



Winter is coming - and so are hundreds of millions of germs to the workplace

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Richard Andrews

Director at Inspiration Office (Pty) Ltd

** Shared office space trend giving rise to greater infection rate*

** 72% of people go to work sick*

** Study showed more than 10 million germs on average desk*

** Antimicrobial materials growing in popularity*

As winter approaches South African businesses will face an onslaught of germs - and not just from people but from desk 'germtraps' too.

Richard Andrews, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy with head offices in Johannesburg, said that South African companies face losing millions of productive hours because of sickness this winter.

“Germs are everywhere, it’s a fact of life. Also known as microbes, bacteria, bugs and now even superbugs, various types of germs live within us, on us and all around us.

“Many of them keep us healthy and alive, but others pose threats to our wellbeing if our bodies cannot manage them.”

Andrews notes that according to a Lancaster University study, 72% of people report going to work when they are sick.

“What most people don’t realise is that it’s not just germs from people that spread to colleagues - office surfaces and materials used in the office space can be potent germ transmitters too.

“Germs are loiterers. They can live and thrive on all kinds of surfaces, including — and especially — desks in the workplace. Many office materials harbour germs making them as infectious as a sneezing colleague when you consider 80% of infections can be transmitted by touch, according to the WebMD website.”

Andrews added that the problem is likely to be exacerbated by the fact that nearly 40% of the workforce is expected to be mobile by 2017.

“Workplaces today need to provide a variety of places for people to work, giving people choice and control over where and how they work. But as employees use shared workstations throughout the day, there is also increased need to minimise sharing harmful bacteria.

“One study by the University of Arizona’s Dr Charles Gerba found more than 10 million germs on the average desk. Crumbs for example that accumulate on desks, are a perfect environment for bacteria and fungi to thrive.”

Andrews added the transition from assigned “I spaces” to shared “we spaces” globally has created rising demand by companies the world over for the use of antimicrobials in the workspace as a way of fighting back against the proliferation of germs.

“Antimicrobial agents and coatings are technologies that either kill or slow the growth of microbes.

“We’ve seen an increased demand from our clients in South Africa and across Africa for antimicrobials since we pioneered them in 2011 in South Africa and have had them as standard since then.

“They’re gaining relevance in the workplace as an option to dramatically reduce germs on frequently touched surfaces such

as the worksurface edge and desk pad, height-adjustment controls, and power and data access points.”

Andrews said that the increased use of antimicrobials is expected to significantly reduce the cost of absent works and the related health care costs as they become a standard feature of office ware over the next decade.

“Antimicrobials show promise as another way to proactively create health-conscious work environments in support of improved worker wellbeing.

“Although antimicrobial materials should not replace or decrease regular cleaning routines or good hygiene practices such as hand washing, coughing into elbows and staying home when sick, they can add another level of potential benefit by sharply reducing germs in the workplace,” Andrews concluded.