

Work Better

It's time for an experience that's fundamentally better

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The pandemic has reshaped many aspects of our lives, including where and how people want to work. Their experiences working from home, and what they face when they return to the office, have influenced what they want and expect to see in the workplace going forward. The things they liked about their office life before the crisis have become even more important, while the things that frustrated them will become an even bigger barrier if not addressed.

People have had vastly different experiences while working from home. Working from home is not a one-size-fits-all experience for people, nor is there a single ideal solution for each organisation. Organisations around the world face dramatically different circumstances depending on the state of the pandemic, their locations, industries, cultures and many other variables. What people want is the flexibility to choose between working from home and the office into the future. Whether they have already returned to the workplace or are still at home, people have learned from what they've been through, and those experiences shape their expectations for what they want work to be like in the future.

What People Need and Expect

To understand the impact the pandemic has had on what people need and expect in the office, Steelcase conducted research in 10 countries and engaged over 32,000 people in multiple studies. Synthesising these studies uncovered five overarching needs that will drive macro shifts in the overall work experience and lead to new ways of planning and designing offices.

To Be Safe and Feel Safe

Offices never had to help mitigate the spread of disease, but people are now pandemic aware. They will make decisions about where to work based on a new set of safety standards to help prevent transmission in the office, just as they expect safety standards for things like fires or tripping hazards.

Top safety concerns:

- 73% Indoor air quality
- 73% Adherence to safety protocols
- 72% General facility cleanliness
- 71% Physical distancing and boundaries between workspaces
- 69% Overall density of people in the building

A Deeper Sense of Belonging

Feeling isolated while working from home is the biggest concern people identified in every country and their top reason to return to the office is to connect with colleagues. People want to feel a sense of belonging at work, which is not only good for their wellbeing, but it also helps business results — feeling a strong sense of community is a consistent marker of people's productivity, engagement, innovation and commitment to the organisation.

To Be Productive

People's desire to accomplish something meaningful, has only heightened during the crisis. While some experienced "panic productivity" in the early pandemic days, most simply want to be of value and feel their work has purpose. The most important things people want their workplace to support are very pragmatic.

Holistic Comfort

Pre-pandemic, 40%* of people said they needed to change postures frequently because of physical discomfort. During stay-at-home orders many people had to improvise and work from sofas, kitchen tables and even beds. Pain, distractions and stress have caused people to yearn for a broad interpretation of comfort, especially after such a disruptive time. They need the ability to work in a range of postures, change settings and to move throughout their day. They need a quiet, distraction free environment when they need to focus and to feel connected to their colleagues and the organization's purpose.

Greater Control

People want options so they can choose where to work or to adapt spaces based on the task they're doing or how they like to work personally. While some people feel working from home has allowed them to navigate their day and avoid distractions, 9 of 10 countries rank a "quiet, professional environment" in their top five reasons for wanting to return to the workplace, suggesting that home is not always ideal for focus. Teams also need control over the level of privacy and the flexibility to move things around to best suit their work.

Macro Shifts In The Work Experience

People's expectations about their work experience changed during the pandemic. Living through a life-altering experience has caused many to think about what's most important to them and to question assumptions about how work should happen. And leading organisations are listening. They see this moment as an opportunity to reinvent their policies, offices and overall work experience. This will lead to macro level shifts in four key areas.

Design Safer Workplaces

A majority of the 32,000 globally surveyed employees said their top concerns are air quality, cleanliness of space and adherence to safety protocols which means behavioural strategies, such as mask wearing and distancing, need to be augmented with changes to the built environment.

Organisations can make the workplace even safer by intentionally designing the built environment to help mitigate disease transmission. Understanding how pathogens move through an environment will help companies develop new systemic strategies to help prevent infections at work. In addition to changes in HVAC systems, workplaces can be designed to reduce density, change geometry — angles and orientation of furnishings — and increase division to limit how far pathogens can travel.

Design for Productivity

People's desire to accomplish something meaningful, has only heightened during the crisis. Before the pandemic people were frustrated with workplaces that didn't give them ways to control their privacy and do focused work. During the pandemic, working from home didn't make that any better for many people: productivity dropped 12% and engagement declined 14% among employees who were unsatisfied with their work-from-home situation, especially the longer they did it.

The top three things people say they want from their office are all about being more productive: to collaborate with others effectively, easier access to tools and resources and the ability to focus. When people are solving problems or innovating, their activities are interwoven, between group and individual work. Organisations can help create a better experience by making it easier for people to shift between group and solo work in both physical and digital environments.

Design to Inspire

People who have lived through a crisis want inspiration — they want leaders who are present and accessible, and to feel a part of something meaningful. The top two reasons people say they want to be back in the office are to connect with colleagues and feel a sense of shared purpose within the organisation. These are both attributes of a strong community, along with trust, inclusivity and resilience. In turn, a strong community correlates with key business outcomes — engagement, productivity, innovation and retention. The workplace can be designed as an infrastructure for people to build social capital. It can intentionally foster meaningful interactions and signal that change and adaptation are part of the culture, and something to be embraced.

Design for Flexibility

Historically designed for permanence, buildings and offices have been dominated by fixed architecture, power and furnishings. Going forward, organisations want places that can adapt easily to the changes in where and how people work and respond to changing business circumstances. Workplaces will need to embrace multi-use spaces that can support diverse types of activities. Furnishings will easily move to allow spaces to expand and contract as needed. Physical and digital experiences will be seamlessly braided to support distributed collaboration as people work in a variety of locations.

While living through a crisis has not been easy on anyone, it has caused people and organisations to think about our shared humanity and what we want to achieve together. We can use this moment as a catalyst for reinventing an office that is not just a container for work, but a place that creates a community where people can feel a renewed sense of belonging, resilience and purpose.

Source: Steelcase Global Report January 2021

Webinar

A panel of Steelcase researchers will share what they're learning about emerging needs and expectations from the future workplace.

Work Better: Four New Design Principles for a Better Experience

The pandemic has permanently reshaped the way we live, work and learn — and it will lead to a better work experience.

Work Better: Explore the Design Principles in Practice

It's time to put human metrics ahead of building metrics. Explore four foundational space typologies.

Global Report: Changing Expectations and the Future of Work

Insights from the pandemic to create a better work experience. We surveyed 32,000 people across 10 countries to reveal the blueprint for creating a better work experience. Discover how the workplace must change.