How the way we work will change the
Office of the Future

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Introduction

History is littered with transitional moments which changed the way we live, work and behave. In the past few decades, the introduction of personal technology and the dawn of the internet have completely reshaped our view of the workplace. But another dramatic and seismic shift is now underway—**the age of hybrid work is here**.

As we gaze over the edge of this inflection point, we see an opportunity to redefine productivity, collaboration and professional meaning. Organizations today have an enormous opportunity to embrace emerging technologies, design innovations, and social trends, and to completely redefine the individual's role in physical spaces at work.

The shift towards hybrid work is about more than practicalities like convenience and cost efficiency. Employees, managers, and executives alike are now re-imagining not just how and when they work, but the intrinsic meaning of work itself. And with that comes a deeper examination of how the physical surroundings of an office space can and should evolve.

This fundamental assessment of what an office should be is happening in parallel with myriad innovations in technology, equipment, and design. Things like augmented reality (AR) and neighborhood design are propelling organizations towards manifesting the office of the future in the not-too-distant future.

Individual employees, leaders, managers, and contributors have never felt so empowered in how they engage with their work on a mental and physical level. With the rise of hybrid work, offices are not in direct competition with people's homes. Organizations that can embrace this new worldview open up new possibilities for how they create their office spaces.

"Increasing expectations mean hybrid work is here to stay. And people are demanding even more out of their work arrangements.[1]"

35% of U.S. decision makers at all levels expect more flexibility from their work arrangements.[2]

35%
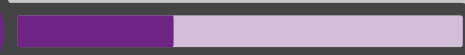
79% of all companies are willing to financially support ongoing remote work connectivity costs.[1]

79%

53% average decrease in office size is being reported by over twothirds of global companies.[1]

53%

98% of companies that hire remotely report a positive impact on the decision to do so. [2]

98%

Active Trends Disrupting the Traditional Office Space

> **"What people expect from the office environment is a place to connect, collaborate, and experience their lives holistically."**

Hybrid work has made the traditional office space an outdated concept, prime for disruption. Offices are getting smaller, as more people spend more time working remotely. And although international travel is expected to return to robust levels, individual's expectations of the office experience will be vastly different moving forward.

Meeting these expectations does not mean simply providing workers with home equipment and a physical space to use on occasion.

Part of the appeal of hybrid and work from home arrangements is that they **allow people to be productive in a physical space that means the most to them**, oftentimes with family, friends, and loved ones close by. There's also the continuing rise of third space productivity. Employees now expect places like cafes, gyms, and outdoor spaces either close-by or directly integrated into their workspaces.

According to recent research by office design firm Steelcase, one of the biggest things that employees want today is a **sense of belonging from their work**.[3] So, while workers now insist on choice and flexibility, they're not dismissing the existence of a physical office altogether. But what people expect from the office environment is a place to connect, collaborate, and experience their lives

holistically. That's a long way from the drab, cubicle-dominated spaces that have characterized many workplaces.

In fact, many offices are now in a position akin to "**technical debt**", a software term describing code or hardware that's outdated but extremely expensive to replace. Therefore, the status quo lingers on far longer than it should. But worker demands, cultural trends, and technology design capabilities are now converging at an inflection point where massive sea change is imminent.[4]

The Meaning and Nature of Collaboration is Changing

What many organizations have failed to recognize in the past is that offices and the workplace are essentially a medium for both individual expression and group collaboration. While companies may have measured things solely in terms of productivity KPIs, that's not how actual humans view their at-work experience. This reality is now coming to light and necessitates new thinking.

Hybrid, remote, and asynchronous work are increasingly the norm, bringing people together across geographic and cultural boundaries. This significantly changes the role offices play in collaboration, arguably making them even more important. When people do come together in the physical workspace, it's a unique opportunity for people to meet colleagues in the flesh.

Today's offices therefore need to consider how connection and collaboration between employees continues to evolve. Whereas 20 years ago co-workers may have grown accustomed to interacting with familiar faces in the office, today that face-to-face connection is something that many remote workers long for and value.

