

Designing Our Return to the Office

Steelcase shares its three-phased approach to bringing people and energy back to work.

 Read 18 minutes

By Donna Flynn, Vice President, Global Talent, Steelcase Inc.

Many of our customers are now thinking about how to bring their people back to the office and asking us how we're doing it. We've learned a lot over the past year because we've had two runs at bringing people back to our Grand Rapids Campus. Last summer and fall when infection rates were low, we had a strong presence of employees on campus but quickly pivoted back to a work-from-home default in November when incidence rates spiked.

That experience gave us an opportunity to learn what worked well and what didn't. In the last few months, we've looked to those learnings to improve our approach and design a more thoughtful experience to help our employees through the transition.

A recent McKinsey study cites strategic planning and employee communication as critical elements for transitioning into the next stage of returning to the office. While most organizations say they intend to embrace hybrid work, 68% have not clearly communicated a vision for post-pandemic work practices. The lack of specifics makes employees anxious and without a clear understanding of what to expect.

"As organizational leaders chart the path toward the post-pandemic world, they need to communicate more frequently with their employees—even if their plans have yet to solidify fully. Organizations that have articulated more specific policies and approaches for the future workplace have seen employee well-being and productivity rise."

The new social hub in the LINC has been designed to support dining and social activities, as well as collaboration in the open plan. The high-energy space acts like a magnet and draws people in.

We learned this firsthand last fall. We weren't as clear as we could have been – on expectations for presence in the office, or on what employees could expect when they came back. We realized we needed to be more explicit and share more frequently.

This spring, we doubled down to lay out a transparent plan for ramping up returns to the office. We communicated how we plan to keep everyone safe, aligned the leadership team around an updated flexible work policy, and laid out expectations for balancing work in the office with work elsewhere.

We also learned that repetition is critical – we need to repeat the message in multiple ways over time. Our human brains are resistant to change and after a year of non-stop change and adaptation, people are tired. Just when we have all adapted to a 'new normal' of remote work, the script is shifting again.

Several workspaces across the Grand Rapids campus feature “instagrammable moments” for people to document their return to the office.

Employees are encouraged to take photos at these refreshed spaces and post them on social media with the hashtag #WelcomeBackToBetter.

Our Choice + Control Hybrid Work Principle

At Steelcase we’ve been practicing flexible work (or mobile work) for more than a decade and have used ‘individual choice and control’ as a guiding principle: We believe people should have individual choice and control over how, where and when they work based on what they need to do and who they need to do it with. We updated our choice and control principle to provide the basis for our new post-pandemic hybrid work policy and shared it with our employees (see Steelcase Hybrid Work Policy).

We also recognized that prior to the pandemic, our choice + control principle wasn’t equally applied by teams and leaders across the company. To increase fairness and equity in implementation, we developed guided discussion tools for employees and leaders and equipped our HR business partners to coach on the new principle.

STEELCASE HYBRID WORK POLICY

Be intentional every day as you choose where and how to work.

At Steelcase, we believe we’re better when we work together. Our research shows that teams build trust, social learning flourishes, and collaboration is more effective when we’re together. Our work is meaningful because of the work we do and the people with whom we work.

We expect the office to be our primary place of work because that’s where we gather together – to learn, teach, innovate and host our customers. That’s what builds our communities of belonging and helps us make meaningful progress.

We also believe in giving people choice + control – over how, when and where we work to achieve commitments and deliver results. We trust you to orchestrate your time and presence across your palette of place to best accomplish your work, and that may change from day to day as you move across the office, spend time with our customers or suppliers, do some work from your home, or travel between nodes of your ecosystem.

Global Framework for a Phased Return

One adjustment we made was to take a three-phased approach to bringing people back that we had been using as a planning team and make it more explicit and more transparent as a communication tool. The framework is informed by neuroscience and lays out our strategy for slowly ramping up returns, to help employees understand what they should expect when they return and reinforce our hybrid work expectations.

Reference images of future applications are posted in the LINC Cafe and other spaces to keep people informed of settings that will be updated in the next few months.

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We rolled this framework out to all our global Return to Office teams to adapt for their locations, as every city is in a different stage of return and faces unique local conditions. Here is how our phased return unfolded for our office locations in Grand Rapids:

INVITE

Our offices in Grand Rapids have been open and designed for health and safety since May 2020 and since then we've had some teams coming into the office regularly who must be physically present to do their work. We use the Invite Phase when infection rates are high, inviting any employee to work in the office if it is the best place for them but define "work from home" as the default for most employees. During this phase our teams who work with physical products, design or manage our facilities, or employees who felt like they could be more productive in the office consistently came in.

ENCOURAGE

The Encourage Phase is designed as a transitional period, encouraging employees to come back to the office to reacquaint with the spaces, reconnect with colleagues and begin the change process. Over this time, we encourage people to steadily ramp up the time they spend in the office. In the U.S. it also helped that the new CDC guidance on masking was issued during our Encourage Phase, and we were able to safely loosen our masking requirements for fully vaccinated employees.

EXPECT

In this phase, we expect employees to move to a new normal of hybrid work and consider the office as their primary workplace, because we believe we are better when we're together. Employees can define alternate work agreements with their manager. During this phase, new habits and routines are established and a sense of belonging and community is rebuilt.

