

4 Strategies for Building a Hybrid Workplace that Works

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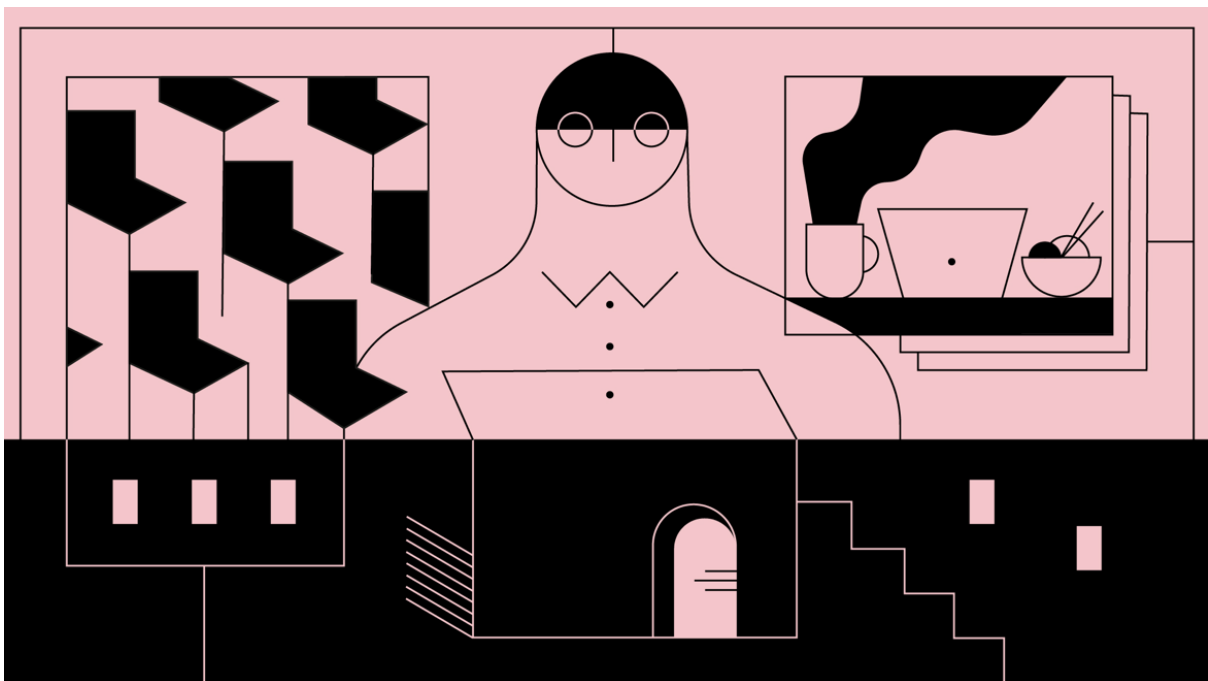


Illustration by Dominika Lipniewska

Summary. More than 50% of companies plan to pilot new workspaces as their companies shift to a hybrid model. The authors, architects and office-furniture designers serving the world's largest organizations, recommend leaders think through the following four design approaches as they consider their hybrid

strategy. First, braid the physical and digital experiences to ensure equity, engagement, and ease. Second, flip open and enclosed spaces. Meetings will be more likely to happen in open spaces with moveable boundaries, while individual work will be in enclosed pods or enclaves. Third, shift from a fixed to fluid workspace. Perhaps your cafe can double as a hybrid meeting space. And lastly, remember that collaboration requires both individual work too. Employees should be able to easily move between “we” and “me” time without trekking across campus or getting hung up on complicated technology. [close](#)

The global pandemic has created new challenges and opportunities in almost every industry, and as the economy reopens competition will be intense. Winners will be those who most clearly understand their customer’s needs, collaborate to identify multiple solutions, prototype, iterate and bring new ideas to market. Those behaviors will only happen when people come together in the new, modern workplace.

By all indications the future of work is hybrid: 52% of U.S. workers would prefer a mix of working from home and the office, saying it has a positive impact on their ability to be creative, solve problems and build relationships. Global research tells us 72% of corporate leaders plan to offer a hybrid model, and only 13% say they expect to decrease their real estate footprint in the next year, suggesting that organizations will continue to leverage their workplaces within a hybrid work future.

But getting hybrid right will be hard. Deciding who works from the office and how often is a complex issue, and it will be different for every organization. If not done well it could threaten culture, collaboration, and innovation. Conversely, a well-executed hybrid workplace can be a magnet that brings people together and helps us work better than ever before.

Organizations who will win know that workplaces designed for people and the resiliency of their organizations will help them move forward, learn, and remain competitive. To start, more than 50% of

U.S. companies plan to pilot new spaces as part of their return to the office this year, for example, repurposing a café into a high-energy social and collaboration space that better supports new hybrid work patterns.