That's one of the main reasons that the concept of empathic design is slowly making its way into how offices are laid out and structured. **Empathic design puts the end user first, considering their emotional state, needs, and preferences.** It's about creating spaces that are welcoming, reassuring, and making people feel more "human."[5]

One of the current trends within empathic design, for instance, is the use of biophilic design elements. This includes elements like light-filled atriums, rooftop gardens, and living walls. Beyond just greenery and plants, design shapes and elements mimic those of nature. The idea is to create an office environment akin to a harmonious ecosystem ideal for workers to connect.

Empathic and biophilic design illustrate how the meaning and nature of work-place collaboration are shifting radically. Although workers now engage largely on a remote and asynchronous basis, they are still parts of a larger organism. And tomorrow's offices will foster organic connectivity while enabling individuals to pursue and explore their own professional meaning.

Designing Offices for More Meaningful Work Experiences

The workspaces of the future will be about much more than clean design, greenery, and amenities. Because offices today are competing with people's homes and even neighborhoods, design trends are now emerging that will not only draw people back into the office, but provide a renewed sense of belonging and professional purpose.

Organizations that re-imagine the office in a way that promotes greater fulfillment, purpose, and connection could also gain a significant hiring advantage. Recent research shows that failure to foster connection and collaboration amongst teams leads to loneliness, thereby increasing absenteeism and turnover. Workers today are naturally gravitating towards environments that keep them connected, seen, and appreciated.[7]

Here are a few elements and features that are on the rise and why they create more meaningful work experiences for individuals.[4]

Flexible private spaces. While offices have become more egalitarian, with executives foregoing large private offices, it doesn't mean designs shouldn't offer any privacy. In fact, flexible private spaces mixed with shared can accommodate both introverts and extroverts. Companies should even consider hotel booking software so individuals and teams can reserve spaces ahead of time.

Dynamic neighborhoods. Features like cafes, co-working spaces, gyms, and gaming spaces fuse work, leisure, and other meaningful activities that in some ways improve upon workers' normal neighborhoods. The opportunity for organizations is to craft an environment that is truly aspirational. This includes a mix of spaces that flow naturally from one to the next, whether it be informal gathering areas or heads-down desks.

Video conferencing. Most employees say that their main issue with current video conferencing setups is that they're too small or uncomfortable. Companies should instead take a casual collaboration approach to conferencing spaces, making workers feel more like they're hanging out with one another at a bar or cafe. Taking a video first approach also means equipping just about every space with video conferencing.

Sound acoustics. How an office sounds might not be top of mind when considering office design. But poor acoustics is one of the biggest complaints the people and companies have when moving into a new space.[5] Offices with good acoustics free of loud echoes allow employees to concentrate better when working alone and have more connected, distraction-free conversations when in collaboration mode.[6]

These are just a few of the key trends in empathic design that are already influencing how people experience and define themselves within the context of work. Gone are the days of assigned cubicles and work desks, giving each person the psychological sense of a narrow role within an organization.

Instead, collaborative spaces and neighborhood design make people feel like they're free to flow from various tasks, teams, and technologies seamlessly. This unlocks their ability to explore professional possibilities in a more creative, organic way and create a work experience that's most meaningful to the individual.

Merging Technology for Sustainability and Inclusion

One of the biggest factors in determining employee performance and retention is providing meaningful work. When people feel like their work is pointless or they're disconnected from a support network, they tend to only engage during work hours and specified parameters without going above and beyond – a phenomenon known as **quiet quitting**. Organizational leadership can combat disengagement by providing both professional and physical experiences that foster a greater sense of meaning, purpose and community.[8]

Biophilic elements, for instance, can provide aesthetic, spiritual, and financial benefits to organizations. A sustainable space will resonate with the increasing number of workers today who identify themselves as environmentally conscious. In addition, making your offices more sustainable can lead to better energy efficiency, reduce costs and help you attain your organization's sustainable development goals (SDGs). This includes smart investments in areas like lighting, temperature control, and sustainable devices.

