

How a future-of-work architect advises companies to redesign their work

What makes an office great? Or perhaps a more apt phrasing for this post-pandemic moment might be: What makes an office a productive, inviting, and, at the very least, tolerable place to do work?

It's a question many employers are asking themselves today as the tug-o-war over returning to the office continues.

"When the COVID first hit, a lot of companies extended their leases because they didn't know what was happening and they didn't want to rush into anything," said Leonora Georgeoglou, a future-of-work design expert at HED, the architecture firm. "As the pandemic has eased, they're now at a point where they're asking us to rethink everything."

Recent surveys show that while employees value flexibility and prefer working from home most days, many people want to spend at least some time at the office.

Research from LinkedIn suggests that "in-person collaboration" and "socializing with colleagues and clients" are among the biggest draws.

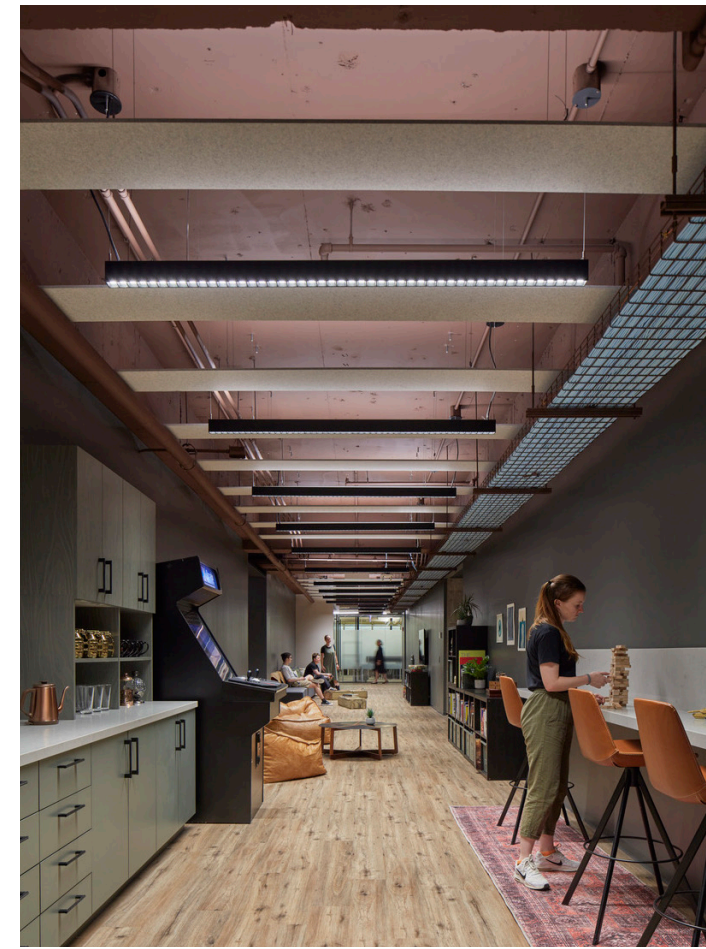
As a result, many employers are renovating and redesigning their staid, stodgy offices to be more conducive to teamwork and collaboration, according to Georgeoglou. "They're asking: How do we create a space that supports our culture, our brand, and creates community?"

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Amid a chronic labor shortage, the redesigns have profound implications for both the workforce and employers.

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Meanwhile, many CEOs worry that too much remote work could dent innovation. Research from Microsoft suggests that reduced interaction between team members could hurt creativity long-term.



Q: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST OFFICE DESIGN TRENDS YOU'RE SEEING RIGHT NOW?

A: There's more we-space and less me-space, and by that I mean there's much less of a focus on individual spaces and a much greater one on communal areas.

Before the pandemic, offices were open, dense, and noisy places. You'd see people sitting at tables with headphones on if they need to do concentrated work. But now when people need to do work like that, they do it at home, where they can be more productive.

Today people need to have a variety of collaborative spaces: small team rooms where three or four people can come together in-person and connect to a computer and bring in a colleague who's remote;

large, open spaces that can be used for all-hands meetings, trainings, and events; and other communal spaces that are flexible and can be converted for a variety of purposes.