As Steelcase moved from the Invite Phase to Encourage and then Expect, the number of people returning to the office steadily increased and has now reached 86% of pre-pandemic employee attendance.

A Rare Opportunity

For every organization, this moment of transition is a rare opportunity for a reset. Returning to the office can mean going back in time to pre-pandemic spaces and culture or leaping ahead to a post-pandemic future. What kinds of behaviors or practices do you want to encourage in your organization?

At Steelcase, we identified culture shifts we wanted to design for and brought together a cross-functional team including Facilities, Design, IT, Human Resources and Communications to create new spaces and experiences across our main campus that would help us drive change. We didn't want people to return to the same spaces we abandoned last year. How might we engage them with some new spaces and new experiences? How might they return to something better, where they feel safe, productive and inspired?

We used three macro-principles to guide our return to our Grand Rapids campus:

Health + Safety First

Protecting the health + safety of our people is always the top priority. We follow CDC guidance and implement science-based protocols to create a safe work environment.

Clarify + Communicate

Our research shows that people expect more autonomy and flexibility when they return to the office. Hybrid work is here to stay, and every organization will need to develop a point of view on what it looks like for them. We took time to thoughtfully redefine and update post-pandemic employee expectations and have pursued a path of frequent communication for clarity.

Entice with Experiences

We approached our return to office planning as an employee experience design challenge. We learned last year that when someone's first impression is uninspiring, ambiguous or stressful, they will resist coming back to campus. We want them to feel supported, understood and listened to – and be excited to return and engage with their colleagues and the company. We also want them to be able to work more effectively alone and together, so we designed a variety of new spaces and experiences to inspire them and help rebuild community. (See sidebar below)

Being back together is re-energizing all of us – the excitement and joy of the reunions has been profound. People are catching up with each other on life and work. Trust is being regenerated, serendipitous encounters are giving us richer, lateral views of the company, interns and new employees are gaining an authentic understanding of the company, and people are working side-by-side in new hybrid ways. We're better when we're together. This doesn't mean we have to be together all the time, every day, 40 hours a week – but it does mean the office is the place where we come together to learn, listen, make stuff, regenerate trust and creatively solve problems with less friction. The office is not dead. The office is very much alive – and the future of the office is human.

Space As Catalyst

Spaces throughout our campus in Grand Rapids have been transformed, using our most recent research about what matters most to people and new design principles (Me + We, Fixed to Fluid, Open + Enclosed, Braiding the Digital + Physical). The renovated spaces have been designed to create better experiences where people can work and reconnect with colleagues both on and off video.

Among the changes is a new Social Hub in the company's Learning + Innovation Center (LINC) that's been designed to support social and dining activities, as well as collaboration in the open plan. The high-energy space is the first thing people see when they enter the building, and it acts like a magnet to draw people in. Key staff spaces have also been redesigned to provide people with lots of choice for privacy and focus work, technology enhancements to support hybrid collaboration, and places to work in relaxed environments that can cause more serendipitous interactions – encounters that can't happen when people are remote. Spaces in the open are designed with flexible furniture elements that people can easily move to adapt the space on demand, as needed.

We will be publishing several stories over the next few months to share these new spaces.

Prototype spaces encourage people to use new technology and test new behaviors as they adjust to the new hybrid work model.

These spaces include a QR code for employees to share honest feedback on new products and experiences, such as this Meeting Owl Pro.

New Interactions

The Steelcase team designed a variety of new interactions across the campus, designed to experiment and help test some hypotheses. Experimentation is key as you bring people back to learn how behaviors have shifted and how to best support them. Employees are invited to experiment by working in prototype spaces with new technologies to support hybrid collaboration, and to provide feedback on the experience. Feedback is being collected through QR codes and will be an input to the design process to make improvements.

We also learned from our past experiences that food and fitness services are important for encouraging people to return. They are powerful ways to draw people back, or as we learned, by not offering them they can be barriers to a successful return. To provide healthy food and beverage options, we worked with Compass, our food service provider, to give employees more choice and control over how and where they can get nourishment throughout the day.

In the “Chat with Leaders” series, former Steelcase President Jim Keane and other senior executives have made themselves available for unstructured conversations and candid interactions with employees over coffee and snacks.

Renewed Focus on Community

People have really missed the human connection throughout the pandemic and our research shows they want to come back to the office to reconnect with their colleagues and their organizations. We have designed events and experiences to help them reconnect and build community. Weekly community events are being held outside in the 'bioswale' between buildings – including a barbecue, performances by employee bands and visits by local non-profit organizations. We also heard that employees want more informal interactions with leaders, so we designed a simple 'Chat with Leaders' series which provides an opportunity for any employee on campus to sit with a senior executive in a small group for coffee and snacks. These are unstructured conversations for employees to ask any questions they would like, and for leaders to listen to the experiences of employees.

Donna Flynn is vice president, Global Talent at Steelcase, leading our efforts to attract, retain, develop and inspire Steelcase employees around the world. She has been with the company since 2011 and was appointed to this role in March 2020.