Offices will also need to factor in diversity and inclusion even more. With 98% of companies that hire remotely seeing a positive impact, global and asynchronous teams will only increase.[1] And with this comes various communication styles, costumes, and holidays. So, when these employees come together on rare occasions in the office, they need to feel a sense of mutual purpose. Offices will no longer just be about promoting presentee-ism, but creating memorable moments and connections that endure when teams re-disburse to their remote locations.

Tomorrow's office spaces should there-fore focus on flexibility of interaction, empowered by technology. Remote and in-person workers should be able to interact in a variety of ways, from video

Sustainability is the 4th most important factor for decision makers when sourcing IT hardware.

10%
of decision makers rate sustainability as their top priority, even more so than finance.

63%
of global decision makers believe that IT leasing is more sustainable and environmentally friendly than outright purchase.

57%
of decision makers are already using IT leasing as a way to become more sustainable.[1]

conferencing to even augmented and virtual reality. Companies may even be able to take a cue from popular AR apps like "Pokemon Go!" to gamify the office experience and add virtual layers to the physical experience.

Ergonomic and empathic design choices with regards to the personal technology equipment that companies issue to employees is also becoming more critical. Items such as laptops, headphones, mice, and other tech accessories should not only be comfortable to use at home but integrate seamlessly into the office design when workers are present.

And on a final note with regards to the bring-your-own-device (BYOD) trend, companies can even reconsider their lease arrangements. Some organizations are even pursuing a **"WeWork" strategy** where spaces are rented only during periodic employee gatherings, therefore avoiding costly overhead of a year-round space. Many of these offices are already purpose-built with neighborhoods and green spaces, making empathic design accessible to companies on a budget.[4]

Create Your Office of the Future

The re-imagination of the office and workspace is long overdue, and current trends are forcing the hand of the business world to create and provide environments that empower workers, managers, and executives to become their best selves. And it's not just about convenience or flexibility—tomorrow's office spaces and designs will help foster creativity and inspire innovation amongst teams and individuals.

Things like neighborhoods and enhanced video conferencing can put employees in a greater state of creative flow than ever before. And while people are embracing hybrid arrangements more than ever, the data shows they still long for a sense of belonging, meaning, and connection from their professional lives. These needs and desires are extremely difficult to fulfill remotely via Zoom meetings and chat interactions.

However, this inflection point represents an enormous opportunity for companies to not only get more out of their human resource assets, but also impact financial and sustainability KPIs. As with all major cultural, social, and technological revolutions, the window to embrace and fully take advantage of the next wave is finite. As more and more companies embrace things like neighborhood spaces and empathic design, talent will naturally gravitate towards those opportunities.

That's why it's critical that companies of all shapes and sizes begin reevaluating their current office designs from all angles and developing a plan to provide spaces that promote more than productivity. Here are some key takeaways that can help you create an office that will give everyone from top to bottom a greater sense of purpose when they come together in the flesh.

Office of the Future Checklist

✅ **Third Space.** Offices are now in competition with homes and neighborhoods. Provide similar— if not more and better—amenities like cafes, green spaces, and game rooms.

✅ **Neighborhoods.** Have spaces that intertwine and flow together like an actual neighborhood. Blur the lines between work and play to make people feel at home.

✅ **Ergonomic Tech.** From chairs and keyboards to screens and video conferencing, technology should be comfortable and have hybrid work in mind.

✅ **Empathic Design.** Create spaces that put the end user at the center. From lighting and sound to desk arrangement, think about how each element will make people feel.

✅ **Biophilic Elements.** Actual greenery and elements that harken to nature help keep employees more psychologically grounded and contribute towards SDGs.

✅ **Create Moments.** Think about what memorable moments your office creates for workers. Spaces should make global teams coming together a special occasion.

Ready to push the boundaries of technology and design to create your office of the future?

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