

# Keeping things fresh

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## Lewis English explains how heating, ventilation and air conditioning can remain effective in the ever-changing modern workplace

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The way we work is changing. Co-working spaces are booming and staff in traditional offices demand flexibility to do their best work. But for landlords and employers, flexibility is not just about moving around the walls in an office: a building won't remain effective unless its heating and air conditioning systems are designed to respond to whatever changes come their way.

The design of heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) plays a vital role in creating the right conditions for staff to be productive and for a business to be successful. Careful planning needs to go into even the most typical office, as temperature fluctuations and poor-quality air can be major distractions.

Iain Kyle, Senior Design Consultant at mechanical services provider [361 Degrees](#), says the process begins with trying to make people as comfortable as possible. Businesses are becoming more aware of their environmental obligations, of the need to save energy to improve the bottom line, and of the trade-offs between initial outlay and long-term savings. But in the end, the focus must be on the occupants or the design will fail.

'It's not acceptable to have a budget-oriented approach at the expense of staff comfort any more. People expect a comfortable environment as a right, not a luxury,' says Kyle. 'I think one of the main challenges facing the industry is that it tends to isolate mechanical services rather than seeing the wider picture. If you have a poorly designed or installed system that creates a poor working environment, you end up with high staff turnover and low productivity.'

He adds: 'That small amount you saved on the air con or heating system has been swallowed up by recruitment costs, increased HR issues and lower profits due to decreased productivity. It seems like a stretch to come to that conclusion, but the facts are there.' Indeed, the [World Green Building Council](#) supports this assertion.

### Focus on flexibility

Of course, what constitutes the typical office is always changing. Flexible workspace is booming, with demand for co-working premises presenting an opportunity for landlords all over the UK. According to [Knight Frank](#), flexible office take-up in central London is now more than double the 10-year average.

Demand has been driven by small businesses, entrepreneurs and freelancers who previously worked from home. But the call for more flexible workspace is also coming from more traditional businesses, and building owners need to be prepared to offer premises that accommodate changes in layout. There is nothing radically new about quiet spaces, collaborative zones and hot-desks; the difference is staff who expect the layout and structure of an office to evolve alongside their working practices rather than waiting for a relocation or

complete refurbishment.

But this shift presents a challenge for HVAC designers, as new boilers and air conditioning systems cannot be installed every time a new lease is signed or an existing tenant needs to have the layout altered. An office might perfectly conform to guidelines the day it is opened, but the slightest change can affect the distribution of heat and fresh air, creating cold spots and draughts or driving up energy usage.

*But in the end, the focus must be on the occupants or the design is surely bound to fail*

One way these challenges can be mitigated, says Kyle, is by adopting [variable refrigerant flow](#) (VRF) air conditioning, which allows simultaneous heating and cooling in different areas. Flexible VRF can adapt to changes in the work being done, while a multifunctional approach prepares a building for potential new technology or upgrades.

'We need to design systems that aren't just intended for the first occupants of a building, but also the fifth, sixth or seventh,' he says. 'Putting up walls, changing internal workspace and introducing flexible areas can mean a system needs to be redesigned every time, unless you design for longevity and adaptability at the beginning.'

## **Ahead of the curve**

For landlords, the potential selling points are clear: to be able to offer flexibility, embracing a new world of work and empowering occupants because they can rely on the working environment to support their staff now and in the future. Workers are savvier about office space than ever, but they are not looking for gimmicks such as ping-pong tables and beanbags. They want energy-conscious environments that enable them to do their best work and stay healthy, so futureproofing is vital to building trust.

'As with all markets, it's about being ahead of the curve,' says Kyle. 'Is your building the cheapest to run, over its whole life? By having a system that not only works now but will work in the future, you become the easy solution. And people always choose the easy solution.'

**Lewis English is Director of Marketing and Change Management at [361 Degrees](#)**

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