort:

- Air speed;
- Dry bulb temperature;
- Radiant temperature;
- Humidity;
- Metabolic rate, and;
- Clothing or other insulation...

...all of which interact to create a subjective, individualised response'. Being subjective, it is also important to take a holistic several-strategy approach when looking to augment thermal comfort in an office pod. By doing so, the designed office pod will be able to cover most, if not all, bases when it comes to working comfort within the pod.

Lastly, light is essentially electromagnetic radiation which lies within a certain segment of the electromagnetic spectrum. Visible light is perceptible to the human eye and is a key component in the sense of sight. Light enters the eye and the information is then sent to the brain. Daytime vision, peripheral vision, vision in dim lighting environments and colour discernment are all facilitated by the eye and by the brain. Additionally, light also facilitates the circadian rhythm, or 'body clock' on a 24-hour basis.

Today, lighting codes (such as the guidelines produced by the Illuminating Engineering Society (IES)) offer illuminance suggestions for various internal areas of a property, including an office pod workspace. These codes ensure the brightness of light in the internal areas is at a certain level to make sure eyestrain and headaches are minimised. If office pods in China are illuminated to the right level, then greater user comfort, satisfaction and productivity will be realised (Figure 6).

Figure 6:
The benefits of good office lighting

Source: Eden Springs, Cushman & Wakefield Research

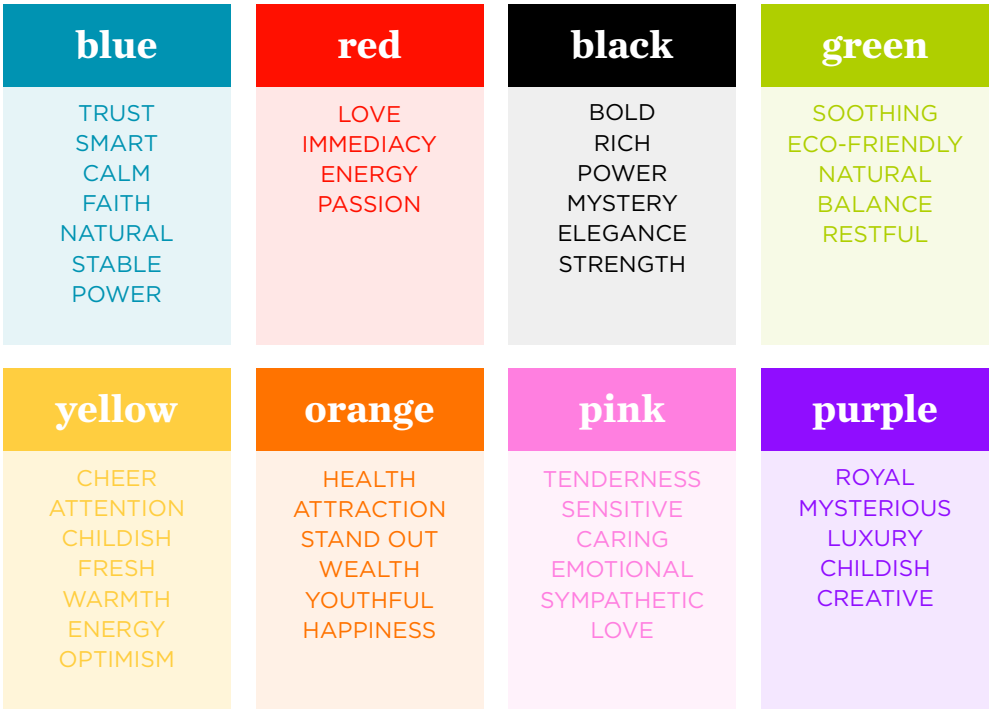
Appropriate colours to promote user productivity

Careful consideration also needs to be given to colour schemes within an office pod space. Colours affect mood and can have an effect on work. Blue, for example, is a natural colour with a calming influence – a good colour to have in a relaxation space (Figure 7). Yellow is full of energy and optimism and can help stimulate the mind – an appropriate colour to have in a space where quick ideas need to be generated.

When considering the office pod internal space colour, a simple neutral colour like white can be used as the standard natural interior colour. However, special spotlight lighting could be installed to offer the user the ability to change the colour of the interior to suit the nature of work carried out in the pod at any given time and thus help to promote user productivity.

Figure 7:
Colours and emotions

Source: Cushman and Wakefield Research



A solution for office pod users, companies and property landlords:

Finally, office pods can be housed in many locations around a city. They can be located in office building lobbies, in shopping centres, in coffee shops, in hotels, in residential communities, in airports, in train stations, in public squares or simply on the street.

Once a network of office pods is established around a city, a reserve-and-use-per-minute/ pay-as-go-per-minute system could be utilised by user members to use a particular office pod at any given time. The user, once having become a member of the office pod network, simply has to use his or her mobile phone to scan an entry door to gain access to the pod and to start using if for focused working, for a conference call, for a brainstorming meeting or even for a livestreaming event.

What's more, once the office pod network has scale around a city, the number of third places from which a user member can work from increases. With work location choice increased, a user member does not need to rush back to the office from another part of the city every time they have a meeting or every time they have to submit a piece of work on time. They can conveniently conduct their work from the nearest available office pod.

This convenience will not only be beneficial for the individual user but will also be of benefit to the user's company and as such, it may well be worth for a company to consider going for a corporate membership package for office pod usage for many of their employees if there is a required need.

From a property landlord's perspective, the advantages that an office pod bring are clear. Three examples are:

- Office pods can occupy vacant space and generate rental income;
- Office pods can add a further value dimension to the property by offering people a quality third place to work from, and;
- Having an office pod located within your property makes your property that much more attractive to people, and four examples are:

    a. If located in an office building lobby, the added office pod offering will make the building that much more attractive to tenants;

    b. If located in a shopping centre, the added office pod offering will make the mall that much more attractive to customers;

    c. If located in a hotel, the added office pod offering will make the hotel that much more attractive to both overnight-stay guests and day visitors, and;

    d. If located in a residential property, the added office pod offering will make the property that much more attractive to either buyers or tenants.

5 KEY TAKEAWAYS

Office pods are a space where an individual user can focus on their work, can take a private call or participate in a conference call or webinar. The same space, if large enough, can also be used by a group of users to congregate for a meeting, for a discussion or for a brainstorming session.

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