

workplace of the future

by Steve Kimball



The workplace of the future is an exciting space. As a result of remote work requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more companies are realizing that employees can be productive at home or in other secondary locations.

Tata Consultancy Services, one of the world's largest technology providers, set a goal for 75% of their employees to work from home permanently by 2025. This is based on an analysis of their current work model and how to increase efficiency and lower costs. They found:

- 25% of any project team can be distributed across geographies. In other words, only 75% of a project team needs to be in a single geographic location.
- They estimated that only 25% of their workforce needs to be in the office (cumulatively) to achieve an overall 100% productivity.
- They found it is sufficient for an employee to be in the office only 25% of the time.

This perspective is also mirrored by employees. According to a Future Forum survey analyzed by Fortune, after a year of working from home, only 1 in 5 workers want to remain fully remote. In addition, 63% of workers prefer a hybrid model with 17% preferring to work in the office all the time.

While working remotely provides a better opportunity for work-life balance, it can also have negative effects on key factors for a productive workforce: collaboration, creativity, culture, and learning. Many companies plan to address this with a hybrid model, where employees will split their time

between in-office and remote work. But, if pursuing a hybrid model, extra attention needs to be paid to the office environment to ensure that the limited hours spent in the office deliver an experience that enhances the working environment and personal development not found elsewhere.

According to recent Cushman & Wakefield research, 50% of all remote workers say colleague bonding is down and they are struggling to connect. A resounding 70% of Millennials and Gen Z's say they struggle more with remote work due to caregiving responsibilities and inadequate workspace. In addition, most agree their client relationships are not as strong, and professional development and mentoring opportunities are limited or completely eliminated.

This feedback provides us guidance for planning future workplaces that are flexible and provide accommodations not available in a remote location.

The offices we return to with a hybrid work model will most likely flip the norm of more desks to more shared spaces. We will see a reduced capacity for individual desks and offices, and increased spaces for meetings, collaboration, creative brainstorming, and training. Flexible design and common areas will be key, and thoughtful detail throughout will reinforce company culture and brand.

While the rule of thumb may have been one meeting room for every 20 employees, hybrid models require additional shared spaces as employees rotate in, often for the sole purpose of utilization of shared spaces. Various types of shared meeting spaces will emerge to cater to specific needs.



conference (board) room

The conference room is the main meeting space in the office and is used for client or board meetings, department gatherings, and a variety of other pivotal collaboration sessions. It is designed to host large groups and should reflect your company brand, mission, and values. Integrated audiovisual equipment is now a requirement in almost all conference room designs.

team rooms

Team rooms are smaller conference rooms equipped with a standard table and comfortable chairs and whiteboards to support longer brainstorming sessions. They allow larger groups to collaborate in a setting where everyone can be seen and heard. There is audiovisual equipment for presentations and conferencing.

huddle room

Huddle rooms typically accommodate 2-4 people for individual meetings, small video/conference calls, and dedicated working sessions. A huddle room usually has a small table, comfortable seating, and space for people to move around. While there may be some audiovisual equipment, this is a space for people to have a conversation or whiteboarding session behind closed doors.

breakout space

This flex space is not technically a conference room, but may be perfect for a quick sync, a client conversation, or a non-private phone call. Equipped with sofas, soft chairs, and a table or two, these spaces are a great way to foster collaboration and connection without building walls. Ideally, they are a good distance away from individual workstations so there is a sense of space and privacy that comes with the meeting.

training room/special event space

Your conference room or cafeteria may be large enough to host training or company events. If not, a training room may provide additional flexibility for employee professional development and event space. Open, common areas can also flex to serve as both a training or event space.



common areas

Common areas are the gathering places where employees come together for work, rest and play. When thoughtfully designed, common areas can reinforce your brand and culture and tell the story of your company's mission, vision, and values. From the lobby and break rooms to fitness centers, and even the hallways and stairs, common areas are important and should be approached with the same attention to detail as individual workstations and meeting rooms.

The smart integration of technology came to the forefront during the COVID pandemic and will continue to be a priority for both in-office and remote workers in a hybrid model. However, the overabundance of screen time can be a negative. Incorporating tech-free zones encourages employees to interact directly with each other in collaborative spaces versus virtually, especially during limited time in the office.

When looking at conference rooms, explore having spaces that have full audio/visual capabilities from touch screens to video conferencing capabilities. But also include "tech-free" conference rooms to encourage the discussion of ideas and the physical handwriting of information. The benefits of these tech-free rooms minimize distractions that laptops bring and encourages the face-to-face interaction of employees with their peers.

While much of the focus in the new workplace will be on shared spaced, individual workspaces still need to be addressed.

assigned workstations

Found in an open office environment, workstations allow higher density of employees while offering open sightlines for improved collaboration. In the future workspace, multiple employees may share one workspace as they rotate days in the office. Arrangement in client- or activity-based clustering allows companies to find creative ways to inspire collaboration, boost productivity and save space in the office.

private offices

About 1/3 of office workers in the U.S. used to have a private office. In the new workspace, these may reduce in number and/or serve double duty as huddle space. Calendar scheduling will be critical to prevent conflicts in these types of shared environments moving forward.



cubicles & hotels

Cubicles often housed large numbers of employees who needed separation for making phone calls. Often utilized for customer service activities, these spaces are now suitable for downsizing as the work activity can be performed remotely. Space sharing will be the new norm. In addition, former dedicated “hotel” spaces for visiting employees and guests can be eliminated as we see opportunities for space sharing, as well as increased shared meeting and collaboration spaces.

conclusion

As employees have reduced physical contact with the office, their connection to the culture and brand will deteriorate. Take advantage of their time in the office to reinforce your culture as expressed in your company brand, vision, mission, and values.

Your workplace is the strongest message you send to employees, clients, and visitors. It should clearly represent your brand and core values. With thoughtful enhancements, a workplace gives a remarkable impression and communicates the company’s mission through its design. In addition, material selections, graphic imagery, décor, and palette can instantly connect visitors and employees to the brand.

Carry this approach to common areas including your Customer Experience Centers, which are the catalyst for developing and fostering relationships. A successful experience center will take both employees and clients on a journey to experience the company’s values, people, products, and partnerships. Instead of hidden behind closed doors, experience centers are now moving to the forefront often adjacent or incorporated into lobby and reception areas.

And, don’t forget about gallery or hall spaces. Whether adorned with artwork, graphics, or everchanging comment boards, these spaces offer insight into the purpose and passion of the company. By providing a landscape with different environments and strategic use of patterns, textures, colors, and tech-free zones, the workplace can be transformed into a powerhouse of creativity, productivity, and loyalty.

As we all venture into the work environment of the future, flexibility in workplace design will be critical to accommodate a variety of hybrid work schedules. However, bringing together the best of what office and remote work have to offer, companies can find a new level of productivity, well-being, and employee recruitment and retention.



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Steve has over 45 years’ experience with business leadership and project management. Prior to co-founding emersion DESIGN, he was the President and CEO for a 100-person A/E firm with offices in Ohio and Florida. He has an extensive history of managing projects such as campus master plans, office buildings, computer centers, research and testing facilities, healthcare facilities, labs, university academic buildings, and engineering centers.