

Lengthy lift waits could stall return to office work

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By [Anna Patty](#)

May 20, 2020 – 12.00am

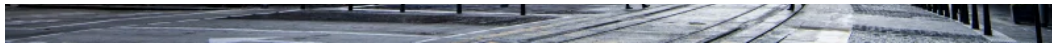


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Office workers could routinely wait for more than an hour to get into their buildings as social distancing regulations cause chaos for lift use in Sydney's high rises.

At present, offices across Sydney are sitting nearly empty. However, the [full-time return to school](#) on Monday and the easing of lockdown restrictions will see employers start bringing staff back to the office.





George Street was nearly empty on Tuesday, but the city is about to get busier. LOUISE KENNERLEY

A survey by Australia's largest office landlord Dexus of 700 tenants found just under a quarter of their workforces will return by the end of May. Up to 43 per cent will be back by June, 50 per cent by July and 71 per cent by August.

Many employees, however, will return to a work environment very different to the one they left before the shutdown.

Lift restrictions, limits on access to office kitchens and [hot desking curtailments](#) are some of the measures being enforced. Other new features will include social distancing floor markings and the staggering of work hours to reduce the number of people in the office at any given time.

Management of lifts is among the trickiest scenarios facing thousands of companies and government departments. Queuing for lifts in lobbies and foyers has the potential to stall office entry at the peak entry time between 8am and 9am.

Kevin George, head of office for Dexus, said it would potentially take two to three hours to move people into its Australia Square Tower at full occupancy of about 2500 people. The wait time could be reduced to more than one hour at half occupancy.

With 16 lifts and social distancing measures in place, only about 32 people at a time will be able to embark on the two-minute lift journey.

Mr George said no more than half of a high-rise office could be occupied with tenants observing physical distancing requirements, based on Ernst and Young modelling and other estimates.



Dexus head of office Kevin George says lift wait times in towers like Australia Square could be more than one hour because of social distancing measures. PETER BRAIG

He said [social distancing requirements for Qantas passengers](#) who would be allowed to travel sitting next to each other while wearing masks were inconsistent with social distancing restrictions in office buildings.

"We need a greater level of consistency around transmission risks," he said.

Safe Work Australia has advised employers to ensure workers maintain 1.5 metres of distance when travelling in lifts "where possible". It also recommends floor markings and queuing systems in lift waiting areas.

Property Council of Australia chief executive Ken Morrison said building owners and managers needed more certainty around Safe Work Australia's guidelines.

"We need to get it right, otherwise Australia's return to work will be left stalled in the lift lobbies and foyers of our office buildings," he said.

"We also need to ensure the guidance aligns, where possible, with advice being prepared on the use of public transport which will also be critical in supporting the return to offices."

Public servants returning to work for the NSW government's icare agency on Kent Street will have their temperature taken before starting a shift.

An icare spokeswoman said lift access would also be restricted according to social distancing measures.

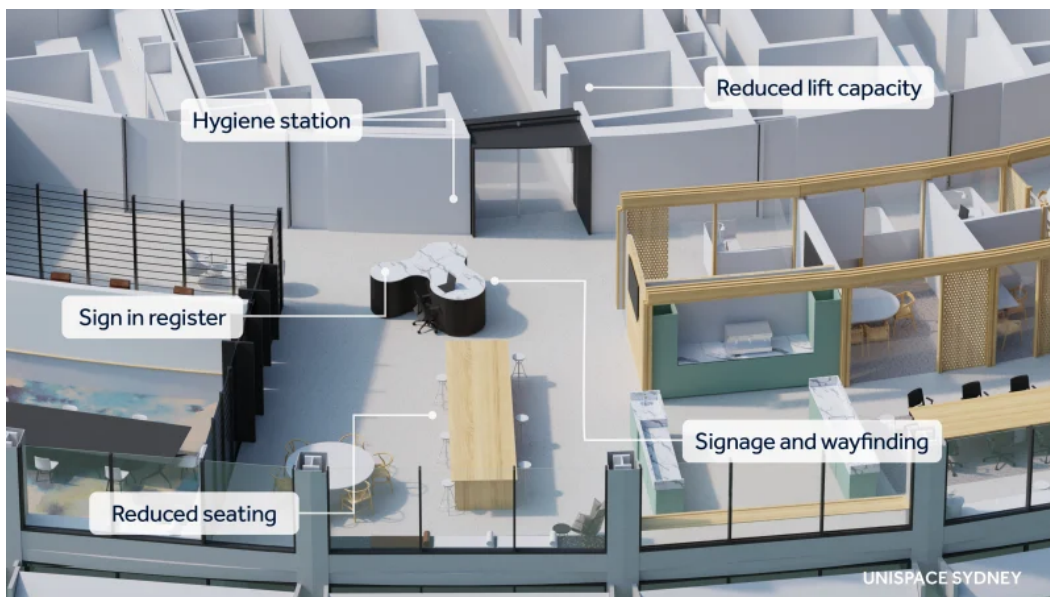
The NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet said public service workers who were not on the front line were "strongly urged to play their part in reducing demand on public transport by working from home where possible, using alternative modes of transport, and staggering start and finish times".

4.8 million people around the world have been diagnosed with COVID-19 with 1.8 million of those cases recovered.

Westpac said staff would slowly return to work in phases, with a mix of people working in the office and from home. The Commonwealth Bank of Australia said staff would return to work in stages. One team of workers would stay at home while others returned to the office and the teams would rotate.

Mirvac chief executive officer Susan Lloyd-Hurwitz said employees were not expected back into offices until June at the earliest.

"For each of the offices, it will be a staged return, and will include staggered start and end times, and different teams working on different days to manage risks and capacity constraints," she said.



Unispace's prediction of the post-pandemic office.

Simon Pole from office design company Unispace said many logistical barriers were preventing a smooth return to the office.

"This includes public transport, building lift restrictions, limited cafes and lunch spots, restricted pantry and kitchens in the office, and reduced collaboration space," he said. "So we are predicting that the return to work will be a gradual increase from now until December."

PwC partner Sean Gregory said about 20 per cent of its 8000 staff who have been working remotely would return to work in offices from early June. "We will be having staggered return of people partly because of the public transport issue and partly because of the lift issue," he said. "Masks will be available for everybody but won't be mandatory."

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