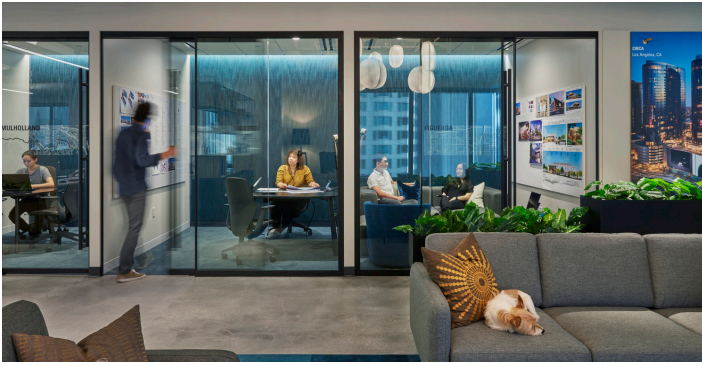
Q: AT A TIME WHERE EMPLOYEES ARE DEMANDING MORE AUTONOMY IN HOW, WHERE AND WHEN THEY DO THEIR WORK, DO YOU THINK THESE CHANGES WILL BE ENOUGH TO LURE THEM BACK INTO THE OFFICE?

A: People are never going back to the office five days a week. But when they do come to the office, it's to have an experience and create community. They want to connect with peers; they want training; and they want mentoring.

I think of the workplace now as an offering of settings. You, as an employee, have options of settings and you pick and choose throughout the day based on the tasks you have to do.

Q: HYBRID WORK, WHERE EMPLOYEES SPEND SOME TIME WORKING IN THE OFFICE AND SOME TIME WORKING FROM HOME, IS CONSIDERED THE WORST OF BOTH WORLDS — ESPECIALLY FROM A TECH PERSPECTIVE. HOW ARE COMPANIES SOLVING THAT PROBLEM WITH NEW OFFICE SET-UPS?

A: We are working closely with companies' AV teams to make everything easy and intuitive. An employee ought to be able to come into any space with their laptops, plug in, and connect seamlessly.



We are also working on ways to improve hybrid meetings. Typically, when you have some people who are physically present for a meeting and others who are dialing in, there are issues with the sound and with the visuals.

The people further away from the screen are dots and you can hardly hear them.

We're looking at how we orient these spaces with technology so that everybody feels like they're part of the same meeting.

We are using more square and round tables so that everybody is equidistant from the camera, and we are improving the planning and placement of audio technology like microphones and speakers in conference rooms as well as acoustical considerations within the office so you can hear everyone the same.

Q: ACCORDING TO A PRE-PANDEMIC STUDY BY HARVARD THAT SURVEYED 1,601 EMPLOYEES ACROSS NORTH AMERICA, WORKERS WANT VERY BASIC THINGS FROM THEIR OFFICES, WITH ACCESS TO NATURAL LIGHT TOPPING THE LIST. IS THIS STILL AS HIGH A PRIORITY TODAY?

A: Previous studies have shown that natural light is linked to productivity. But now the focus is on wellness. Having access to daylight is a mood enhancer. It makes people feel better. Mental health and burnout are front and center in our conversations with employers. They know that it's important for people to have ample natural light for their wellbeing. This is just one way that well-designed workplaces can improve the quality of life for employees.

Q: SPEAKING OF BURNOUT, HOW ARE EMPLOYERS UPDATING THEIR OFFICES IN WAYS THAT COULD HELP REDUCE STRESS LEVELS?

A: Research shows that exposure to nature can inspire creativity and even lower stress. So we use a lot of natural materials, like stone and wood, that evoke nature. We've also found that a printed wall covering that has a picture of mountains and waterfall has the same effect.

Q: THE WAYS IN WHICH AMERICANS DO THEIR JOBS HAS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS AND IT WILL NO DOUBT CONTINUE TO EVOLVE. HOW MANY OF THE CHANGES TO THE OFFICE THAT WE'RE SEEING RIGHT NOW WILL STICK?

A: From what we're hearing from CEOs and seeing and our research, the office must be a destination. Employees have already proven that they can be productive at home, but particularly for creative fields, bringing people together in the office to collaborate has been shown to trigger more creativity and idea sharing.

The changes to the office that we will see stick are elements that let it compete with the home office, aspects of wellness like circadian and natural lighting, air quality and ergonomics, fitness areas, and wellness and nursing suites.

What will make the shared office the workplace of choice, at least some of the time, is options that match the needs of the work you're doing such as collaborative spaces of varying scale and formality, and most importantly, elements that emphasize the brand and culture of companies.

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