As architects and office-furniture designers serving the world's largest organizations, we recommend leaders think through four design approaches as you consider your hybrid strategy.

Braid the Digital and Physical Experience

As leaders of global teams, we know that bridging the gap between in-person and remote participants is hard, and hybrid work means there will inevitably be someone who is remote, regardless of well teams coordinate their in-office days. Remote colleagues can feel frustrated and unable to participate equally, becoming less engaged. This is especially true for creative and innovative work, such as brainstorming, which often use analog whiteboards or other physical products that are difficult for people on the other side of the camera to fully experience.

The solution is to integrate physical spaces and technology with three key concepts in mind: equity, engagement, and ease.

For example, currently, many conference rooms consist of a long table with a monitor at the end. In-person attendees sit around the table while remote participants are featured in a grid of tiny boxes, often on the same screen as any shared content.

One way to create more equity is to give each participant their own screen, placing monitors on rolling carts that can easily be moved around. Teams can pull a remote colleague into a breakout session or up to the table. Many software systems now let you split people and content onto separate displays.

To be fully engaged, people need clear sightlines to one another and to the content. Designing for employee engagement in digital-to-physical space means thinking like a movie director – lights, camera, audio, content. Some solutions we’re seeing are angled or mobile tables, additional lighting, extra speakers, in room microphones, and easy-to-move markerboards and displays.

In addition, research tells us more people will connect to a meeting on their individual devices as well as the technology in the room. Ample power supplies, whiteboards, and a variety of software solutions will contribute to an easier, more seamless hybrid collaboration experience for people.

Flip Enclosed and Open Spaces

It is time to rethink the open plan. For decades, individual workstations have become more open with ever-increasing density, while meetings are held in enclosed conference rooms. As people return to the office, these spaces will begin to shift. Meetings will happen more often in open spaces with movable boundaries, and individual focus work will happen in enclosed spaces like pods or small enclaves.

Open collaboration spaces are inherently more flexible because they don’t require fixed features in their design, so they can morph and change as new work patterns emerge. Innovation, problem-solving, and co-creation often use agile approaches – for example, quick stand-up meetings which require visible, persistent content which can be hosted in open spaces, defined by flexible furniture, easy-to-access tech, and other design elements.

Meanwhile, individual spaces will need more enclosure to provide different levels of visual and acoustical privacy that people have come to expect while working at home. Video calls will happen everywhere, so enclosures – screens, panels, pods – will give people places to focus and mitigate disruptions.

Shift from Fixed to Fluid

Buildings are built for permanence, meanwhile the pace of business and change continues to accelerate. We can see the tensions between slow and fast emerge in the rise of pop-ups and coworking models with demand for shorter lease terms. Most companies who have real estate are asking, how much space do we need?

The hybrid future solves for a more fluid workplace that can flex as needs change. Not only does this accelerate innovation and advance the culture of the organization, it can ensure real estate is always optimized. At Steelcase, we've optimized our own space by designing an open area that supports hybrid meetings in the morning, becomes the café at lunch, hosts a town hall in the afternoon, and can be rented for an evening event.

Balance “We” and “Me” Work

The pandemic has caused us to rethink the purpose and meaning of the office and many leaders have come to the conclusion that the office is a place for collaborative work. Gensler's Research Institute, conducted amid the height of the pandemic, shows full-time work-from-home employees saw a drop of 37% in average collaboration time. As a result, leaders are rightfully focused on boosting collaboration, and Steelcase research shows that nearly two-thirds of leaders want to increase spaces for both in-person and hybrid forms of collaboration.

But collaboration is not just about group work, it actually requires solitude too. Effective collaboration happens when there's an ebb and flow of people coming together to work as a team and then moving apart to focus individually, process their ideas and follow up on assigned tasks. Too much together time, without enough individual focus time can result in groupthink, so it's important that the pendulum not swing too far by designing offices that are all about the “we” and not balance the need for “me” spaces.

The jury is still out on whether working from home is more productive or not, but in the past year, employees report higher levels of productivity when their home allows them to work without interruption. We must provide places with appropriate privacy at the office, too, and employees should be able to easily move from one type of work to another without trekking across campus or getting hung up with complicated technology.

The office we return to must offer people a better experience than what they have at home and that means giving employees the right mix of spaces for the types of work that need to get done.

Organizations that choose a “wait and see” approach risk frustrating their employees who find that the old office doesn’t support the new ways they — jeopardizing the competitive advantages of bringing people together. People whose organizations move forward and create workplaces that adapt, flex and thrive will attract and retain the best talent and benefit from innovation and growth. The future office will be a competitive advantage for organizations who take advantage of this moment in time.

When we’re all back in the office, it won’t be the same, and that’s a good thing.

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