

WHITE PAPER / **WORKPLACE DESIGN AND EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING**

HINDSIGHT IS 2020: THE FUTURE OF WORK IS HERE

BY Jessica Vessell

Companies have been given a unique opportunity to rethink the workplace and create an environment that supports people's ideal work styles and positively impacts employee satisfaction, productivity and well-being.



Much has been written about the future of the workplace in response to COVID-19. Fortunately, hindsight is 2020 and it's clear the future of work is here. Employees are flexible in where, when and how they work. But while focus was found during that time, it seems that connection was lost. We miss the magic of collaboration.

The opportunity to evolve the physical workplace experience to foster both flexibility and desire for connection can reignite motivation and create a favorable “second impression” for a workforce. With reflection, input, and smart and responsive design strategies, organizations can positively impact the health, well-being and productivity of their employees.

A FLEX FORWARD

In June 2020, as the pandemic had taken hold in the United States, 42% of workers were working full time from home, according to a policy brief from the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR). While remote work isn't a new concept, these figures are a substantial increase from the 2% of employees before the pandemic.

Remote work and flexibility in where and how work is done is expected moving forward. Global Workplace Analytics estimates that up to 30% of the workforce will continue to work remotely several days each week. According to a Pew Research study, more than half of people who can fulfill responsibilities from home want to keep a “work-from-anywhere” policy.

The work-from-home constraints of the last year have bestowed choice and autonomy on employees in almost every industry. These workers were able to adapt and focus on getting the job done. Knowing there is still a strong desire to collaborate and socialize in person, now is the time for organizations to develop a flexible workplace experience that provides employees options for where, when and how they work.

DESIGN FOR AN IDEAL EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

At the heart of every organization are their people. The pandemic brought a vast array of challenges, altering how we work in unexpected ways and requiring a new level of day-to-day agility. From now on, employees will likely

expect more from their physical workplaces and more chances for a diverse range of real-world experiences.

Taking an honest look at the wins and losses during this time, companies can identify valuable feedback and insight on areas to change and practices to keep. Involving the very people needed so that the change is successful will strengthen employees' sense of connection with their company. This involvement, in turn, will drive excitement for the day employees return to the office.

Designing or adapting spaces to become a destination creates an exciting experience that employees cannot get anywhere else. Happier employees who feel a sense of community and belonging, in a space designed based on this intention, results in healthier people who want to stay and top talent that wants to join.

FROM HERE TO THERE

While the retail, hospitality and consumer industry has succeeded — think Apple, Nike, hotels, etc. — in creating destination-worthy work environments, the corporate office experience has stagnated.

No matter the mix of working arrangements, physical space is needed to build culture, collaborate, host clients and so much more. But first you must know where to begin in re-envisioning a workspace. Start by engaging employees and asking them what has worked, what hasn't and what's needed from now on:

- What was it like to work in the office before the pandemic? If you could go back, what would you have changed?
- How has working from home affected you as an employee? If you could change the experience, in what ways would you do so?
- How did you previously collaborate? How has this changed?
- What do you need to keep your mental, physical and psychological well-being in a healthy state?

Regardless of the flexible workplace design approach, an ongoing employee feedback loop is imperative. Companies need to engage staff so that they feel ownership in co-creating the ideal workplace experience.

ENGAGING EMPLOYEES

Some employees have missed the office, and some have flourished working on their own. Still, most all crave a balance with social interaction.

To define the optimal future workplace, companies need to take time for an honest examination of what the culture, teamwork, operating conditions and employee working arrangements were like before and during the pandemic:

- What was the model for collaboration before the pandemic? How has this been adapted? What has been the effect?
- How were new initiatives, projects and product ideas developed in the past? How have remote staff overcome this? What has been successful and what has not?
- What was the company culture like before and how has it changed? What should be preserved?
- What roles existed previously, what roles have changed and what functions were created to accommodate the new environment?

The results may very well be different depending on an organization's various business units, functions and geographic locations. Collect direct input from employees, customers and external partners to truly understand the organization's current state.

Having pulled together a variety of questions, the assessment should not be complicated or a one-off exercise. Free and simple-to-use survey tools, like SurveyMonkey, are quick to set up, receive input and get all staff involved.

FOCUS ON WELL-BEING

Employee health and well-being is a major consideration for staff returning to the office. To show employees, or future tenants, that this is taken seriously, standards exist that focus on the interior environment to support employee wellness.

The WELL Building Standard is a tool that can aid design strategy outcomes with a specific focus on human health through the design of air, water, light, fitness, nourishment, comfort and mental health.



FIGURE 1: *A modern, well-designed office — one that includes soft furnishings and acoustic considerations — creates a space that can improve employee satisfaction while increasing productivity.*

While not a set of stand-alone design strategies, the standards complement the design decision process to support an ever-evolving workplace. Utilizing existing space differently creates a new flow of movement and work areas that allow people to work without distraction, attend a meeting, socialize and take a break, and then use a dedicated space to meet and connect with remote colleagues.

A PURPOSE-BUILT FUTURE

Beautiful, well-designed offices serve as a destination for collaboration, connection, community and creativity. Using insight from the company and employee feedback, design strategies can reveal unique and suitable environments that support physical and psychological well-being and offer an experience exclusive to a company. Offering such thoughtful building amenities also can attract new business and, therefore, new lease agreements for landlords as well.

SPATIAL STRATEGIES

A flexible workplace can accommodate different work types needed for an organization to succeed. Both vibrant and versatile, the right office design addresses different workforce needs, working styles and available space.

DESIGN FOR COLLABORATION

Teams need interaction to solve problems, spark ideas and build relationships. Technology-enabled rooms and spaces for in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings for collaborative work and training rooms for onboarding and professional development are also required. Flexible room types can be used as a team “hub” during a specific period on a project-by-project basis or as a permanent landing spot to accommodate a certain percentage of employees at any given time.

DESIGN FOR FOCUS

Individuals need space to concentrate on the work at hand. Flexible workplaces should include quiet rooms, such as a library area that conjures silence and focused attention. Soundproof booths, like phone and video booths, also allow workers to access privacy and dedicate attention. Spaces designed for focus provide co-located and hybrid workers dedicated areas to isolate while still being connected.

DESIGN FOR FUNCTION

If massive auditorium gatherings are on hold for a while, can outdoor areas be used to gather people in smaller groups to achieve goals? To accommodate hybrid workers, can desks and office areas be booked in advance for the day? Are interactive maps and wayfinding signage up to date to help all employees feel included and productive? Creatively updating logistical spaces such as elevators, reception areas, ventilation and lighting can craft an experience that provides both connection and supports well-being.

DESIGN FOR FIT

With changing workforce needs, organizations may find they have too much real estate — or not enough. Both situations offer a great opportunity to redefine and reutilize how the office footprint is used. Let the insight gained during the company and employee assessment exercise guide how existing space can address the workplace needs that exist now.

DESIGN FOR DESTINATION

Offices and buildings designed as unique destinations help transform the work environment to motivate and inspire. Just as the kitchen is the heart of the home,

PLACES FOR PRODUCTIVITY

The evolving workplace offers potential and promise for companies that foster employee happiness, well-being, productivity and community — no matter where their employees are working:

- **Co-located staff are office-based employees who work with others in the same shared space. These employees require resources in the office to communicate and collaborate with virtually located teams effectively.**
- **Remote workers are based outside of the physical office workplace and typically interact with other staff, customers and vendors through messaging apps, emails, virtual meetings and video conferences. Remote work includes working from home but can be any location away from the office.**
- **Hybrid staff is a mix between co-located and remote employees, spending time working both in and away from the office. The number of hybrid employees is expected to grow post-COVID, allowing the option to choose to work where they are the most productive. Hybrid staff needs office space for collaboration and face-to-face meetings, plus the use of virtual, technology-based tools for remote work.**

food and drink are necessary workplace amenities and motivators. The heart of an office can also become a central social space for reception, coffee, cafeteria or canteens, as can adjacent boardrooms, auditoriums or training rooms.

Additionally, fitness amenities, outdoor and indoor gardens, bike-sharing opportunities, rooftop terraces or on-site childcare allow companies and landlords to differentiate while boosting employee well-being, engagement and productivity.



FIGURE 2: *Providing access to nature via natural ventilation, outdoor terraces and biophilic design (designing with plants) invigorates the space, making it a desirable place to work.*

ADVANTAGES OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSIVE DESIGN

From moveable floorplates and multifunctional furniture to shared desks and brainstorm areas, companies can maximize site usage with agile spaces. In addition to providing employees the autonomy to choose on-site work styles, design contributes to improved culture and morale. Designing for access to natural light, nature, thermal comfort and acoustics while optimizing a company's footprint can also help control workplace cost.

INNOVATION IN ACTION

Influenced by a visit to a co-working operator's headquarters in New York, a confidential technology client was inspired to revamp its former headquarters to enhance the employee experience. Collaborating with the co-working brand ambassadors and company leadership on this project, Burns & McDonnell helped create the ideal workplace design while substantially decreasing the real-estate footprint.

The strategy was driven by evaluating experiences per square foot while balancing the client's target budget. Through intensive employee and leadership discussions, design evaluation, budget alignment and general

contracting, an ideal workplace strategy was designed. The result is a four-story, 120,000-square-foot remodel that simultaneously densifies the current space while creating an inviting building for community events and collaboration.

Post-occupancy surveys revealed an increase of 34 percentage points in employee satisfaction and the redesign increased employee engagement, health and happiness. Results from the project, using the spatial strategies detailed in this paper, show that the building is an ideal post-pandemic workplace to accommodate a hybrid workforce.

CONCLUSION

The global pandemic has given companies a unique opportunity to rethink how offices and workplaces can contribute to staff health, well-being and productivity. Using input on company culture and employee working experiences, workspaces can be designed to enable the socialization and collaboration that many employees have missed. The right design fosters employee health and well-being to achieve a successful return to work and make a positive "second impression" for employees.

Whether a company embraces an in-office, remote or hybrid future, a destination-worthy physical space that is purpose-built to connect, build culture, collaborate, host clients and function effectively is key to developing an ideal employee experience. Through flexible workplace design, organizations can better boost engagement, productivity and a company's bottom line.

BIOGRAPHY

JESSICA VESSELL is a senior architect at Burns & McDonnell leading commercial interior architecture and design for corporate workplace, hospitality and residential projects. With more than a decade of experience, Jessica focuses on design driven by human experience, most recently standardizing and scaling WeWork from eight locations to more than 800 by developing flexible workspaces that reflect culture and employee needs.

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